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# Vital scrap: The agency of objects and materials in the Finnish 19th-century world view

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**Abstract:** In the science-based western world view today, objects and materials are perceived as inert; essentially, they are dead matter. However, this is not the case in all cultures and all periods. In the area of present-day Finland, objects and materials were seen as potentially alive up to the early 20th century. This is well documented in oral accounts gathered and stored in folklore archives. Moreover, objects perceived as potent have been gathered into museum collections. While the issue of special agency in objects and materials has been discussed within folkloristics and comparative religion, it has been less familiar among archaeologists. This chapter provides an archaeologist's viewpoint on the significance of this issue, especially the ways in which it affects the important question of ritual or rubbish. The notion of non-human agency in the 19th-century Finnish world view is a complex and dynamic matter. This kind of agency surfaces in the interaction between a human and a thing.

**Keywords:** magic objects, agency, world views

## 8.1. Introduction

*If a sick person's disease is unknown, where it has been caught and what it is will be divined as follows: Nine hairs are taken from the head of the sick person and nail cuttings from three fingers. They are put on a table and an old silver coin on top of them. A vessel with spirits is put on top of the coin. While covering and pressing the vessel with the left hand, one says:*

*Begin the journey, Lot,  
Begin rolling, Holy Cross,  
Let knowledge show the way!  
Tell, Lot, the causes,  
Not what man wants to hear!*

*Then one hits the hand holding the vessel, so that the liquor stirs. Then, when one takes the hand off the vessel, one can see the type of creature that the people<sup>2</sup> of the guardian spirit [that caused the illness] look like, and if the dregs spin counterclockwise, the disease cannot be healed, but if they spin clockwise, it is certain that the sick person can be released. If the sick person has been cursed, the dregs will not stop spinning. The hairs and nail clippings are put in the bathing water with the other ingredients, and from*

1. Lähe arpa astumaan, Pyhä risti pyörimään, Tieto tietä näyttämään! Sano arpa syitä myöten, Elä miehen mieltä myöten!

2. Fi väki

*the coin one should scrape silver onto the places where the bathing ingredients are gathered.* (SKVR I, 4 1919: 544. Translated from Finnish by the author. Clarification in brackets added.)

*Disease: a disordered or incorrectly functioning organ, part, structure, or system of the body resulting from the effect of genetic or developmental errors, infection, poisons, nutritional deficiency or imbalance, toxicity, or unfavorable environmental factors; illness; sickness; ailment.* (Dictionary.com)

The two quotes above are examples of two different understandings of the cause (and cure) of disease. The latter is the modern, scientific understanding, while the former comes from rural Karelia at the turn of the 20th century. The latter example shows an understanding that has its roots in European 17th–18th-century materialistic science in which the workings of the world began to be explained through physical forces that were non-intentional and thus mechanic (e.g. Sheldrake 2012: 28–55). This science-based way of understanding the world has since become a commonly believed truth in the west. However, it took time before the new world view was adopted among uneducated people, and even among the educated, it has not been as triumphant as often portrayed (e.g. Josephson-Storm 2017).

This chapter discusses the notion of non-human agency in the world view that prevailed among uneducated people in the area of Finland before science-based understanding became popular. While this question has been discussed especially within Finnish folkloristics (e.g. Krohn 1915; Apo 1995, 1998; Issakainen 2002; Koski 2003, 2008, 2011; Stark 2006), it is less familiar among archaeologists in Finland. Thus, in this chapter I approach the significance of this issue from the perspective of archaeological material culture and address the challenging question of “ritual or rubbish” (e.g. Hill 1995; Clarke 1997; Brück 1999; Morris 2008). The discussion is based mostly on observations that I made when researching data for previous projects (Hukantaival 2015a, 2016, 2018). The main material consists of archived narrative sources (folklore) describing customs and magical practices. In addition, some material sources, objects that have been seen as potent, are discussed. Both types of sources derive from the extensive folk culture collection efforts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Thus, this is the temporal limit of this discussion. Spatially the discussion mainly covers the area of present-day Finland. However, some of the sources derive from the Karelian areas east of the present-day border. This temporal and spatial context remains the focal point of the discussion throughout this chapter, even when words that are more vague are used (such as ‘the old world view’).

In this chapter, I operate with many challenging and ambiguous concepts. The first problem is what to call the world view in the area of study before changes in society fuelled changes in the world view from the early 20th century onwards (e.g. Stark 2006: 452–458). Finally, I decided to try to use the concept ‘peopled world view’. The meaning of this concept is specified shortly, but first some additional issues need to be addressed. First, like any cultural aspect, world views are not static (e.g. Sire 2015). Wider world views shared in a society are in constant flux. Within these mainstream perspectives are personal world views that may partly conflict with the wider constructions. Personal world views change when an individual matures due to experience. It would thus be misleading to assume that the science-based world view promoted in western societies today was preceded by a static, universal ‘peopled’ world view that is as ancient as humankind.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a world view is a way of thinking about the world. However, this is too narrow a definition for the needs of this chapter and certainly does not do justice to this complex concept (see e.g. Sire 2015). Above I have used words such as understanding, experience, and construction in connection with world view. I see world view as the basic assumptions (conscious and subconscious) about the nature of reality (truth) that shape how we experience the world. World view is thus mostly a feedback loop where the experienced reality is formed by what is previously believed (known) to be real and true. Occasionally a new experience or piece of information is accepted

into the loop, and as a result the whole world changes. It might even be fitting to modify the concept into ‘world *experience*’, since it is more than a vision. However, I chose to use the more established concept in this discussion.

