

Same mental idea, different manifestation? Hidden charms in Finland and the British Isles

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Introduction

*When a horse dies one should dry its skull and secretly conceal it under the back wall; no-one must see when this is done. This will drive bedbugs away.*¹

The above folklore account was recorded in 1908 in eastern Finland. It belongs to a corpus of 775 records on practices involving ritual concealments in buildings in Finland comprising part of the research material for the author's PhD thesis.² The other main material for the study is finds of concealed objects made in connection to archaeological excavations or demolition/renovation of old buildings. Due to challenges in recording and interpreting such finds, this material is considerably smaller, consisting of only 234 cases. Additionally, the study discusses seven witchcraft and superstition trials where concealed objects are involved. These materials, from a period of c.1200–1950 CE (Finland's historical period), are analysed from a contextual multi-source perspective in order to recognise patterns in the relationships between a chosen object, its location, and meanings of the act.

Ritual concealments in buildings, or hidden charms, are widely-known and have especially been studied in the British Isles. The hidden charms most often discussed here are concealed shoes, dried cats, horse skulls, and witch bottles.³ While conducting the Finnish study, it became apparent that practices in different parts of Europe share some elements and differ in other respects. The aim of this paper is to briefly explore similarities and differences in practices involving ritually concealed objects in buildings in Finland and the British Isles. At the same time, some results of the study and traditions known in Finland are introduced.

Meanings of the Practices

*A small bottle with quicksilver has been kept inside or under the threshold of a stable and cowshed, for a witch cannot cross such a threshold.*⁴

The meanings of the Finnish concealments are most easily approached from the viewpoint of folklore accounts, since many of these are explicit about this aspect. However, these accounts date mostly to the late 19th and early 20th century, so they describe the customs known at that time. The meanings of earlier practices must be inferred from the choice of object and its location in the building. For the purpose of this paper, the meanings described in the folklore form a sufficient body of evidence for comparison with meanings discussed in the British Isles.

In Finnish folklore, several different reasons are given for practices involving concealment (Fig. 1). Still, the most common meaning (in 35% of the accounts including such information) is protection against some sort of evil (so-called apotropaic practices). Moreover, the evil is most often specified as witchcraft caused by envious neighbours. The second most common reason (31%) for concealment is a more general wish to make the building 'lucky' and the third is repelling pests (15%). Other reasons that occur in smaller percentages are, for example, malignant magic, offering to a guardian spirit, and counter-magic against witchcraft believed to have already occurred. Study of Finnish folklore also reveals that specific meanings are connected to specific types of objects and their chosen location. Concealments of mercury in threshold contexts especially have a very strong correlation with apotropaic practices, while animal remains in hearth contexts are strongly connected with pest-repelling meanings.

Though the author is unaware of studies giving information on the relative popularity of different meanings in the British Isles, there seems to be a consensus that apotropaic meanings are prominent here as well.⁵ Other meanings are discussed less often.⁶ Since living cats hunt rodents, a vermin-scare function has sometimes been suggested for concealed cats, but this explanation is likely to be simplifying or even misleading.⁷ As noted, in Finland pest control is applied to animal remains concealed in hearth structures, but most commonly the object in question is a horse skull, so no modern type of logic explains the choice of animal. Instead, the usefulness of the concealed object is connected to a notion of special (otherworldly) agency believed to be a quality of certain animals, materials, and artefacts.⁸

Concealed objects and their contexts

A copper coin, a coin of the crown, was put under each corner when building a cowshed; then witchcraft could not affect it.⁹

In Finnish folklore accounts, three types of objects chosen for concealment stand out: mercury, coins, and animal remains. Mercury is often described as being put inside a small bottle or the quill of a bird and concealed under or inside the threshold. The most commonly occurring animal remain is the horse skull, which is also prominent in the British