The science-based world view is rooted in materialism and reductionism, and it may use analogies of mechanical clockwork or computers in describing the workings of reality. Matter is essentially inert and, ultimately, life becomes difficult to explain. Consciousness is another problematic issue in a purely materialist world view (see e.g. Nagel 2012; Sheldrake 2012). This materialist world view is popularized by being included in elementary school curricula in modern Finland. In contrast, the Finnish world view of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used analogies of people or crowds of beings (*väki*) in discussing how reality functions. This is discussed in more detail in the next section. To put it pointedly, the actors in the peopled world view were living and human-like agents instead of non-intentional physical forces. The fact that the Finnish personal pronoun *hän* (he/she) also referred to animals and objects (he/she/it) long into the 19th century (Häkkinen 2013) may be one example of this way of understanding the world.

Laura Stark’s (2006) discussion of how the *self* was experienced clarifies other aspects of the old world view. In the light of narrative sources, 19th-century rural Finnish-speakers experienced themselves as essentially entangled with their environment (cf. Hodder 2012). The boundaries of the body were felt to be ‘open’: the self was intertwined with the surrounding social world and therefore vulnerable to the emotions, intentions, and desires of other humans and non-human agents inhabiting the natural surroundings. This open body schema is reflected in the understanding of illness and magical harm, both of which often involved the idea of an ‘external’ force penetrating the fragile borders of the body. (Stark 2006: 452–454.) This idea of weak boundaries was also reflected in the need to ritually protect the borders of a household against outside harm (such as witchcraft) (Hukantaival 2016). The notion that selfhood or personhood was seen differently in the 19th-century world view than in the science-based one is a key observation in discussions of non-human agency (see also e.g. Hallowell 1960; Bird-David 1999).

## 8.2. Magic agency and the problematic concept of *väki*

Magic is a concept even more problematic than world view (e.g. Buss et al. 1965; Jarvie and Agassi 1967; Hammond 1970; Agassi and Jarvie 1973; Bailey 2006; Pocock 2006). In fact, some scholars have abandoned the word altogether, since it carries a heavy load of colonialism and contempt. Others, like me, still find it useful when applied carefully. Magic refers to a special understanding of causality. It has earlier been seen as a misunderstood mechanical causal relationship in which things automatically act on each other in ways and from distances that are not possible from the viewpoint of Newtonian physics (see Frazer 1992 [1890]). However, these effects are directed towards the desired results by the intent of the magic practitioner, and thus the causality is not mechanical (e.g. Mauss 2006 [1902]: 81–83; Hämäläinen 1920: 35). I see magic as a useful concept for directing our attention towards a principle of causality that is not seen as real in the modern western, science-based world view, but was (and still is) experienced as real in other world views. Some find it important to distinguish magic from religion, but I see this as unnecessary. Magic can be part of religion or outside of religion, depending on how these concepts are defined. Essentially, magic is a way of controlling the uncontrollable aspects of life: weather, health, or good luck (cf. Malinowski 1954). These aspects are crucial for survival, and thus it is not surprising that people feel a need to be able to improve their situation.

In Finnish scholarship, the ‘magical properties’ that objects and materials were believed to possess have often been referred to by the concept of *väki* (e.g. Krohn 1915; Apo 1995; Stark-Arola 2002; Koski 2003, 2008, 2011; Stark 2006: 258–62; Ratia 2009). In everyday Finnish, *väki* means people, especially crowds of people, but it is also used to signify force, especially in adjective form or in compound words (e.g. *väkivalta*, violence, or *väkevä*, strong, powerful). The association is quite natural: crowds of people are powerful forces.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, in a late-19th-century folk belief context, *väki* refers to both personified (humanlike but non-human) beings, such as guardian spirits, and impersonal forces. *Väki* manifested in different natural environments and materials: One could find *väki* in the forest, in water, in the earth, in fire, in rocks, or in a cemetery, for example. *Väki* could grab someone, infect, and cause illness. This would happen, for example, if one was startled or became angry when in close vicinity to a *väki* element. The healing of such an illness needed to begin with finding out what kind of *väki* had caused it. Thus, in the folklore quote in the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of the divination was to find out which kind of *väki* had been caught (had grabbed the patient) and whether the problem could be corrected.

In Finnish folk religion research, *väki* has become a scholarly concept (see e.g. Issakainen 2002; Koski 2003, 2008). This means that the polymorphous, ambiguous word of the living spoken language has been fixed into a specific form for communicating in an academic context. Hence, the concept of *väki* converted to mean specifically ‘supernatural’, ‘otherworldly’ power that could be manipulated in magic. This was later criticized by folklorist T. Issakainen (2002). When familiarizing herself with the *väki* of folk belief texts, Issakainen noticed that the idea of a useful, impersonal otherworldly power seemed to be rare in the tradition. Instead, *väki* could mean one of three things: crowds of supernatural beings, impersonal power that was too powerful to be manipulated (at best, it could be repelled), or impersonal power that was *mundane*, not supernatural (e.g. the *väki* of wind is blowing). Issakainen (2002: 119) pointed out that *väki* could not always be persuaded to work to the benefit of the performer of magic. Instead, *väki* could be angered and seek revenge, and it could be appeased with proper, respectful conduct. Issakainen sees this as further evidence that *väki* was not impersonal: it was a personified active agent. Moreover, Issakainen views the idea that certain objects or materials contain otherworldly power as too simplifying. She also finds it dubious that the idea of a powerful object would be meaningful to 19th-century people unfamiliar with batteries and magnets. I see this last notion as an example of how our materialist (mechanistic) world view may confuse us: one does not need to know about batteries to understand power when every living creature clearly manifests a power to act – agency<sup>4</sup>.

*Väki* may not be such a good scholarly concept, since it easily confuses fixed academic language with the dynamic spoken language of late-19th-century people. Moreover, the notion of *väki* seems to contain many different layers of tradition. For example, Issakainen (2002: 112) notes that the idea of the *väki* of water contains images of guardian spirits living in a water realm, ghosts of drowned humans, the energy of flowing water, and otherworldly power conducted through water. Kaarina Koski (2003, 2008, 2011) has also discussed the different layers of meanings present in *väki* narratives. She specializes in the belief traditions concerning the *väki* of death (often called *kirkonväki*, ‘people of the church’). This *väki* could manifest as a group of dead people (ancestral spirits), a group of small, partly or completely invisible beings that reek of death, or an invisible power. Koski (2011: 331, 334) noted that the images of crowds of beings dominate in tales while the idea of power is more prominent in rite descriptions and healing. This is an important observation, since it shows the context-dependency of the mental images. Essentially, in folk belief contexts, *väki* is human-like agency: the ability to act intentionally (Stark 2006: 256–257). Despite these issues, I do not propose to abandon the concept of *väki*. Instead, we should look into this matter a bit more deeply.

3. However, it has been suggested that ‘force’ was the original meaning for this native Finno-Ugrian word, since this meaning is prevalent in most neighbouring languages (Häkkinen 2013).

4. From the Latin root *agere*, do, act, perform, etc. See the section Agency and Material Culture below.

### 8.2.1. Agency in nature

I have found it revealing to observe how *väki* has been encountered in the natural environment. As mentioned, Issakainen (2002: 115) pointed out that the *väki* of wind could simply mean the wind's mundane ability to rustle treetops and dry the laundry, for example. Issakainen calls this the mechanistic ability of the wind, as surely many contemporary westerners may agree. However, in the light of the narrative material, I am not convinced that this was how it was seen in the peopled world view. Still, Issakainen (2002) makes the important observation that *väki* is especially connected with movement and activity that can be perceived with the human senses. In addition to wind, for example, flowing water and fire are strong *väki* elements.

As the healing ritual in the very beginning of this chapter suggested, the *väki* people of a natural realm had a distinguishable appearance. Thus, in addition to human-formed apparitions such as guardian spirits who 'owned' the natural realm, the 'people' of water could manifest, for example, as a seal, frog, or pike, and the 'people' of forest as a bear, squirrel, or wood ant (e.g. Krohn 1915: 71–72, 75, 142). In fact, a nest of wood ants<sup>5</sup> is a frequently recurring location for ritual performance in narratives. For example, a hunter would offer silver and pewter on an anthill to the guardian spirit of the forest in order to secure good hunting fortune (SKMT I 1891: 2, 13 §). The constant busy swarming on the surface of an anthill must have been a sign of forest agency at work. Likewise, roaring rapids were places where extremely strong water 'people' could be encountered (Krohn 1915: 93). Still, there were 'people' also in motionless natural environments. For example, the agency of rock was quite steady. In fact, in this case, agency manifested as hardness (durability) (cf. Stark 2006: 277–81). As noted above, the agency of death was not always visible at all, but instead it could be experienced as rustling sounds or unpleasant smells (the reek of death) (Koski 2003, 2008, 2011).

The powerful agency of nature could make someone fall ill (e.g. Stark 2006: 257, 269–77). This was often connected with a sudden loss of mental balance, such as being startled. The illness was described as being caught or rubbed on by the element in question, or as if the element had grabbed the person. For example, forest agency could cause illness as follows: "The forest rubs on also if one is hit by a twig or branch or if one stumbles on a stump, root, or something, so that one is startled. They are all that forest." (Hako 2000: 3.)

In addition to startling, one could get infected by *väki* if one behaved inappropriately and thus bothered the agency. One account states that "forest *väki* will not harm anyone if it is not aggravated" (SKMT IV, 2 1933: VIII 28§). One way to upset an agency was to bring something from the realm of another *väki* in contact with it. Thus, many situations called for special soothing rituals, for example when a horse needed to be swum:

*When a horse needs to be swum across a sound, one should take three stones from the shore, and while the horse is led into the water, one should throw the stones into the lake and say:*

*The hound to the ground, we to the water!  
Water to us, coin to the king!  
The king is famous for gold,  
the ruler for silver.*

*Then the water will not oppress the horse, even if one has angered the guardian spirit of the water. Then, when one has reached the other shore, one scrapes silver into the lake and chants offering words, so the guardian spirit of the water will not be angered. If one does not pay for swimming a horse, one angers the lake's guardian spirit. The horse is an animal that belongs to hiisi's *väki*, and it is not a favourite of the water guardian spirit. (SKMT IV, 2 1933: XIII 963§.)*

5. *Formica* species.



The last two accounts show rather well how agency in nature could be attributed to the element in question as a whole (*they are all that forest*) or to a personified guardian spirit. The human-like guardian spirit, the actions of animals and plants in its environment, and the environment itself were all entangled in the idea of *väki*. Often these environments were seen as households and guardian spirits as the masters of their people. The *hiisi's väki* (Fi *hiidenväki*) mentioned in the latter account is not quite as straightforward a concept as many other nature agencies, since *hiisi* may refer to a sacred grove, a cemetery, or any eye-catching (sacred) natural place (Anttonen 1996: 116–23; Pulkkinen et al. 2004; Wessman 2009; Koski 2011: 149–51; Jonuks 2009, 2012).