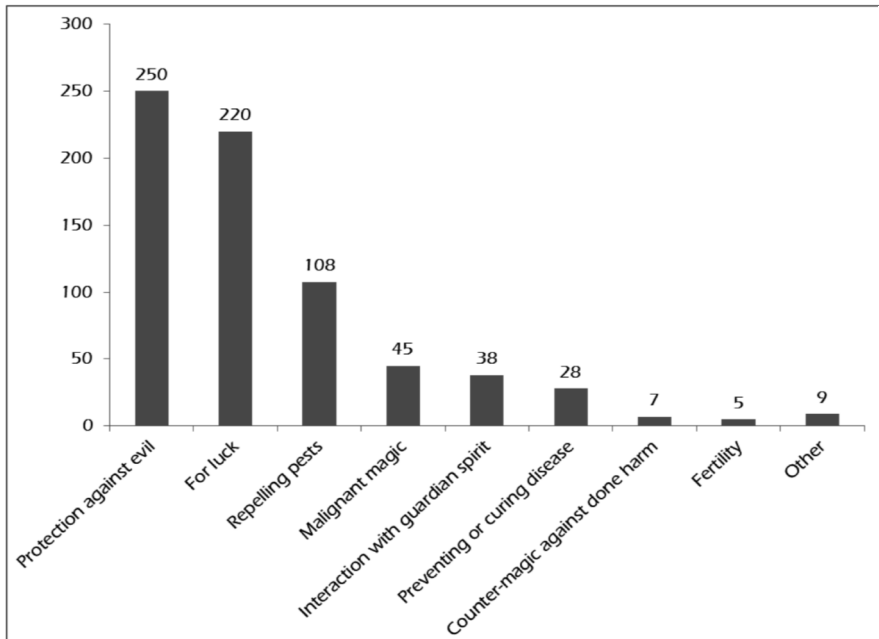


Fig. 1. *Reasons for concealing objects in buildings, as given in Finnish folklore accounts (n=710).*

Isles.¹⁰ Coins have been concealed in the British Isles as well,¹¹ but they are not as often discussed as horse skulls, shoes, and cats. These last-mentioned three types of objects are discussed in more detail below.

In contrast to the folklore, slightly different objects stand out in the Finnish finds. Find material forms a smaller body of evidence than folklore, emphasised by the fact that the finds cover a wider time-span of around 800 years. Still, one major reason for the diverging picture is matters of preservation, recognition, and documentation of finds. In the find material, human-made artefacts especially stand out as concealed objects. Moreover, in cases found in buildings dating to late modern times (c. 1700–1950) wedged Stone Age objects, so-called thunderbolts,¹² form a large proportion (40%). This picture is influenced by the early interests of antiquarians and museums. Finds of Stone Age and other interesting artefacts have been recorded with accuracy, while many other types of objects have not been of interest.

One group of objects occurring in both folklore and finds is sharp metal tools, such as axes and knives. Coins are also present in the find material, but due to problems in recognition and documentation of these small objects, they are clearly under-represented. Animal remains occur in the

whole study period as well, but it is likely that only a very limited proportion of actual practices has been recorded.

The contexts of hidden charms occurring in folklore, in order of popularity, are thresholds, corners, walls, roofs, hearths, and floors. Dwellings and animal shelters stand out as types of buildings receiving a concealment. In the find material, thresholds and roofs are under-represented, while walls, floors, and hearths stand out.

The most common type of building during most of the historical period in Finland was a horizontal log construction with a cross-notch corner technique. The oldest type is called a smoke cottage, since it does not have a chimney. The smoke was simply led out through a small hatch in the wall. Smoke cottages are known from medieval times up to the 19th century, even though log houses with chimneys started to become popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹³ This building technique affects concealment practices, as simple log houses have fewer options than more complex structures of where to put a hidden charm.