In essence, the notion of *väki* is connected with the vitality of nature. A walk in the forest (especially in the summer) is filled with sensations: sounds, smells, and visible movement. The powers of nature also have very concrete effects: the wind may tear off a roof, a bear may kill a good milking cow, and raging waters may collapse a boat or drown a horse. The agency in nature can thus be clearly perceived in everyday life. The explanation that there were humanlike beings that caused such phenomena may, in our view, be seen as ‘supernatural’ or at least as anthropomorphizing. Still, the experience is real, only the explanation differs in the materialist and peopled world views. As the folklorist Lauri Honko (1964: 10–12) has pointed out, belief in supernatural beings was actualized in certain situations through authentic experiences. In other words, the whole world changes when it is experienced from a different viewpoint (world view).

### 8.2.2. Animism, ancestors, and metaphor

At this point in the discussion, one might ask whether the belief in ‘people’ in nature equates to animism. Animism is commonly defined as the belief that all objects, places, and creatures possess a spiritual essence such as a soul (see e.g. Tylor 1891: 23, 287, 417–502; Durkheim 1964 [1915]: 48–70; Bird-David 1999: S67). However, I agree with the cultural anthropologist Nurit Bird-David (1999) in that animism has been misunderstood. First, the common definition is misleading, since it contains a (Cartesian) dualistic bias: the idea of an eternal spiritual essence separate from the body – the soul. However, the notion of life does not necessarily imply a separate spirit essence or soul; life can also simply be one property of matter. For example, in Buddhism the existence of a separate soul is negated while life is certainly not (e.g. Agganyani 2013). Still, the root of the word animism is quite revealing: the Latin *anima* refers to air, breeze, breath, life, and soul (Morwood 2012). Similarly, in Finnish the word *henki* refers to breath, life, and spirit. One can see or feel movement in both breeze and breath.

One very important aspect of animistic agency pointed out by Bird-David (1999) is that it surfaces through interaction, in a relationship between humans and their environment. Another point is that in all cultures, the sense of personhood is not restricted to humans. Thus, for example, the Native American Ojibwa sense of personhood was conceived as an overarching category within which e.g. ‘human person’, ‘animal person’, and ‘wind person’ are subcategories (Hallowell 1960). These two observations seem to be essential also for the discussion at hand. However, even though revised animism could be a suitable concept for this chapter, I feel its older connotations would mislead the argument.

As revealed above, some of the *väki* narratives contain images of dead people: ghosts or ancestors. The question of whether we should see an ancestor cult in the beliefs concerning guardian spirits in nature is part of an early academic discussion. It was debated in detail in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see also Tylor 1891; Durkheim 1964 [1915]). As often happens, this discussion became somewhat polarized: some scholars were prone to believe that all folk belief phenomena were to be traced back to an ancestor cult, while others were against this (see e.g. Varonen 1898; Haavio 1942; Honko 1962). Since this chapter is not concerned with any ‘origins’ of the traditions, it is sufficient to note that these kinds of mental images were present in the tradition. Sometimes the agency of a place could be seen as a remnant of someone who had died, or was buried, at that location. Likewise, the

agency of a human person could remain in an object that this individual had manufactured or used, and thus objects with unknown makers and owners were often preferred in rituals (Issakainen 2012: 136–38; Hukantaival 2016: 140). I return to this latter phenomenon below.

Still, one way to understand the concept of *väki* could be as metaphor. We should not uncritically assume that past people were more (or less) naive than we are. Just as we today may speak of the workings of the world or the brain using metaphors of machines and computers, the concept of ‘people’ acting in the wind or in flowing water, for example, may have been a metaphor. Still, metaphors are extremely powerful (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). If we do not reflect on the matter, we may really believe that the human mind works like a computer. However, when we stop to consider it, we realize that computers are a product of the human mind and not equal to it. This could have been the case with *väki* as well. The metaphor of ‘people acting in nature’ may have become reality, but it could still have been revealed as metaphor if it was contemplated more deeply. Still, this does not mean that such contemplation would have resulted in a view of the world as mechanical. It is more likely that the world was seen as alive and imbued with agency that sometimes resembled the agency of people.<sup>6</sup> Next, I discuss in more detail how the idea of human-like agency affected material culture.

### 8.3. Agency and material culture

The connection between agency and material culture is complex. The recent prominent discussion on the agency of materiality (see e.g. Knappet and Malafouris 2008) was promoted by philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour (e.g. 1993, 1999). He criticized modern science’s engagement in ‘purification’, where the world is divided into clearly separated domains (e.g. nature and society). According to anthropologist Daniel Miller, one of Latour’s most influential strategies in the quest against purification has been to apply the concept of agency to the nonhuman world. In this approach, material things may be said to possess the agency that causes effects having consequences for people but that is autonomous from human agency (Miller 2005: 11–15; see also Hodder 2012: 68). Thus, in that approach, agency refers to the fact that material things have their own properties that constrain human activity. To understand the agency of material things in the world view of the study area, however, a more permissive approach is needed: things may have been understood as acting with intention. Still, the issue concerns material things that are believed to possess agency that causes effects, which have consequences for people. This is how the agency of things is understood in this chapter.

In her study, Issakainen (2002: 111) criticized the idea that an object could be seen as filled with impersonal *väki* power, since this may direct too much attention to the “instrument of the magic act”. Instead, she argues, the object functioned as a conduit for a power that transcended the mentioned realm of forest, water, or rock. There might be an (unconscious?) Cartesian dualist notion behind this claim: since matter is inert (dead), any agency must be immaterial (spiritual or social), and thus matter may only function as a vehicle for such power (cf. Latour 1993: 80). Naturally, this same notion is present in wording that implies that an object may be a vessel for power, as well. Partly this is a problem of language – it is difficult to express anything in a non-dualist way, since dualism seems to be embedded in the English language.<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, the 19th-century Finnish speakers who spoke of *väki* were the descendants of about 700 years of Christian tradition with its belief in souls. Moreover, it has been argued that even the older, pre-Christian, world view included a kind of soul-belief. This belief supposedly maintained that an individual had two (or even three) souls. When put in a simplified form, the *itse* (self) included the personality, was attached to the person’s name, and was inherited in the family (being reborn), while the *henki* or *löyly* (spirit, breath) was an impersonal life force that left the body at death (Harva 1948:

6. The tendency to see natural activity as human-like agency was suggested as the cause of belief in humanlike gods already in classic works (e.g. Tylor 1891: 285), and this theory still prevails in the cognitive science of religion (e.g. Culotta 2009).

7. Even though passive voice expressions (where action is underlined) are common, this is largely true also in the Finnish language. Of course, this text does not manage to avoid dividing the world into subjects and objects either.

234–62; Pentikäinen 1990: 21–24; Siikala 2013: 370)<sup>8</sup>. However, this argument is already old, and a fresh approach to the material might produce renewed conclusions. In any case, my question for this section of the chapter is whether it is possible that agency was seen as a quality of matter without the need for an extra ‘spiritual’ actor. Let us first look at how the relationship between agency and material culture appears in narrative sources. After this, I describe some ritual objects present in museum collections.

### 8.3.1. Väki and material culture in folklore

For this part of the discussion, I have intentionally searched for folklore examples where *väki* is explicitly mentioned in connection with material culture. Since these kinds of accounts form only a small part of the narrative material, this admittedly limits the viewpoint. However, the intention is to see what the overt connection between *väki* and material culture is in the narratives. Overall, the reason why a specific object is chosen for a ritual practice is very seldom stated in the vast narrative material (Hukantaival 2016: 123–29). Moreover, different types of *väki* are considered as being connected to tangible objects to different degrees. For example, in narratives about obtaining the *väki* of water, often the only object mentioned is water itself. The agency of fire, on the other hand, is frequently mentioned as connected to fire-making equipment:

*“Väki of fire is most powerful and quick. With it one can repel all other väkis. But it cannot be repelled with anything. One raises it with fire-making equipment.”* (SKS KRA. Kinnula 1946. Otto Harju 3624, informant (man) born in 1889; Issakainen 2002: 120.)

The agency of fire and the connected agency of the forge were useful in bear hunting, since “the *väki* of the forge is stronger than forest *väki*” to which the bear belonged (SKMT I 1891: 322 §; Stark 2006: 261). The agency of fire is again connected to fire-making equipment in the following example:

*When one sets off to kill a bear, one puts an old fire steel, the maker of which is unknown, in one’s hat. Then, if the bear tries to attack, the hat is thrown in front of it. The bear cannot cross the hat, since the fire *väki* confronts it, and the bear must try to flee, as it is sensitive to fire.* (SKS KRA. Uhtua 1889. H. Meriläinen II 811, informant 42-year-old man; Issakainen 2002: 121.)

Hunters also needed to guard themselves against the malicious envy of other hunters. For this purpose, as well, it was good to keep fire *väki* in one’s tinder pouch:

*When two hunters meet and one of them leaves, if the other looks between his legs at the leaving hunter, that hunter will get lost in the forest. The looker should cross his eyes so that the leaving hunter is seen double. But if that hunter is prepared, if he carries fire *väki* in his tinder pouch, the looker is inflicted with eye pain that follows him to the grave.* (SKMT I 1891: 3, 98 §.)

This example clearly suggests that it was not sufficient to simply carry a tinder pouch in order to guard against the malicious wishes of others. Most likely, all hunters would keep fire-making equipment with them. Instead, fire *väki* needed to be activated with the proper rituals. The key event for this was often when the *väki* was ‘taken’ from its natural environment. For example, the *väki* of rock was obtained from a crack in a cliff that was always wet (a ‘crying rock’) (Stark-Arola 2002: 72). One could take some chips of the rock or soil from the crack with an old knife. Still, it was crucial to perform the proper offerings of coins or silver and to utter flattering words and incantations when taking the substance. *Väki* would infect a careless and disrespectful person (Stark 2006: 258–60). In fact, coins or silver are often recurring objects mentioned in connection with any *väki*: it was important to give

8. The third ‘soul’ was a kind of doppelgänger-guardian spirit (*haltia*).

9. Fi *tulukset* means the combination of firesteel, flint, and tinder, usually kept in a pouch.



offerings in interactions with these agents (e.g. SKVR I, 4 1919: 28, 29, 31). However, sometimes *väki* was connected with certain objects without the need for any preceding rituals. In these cases, the object was still special: often old, broken, and found (with an unknown maker and owner):

*One drives out bedbugs by gathering rainwater during a thunderstorm from three roofs into three vessels. During midsummer night, one should sprinkle the water around the house naked and brush the walls and floor with an old, broken oven broom that has been found in the village while saying:*

*Get out old inhabitants,  
Ukko<sup>10</sup> commands you away!  
If you don't obey,  
I'll torch your hair with fire  
and burn your shirts.*

*Then the house is left empty for three nights and the oven broom is left to guard the threshold; it has the *väki* of fire, it will not let the bedbugs leave through the door; they did not come that way, they need to leave the same way they came so they will not come back. Afterwards, the oven broom and the brushed litter are taken into the forest to a northward slope onto a path where all kinds of people and animals travel. Then one has gotten rid of them. (SKVR I, 4 1919: 1954.)*

Even though, in the first example above, the agency of fire is mentioned as the most powerful *väki*, these kinds of folk beliefs are not fixed and dogmatic. Thus, also the *väki* of water is sometimes mentioned as the oldest and strongest (Krohn 1915: 93). In the following example, one seems to be able to repel both wind and fire when combining the agency of forest and quicksilver:

*When one builds a house, one drills a hole in the ridge beam and puts inside three small pebbles that have been taken from an anthill, as well as some quicksilver. The hole is then plugged with an alder wood plug. Then the wind cannot take the roof and an enemy cannot incite fire *väki* to attack the house. (SKS KRA. Usmana. H. Meriläinen II 2265. 1894; informant 64 years old woman.)*

The agency of quicksilver (mercury, Hg) is an interesting question. This substance was commonly used in 19th-century folk magic practices, especially for apotropaic purposes (Vuorela 1960: 50–51; Issakainen 2012: 48, 56–57; Hukantaival 2016). Quicksilver was generally used as medicine and could be bought in pharmacies. Earlier, I have suggested that quicksilver may have been seen as belonging to the domain of the earth, since it was sometimes believed that it was produced by vipers. Vipers were believed to gather their venom from the ground, and they were also otherwise connected with earth agency (Hukantaival 2016: 124–25; e.g. SKVR I, 4 1919: 370). However, one folklore account states that quicksilver is the “stuff of the fire guardian spirit” and thus one could upset the water guardian spirit by putting quicksilver into a lake (SKMT II 1892: 43§). Again, folk beliefs are not fixed and dogmatic, so it is possible that the type of *väki* quicksilver belonged to was ambiguous.

Another type of agency that was often described as connected with objects is the *väki* of death. The object could be anything that belonged to a burial: churchyard soil, coffin nails, and pieces of clothing, bones, or hair. Moreover, one could transfer this power to almost any object simply by putting it in physical contact with a dead body:

*This is done to make a thief bring back the stolen object. Coins are kept in the mouth of a dead person for three nights and then the coins are put in the place of the stolen thing, then one says: Catch the one who took my thing! Then the church *väki* will find the thief and force him/her<sup>11</sup> to bring it back. (SKVR XII 1935: 7897.)*

10. 'Old man', the thunder god/guardian spirit.

11. The Finnish personal pronoun does not differentiate between the sexes.

Other types of *väki*s could be used similarly to find and punish a wrongdoer. For example, in the following complex miniature coffin ritual, water *väki* was incited to attack a witch:

*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 one recites 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 the rapids; the water *väki* will find 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. (SKMT I 1891: 282§; Hukantaival 2015a: 212–13.)*

As noted, the agency of death could be obtained from churchyard soil. However, also other types of agency could be connected with soil. The following example is intriguing, since it depicts a very specific type of agency: the *väki* of juniper. In this example, *väki* and guardian spirits (*haltia*) are used as synonyms.

*One takes the *väki* of juniper to herd one's cattle by taking soil from the root of a juniper with nine forks into a silken cloth. Three hairs are taken from the head of the farm wife and put on the root of the juniper, and three chips of gold are scraped on it from a wedding ring that has been used to marry three couples. The cloth with soil is put into the bell collar when the cows are let out to pasture in the forest. On the first three days, one should take milk from the bell cow to the root of the juniper where one took the guardian spirits. Then bears will not eat the cattle and everything will go well. (SKMT IV, 1 1933: V 33§.)*

Before returning to discuss the relationship between *väki* agency and objects as seen in these examples, let us take a look at some physical objects that have been used in rituals.

### 8.3.2. Potent 'scrap'

The observations in this section are based on the ethnologic collection catalogued in the Magic Objects card index of the National Museum of Finland (Sirelius 1906; Hukantaival 2015a, 2018). These objects have been collected in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from mostly rural people all over Finland, and the catalogue includes information on how they have been used. The users were often parents or grandparents of the people from whom collectors bought or received the objects. The approximately 330 objects in this collection can be roughly divided into natural objects (56%) and manufactured artefacts.<sup>12</sup> Within these two main categories, the largest groups consist of different remains of animals and (mostly natural) stones, but natural wooden formations are also quite a large group. The category of artefacts includes both objects that could be used in mundane contexts and objects specifically manufactured for ritual use. Teeth, claws, and other body parts of bears stand out in the whole collection as the largest subgroup. Stones are mostly smooth water-polished pebbles (so-called snake's court stones and raven stones). Some objects stand out thanks to their complex and fascinating character, such as the frogs and squirrels buried inside miniature coffins (Hukantaival 2015a). However, in this discussion, I focus on some of the least remarkable objects in the collection – the things that might be interpreted as 'scrap' if no information of their use in rituals was available (if they were encountered at an archaeological site, for example).

12. There are 333 catalogue numbers in the collection, but some of these include several objects.

The collection includes several fragmented bones and artefacts. For example, a piece of European elk antler (KM F482) has been used to heal or prevent sudden pain, and a small stoneware potsherd (KM F634) has been used to heal boils on the skin by pressing the potsherd on the boil (Fig. 8.1). A brass handle of a knife (KM F1297) has been used to heal swollen cow's udders by pressing on the udder with the heated object. The assemblage also contains a compress against 'the rose' (erysipelas) (KM F272). This wrapping includes nine different objects: a rag, some blue paper, some black wool, a wasps' nest, a piece of red cloth, the bladder of a cow, some seal blubber, some chalk, and a piece of hare skin. Similar assemblages of small 'scrap' are found in several cunning folks' pouches and boxes in the collection. For example, one such box (KM F1254) contains two wooden gnarls, six pieces of some vegetable material, a piece of coal, and the head of a nail. This box has been used by a cunning man, who had inherited both the objects and the occupation from his mother.



Figure 8.1. According to the information in the museum's catalogue, this fragment of a stoneware mineral water bottle has been used for healing boils by pressing them with it (KM F634). National Museum of Finland. (Photograph: S. Hukantaival.)



As can be inferred from the above, many of the objects in this collection have been used by folk healers, but it also includes objects used in other connections. For example, a so-called “magic treasure” was delivered to the National Museum in 1931 (KM 7380:77). It is a small birch bark packet that contains three small fragments of animal bones (a vertebra, a tooth, and piece of jawbone) and a small piece of flint stone (Fig. 8.2). The packet had been found under the southern corner of an old building in Perho. According to the catalogue, this ‘magic treasure’ had been made to repel pests from the building and to divine whether the building location was favourable (Hukantaival 2016: 86, 198, Appx. 3: 197).



Figure 8.2. The animal vertebra, tooth, and bone fragment together with a small piece of flint and a wood fragment (not mentioned in the catalogue) were found inside a birch bark packet under the southern corner of a building in Perho. The so-called magic treasure was delivered to the museum in 1931 (KM 7380: 77). The catalogue explains that it was used to expel pests from the building or to divine whether the building plot was favourable. In the latter case, the packet would be left at the prospective site overnight. The place was good if there were ants under the packet in the morning, but if there was a frog or snake at the site, the building must be built elsewhere. These animals represent different *väki* categories. National Museum of Finland. (Photograph: S. Hukantaival.)

As for items mentioned often in the narratives presented above, the collection also includes a tinder pouch made of leather that contains a full set of fire-making equipment (KM F1321). The catalogue explains that these items have been used to restore good fortune in marriage, and according to the donor, “they have proven to be very good magic objects in use”. Moreover, the collection contains a small round buckle (KM F1545) from which silver has been scraped in “offering to appease, for example into a spring”.

## 8.4. Discussion: The archaeologist and magic agency

Though widely criticized (e.g. Brück 1999; Bradley 2005; Morris 2008; Chadwick 2012; Hukantaival 2015b), a division into purely functional (‘rational’) objects and (‘non-functional’) ritual objects often surfaces in archaeological interpretations. This is quite understandable, as it is often very difficult to interpret the meanings of objects in an archaeological context. Thus, it seems safer to assume ritual interpretations only when no other explanation is acceptable. Still, it has been recognized that distinguishing the remains of ritual from rubbish is not easy, and in some situations such a division can even be misleading (e.g. Brück 1999; Bradley 2003). As can be inferred from the discussion so far, this chapter is not making this issue any clearer. In contradiction, it might blur things further. However, if the matter is simply not clear-cut, it would not be right to try to force it into a neat fantasy. So what *can* we say about rubbish and agency?

The above short survey of *väki* agency and material culture in narratives depicting ritual practices confirms the idea that there seem to be different shades of meaning in the tradition. On the one hand, the relationship between object and agency seems to be metonymic, based on association between an element<sup>13</sup> and an object. Still, all examples show the importance of ritualization, such as offerings, incantations, the number three, and special properties of the location where agency was obtained or the object itself (on ritualization, see e.g. Bell 1992, 1997). Thus, agency manifested in special circumstances. It is not completely apparent, though, what the relationship between the object and the agency was. In some cases, agency seems to be a property of the object that fulfils those special circumstances, while in others it seems that the object acted as a conduit or gateway for the agency. Thus, both mental images may have coexisted in the tradition. Issakainen (2002: 111) did not believe that the agency used in magic was believed to originate in the element in question (e.g. forest, water, or fire) but, I assume, in some “otherworldly” realm. Still, everyday life was so imbued in ritual and the respectful consideration of nonhuman actors (e.g. Stark 2015) that I do not see it as important to draw any clear lines between the mundane and supernatural in this context. It seems likely that the agency did belong to the element, and that it manifested when activated ritually or accidentally by improper behaviour.

As is common also in narratives, the ‘magic objects’ in the National Museum’s collection do not include explanations of the agency of these objects. They are simply portrayed as objects that ‘work’: they are good for some specific task. Still, when one is familiar with the narratives depicting magic objects, one can interpret the logic (at least partly) of why these objects were good for these uses. First, any small piece of something had the potential to manifest the type of agency to which it belonged. For example, an elk antler, as well as wooden gnarls, most likely manifested the agency of forest. Animal bones, especially horse skulls, were commonly used for repelling pests (Hukantaival 2016: 111, 126). Perhaps the *hiisi*’s agency, to which the horse belonged, was stronger than the pests’ agency (earth?). Skin diseases were often believed to have been caused by earth *väki* (e.g. Hako 2000: 2–3, 86–88). When these ailments were healed, the agency that had ‘grabbed’ or ‘rubbed on’ was returned to its source. Thus, the same agency, earth, was often used. It is likely that the stoneware potsherd

13. The elements in Classical natural philosophy were fire, air, water, and earth, but in this context, forest and death are also included. The more limited agencies (e.g. juniper, the forge, the tar-burning pit) may be seen as subgroups of the main elements.



was indeed found in the ground and thus manifested earth agency. In any case, the scraps and fragments are more than scraps and fragments: they represent something, and they have the agency of that something.

Still, not all rubbish was always seen as powerful. When studying the Native American Ojibwa world view, Hallowell asked an old man whether “all the stones we see about us here are alive”. After reflection, the man had answered, “no, but *some* are”. The ‘alive’ stones were those that appeared to move or have an ‘open mouth’ (Hallowell 1960: 24–25). Similarly, Bird-David notes that the personified *devaru* of the South Indian hunter-gatherer Nayaka are certain things-in-situations. *Devaru* manifest in events involving engagement between things and an actor-perceiver. Moreover, Bird-David states that “we do not first personify other entities and then socialize with them but personify them *as, when, and because* we socialize with them” (Bird-David 1999: S75–78). Something similar to this can be inferred from the narrative material of *väiki* agencies in nature: nature becomes ‘people’ when coming in contact with humans in a way that is beyond human control, and thus negotiation is needed.

Unfortunately, the special character of the ritual objects often cannot be observed in an archaeological context. It is certainly not visible to the archaeologist whether a fragmented object has been obtained accompanied by offering and incantation or whether a coin has been kept in the mouth of a dead body. Likewise, as archaeologist Timo Muhonen (2013) noted in his study of natural stones in Finnish folk beliefs, portable stones used in rituals were often special, but in ways that do not necessarily leave traces: they could belong to a sauna stove or they could be picked up in a lake at a place where fish catches had been good, for example. Still, one aspect that can be observed in some cases is the tendency to prefer objects that are old and found – objects with an unknown maker and user. This has sometimes been the reason for the use of objects found in Iron Age cemeteries or coins a few hundred years older than the ritual event (Hukantaival 2016: 184–185, 196–197). An object included the agency of its manufacturer or owner, and using such an object in rituals could be harmful to that person. This could be prevented by using old objects (e.g. Issakainen 2012: 136–138). Thus, whenever antiquated objects appear in temporally removed contexts, a ritual meaning should be considered. It is well known that Stone Age tools were widely seen as potent ‘thunderbolts’ (e.g. Blinkenberg 1911; Carelli 1997; Johanson 2009), but also other objects that appear in the ‘wrong’ time frames should be noted.

Archaeologists are trained to interpret functions and meanings of objects based on the object’s context. In this connection, context refers to the immediate find context of a particular object (e.g. soil layer or structure, grave or settlement site) and more widely the usual pattern of similar objects and their find contexts, as well as the context of the particular site within the geographical area. In fact, contexts are crucial in the interpretation of ‘ritual rubbish’. Archived folk belief narratives clearly show that, for example, fragments of bone, natural stones, pieces of coal, ashes, and iron slag have been used as ritual objects (e.g. SKMT I 1891: 74 § p). However, the only way to interpret such activities on an archaeological site is through the context of the ‘rubbish’. Ashes and coal found in connection with a hearth are best left without any further interpretations even though they may well occasionally have had ritual meanings. Ashes and coal found, for example, in an inhumation grave are more revealing.

In any case, the main message of this chapter to the archaeologist is that we should remember that world views have changed and that what looks like insignificant rubbish to us may have been seen as imbued with agency that could activate in a specific situation. Moreover, the significance of the observations on agency in nature to archaeology is in the tendency of these special places to attract ritual behaviour. Naturally, it is easier for archaeologists to recognize special natural places that are outstanding features in the environment, such as rocky hills or rapids (e.g. Bradley 2000; Jonuks 2012). The site where an anthill has attracted offerings may not be recognizable at all. Still, it is good to remember that these latter kinds of sites have been important as well.

## 8.5. Conclusion

The notion of non-human agency in the 19th-century ‘peopled’ world view is a complex and dynamic matter. Understanding it requires letting fixed categories of people, animals, and non-sentient material break down. Instead, human-like agency may surface in interaction between a human and a thing. Thus, the interaction comes to take place between two subjects: the human and the ‘other people’. The *väki* tradition includes different shades of meaning, for example of personified guardian spirits, residual human agency, and impersonal activity. *Väki* manifested in movement (rustling, swarming, and rushing) or in specific qualities such as hardness, sharpness, or unusual form (such as branches of trees forming a circle).

The ritual objects discussed here are not remarkable artefacts but everyday tools and even small fragments of ‘scrap’. The ritual usefulness of these kinds of unremarkable objects is revealed in narratives describing the activities of *väki* agencies. The agency originated in a powerful element, such as fire, water, or death, and the object was linked with this agency through association or contact with it. This observation calls attention to the archaeologists’ question of ‘ritual or rubbish’, showing that it might indeed be the wrong question to ask. What we see as rubbish may have been quite useful in ritual contexts.

As mentioned in the beginning, this chapter is not based on comprehensive research based on large sets of data, but mainly on observations made during researching data for other projects. Thus, it is formed as a theoretical discussion backed up by examples of data that are in accordance with that discussion. The next step would be to try to find data that contradicts the hypothesis that the world was seen as imbued with human-like agency. Perhaps this way of seeing the world only surfaced in specific, ritual contexts. This is an intriguing question for further study.

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