Even though concealments from the British Isles are often reported in connection with chimneys, hearths and thresholds also seem to have been popular locations.¹⁴ The similarity of preferred contexts is not self-evident, since a study focusing on southern Scandinavia shows that the hearth was chosen as the location for concealments in the Iron Age and a few medieval cases, but not at all in later times.¹⁵ In contrast, it seems that the hearth remained popular throughout the historical period in both Finland and the British Isles.

Horse skulls

In Finnish folklore, horse skulls are most often mentioned as concealed in the foundation of a hearth, but in some cases wall-foundations and floors are also mentioned (Fig. 2). As noted, there is a strong connection between horse skulls and pest control in the folklore. They were usually supposed to keep cockroaches, fleas, bedbugs, and rats outside the building.

Even though horse skulls are often mentioned in folklore, there are few documented finds of such concealments in Finland, although it has been pointed out that in some areas finding a horse skull in an old hearth during demolition has been common – perhaps too common, since people do not think that it is something they should report to the local museum. Only remarkable finds tend to get reported; this is evident in two cases where the complete skeleton of a horse was found in a hearth foundation.¹⁶ Finds from archaeological excavations are rare as well, but instead several cases of cattle skulls in hearths and under floors are known.

Though a pest-repellent function is not present, horse skulls in the British Isles seem to focus on similar locations, under floors and by hearths. Here, a folk belief that a horse skull has an acoustic function as a sound box

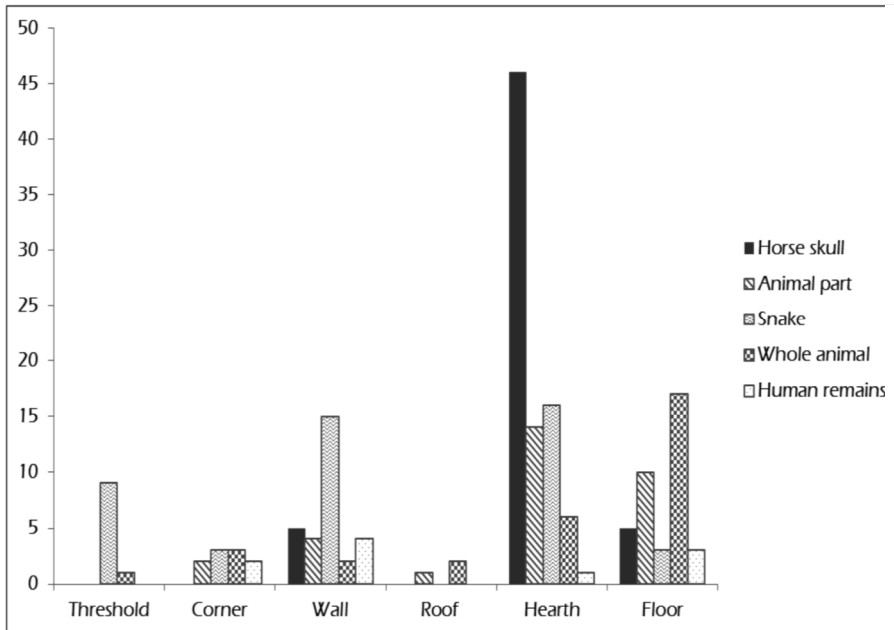


Fig. 2. Relationships between animal and human remains and locations in the building in Finnish folklore (n=174).

amplifying singing or dancing has been discussed.¹⁷ Though recognised in neighbouring Scandinavia,¹⁸ this meaning is unknown in the Finnish tradition. It is also evident that the acoustic meaning is unlikely to have been the only reason to conceal a horse skull in the British Isles.¹⁹

The shifting meanings of practices that outwardly appear similar are very interesting, and a comprehensive comparative study could reveal relevant insights.

Concealed shoes

Only two Finnish folklore accounts describe concealing a shoe: one explains that a worn shoe together with horse bones and a tar pot will repel pests when hidden in a hearth structure; and the other gives the same purpose to a worn shoe hidden together with cattle bones in a hearth.²⁰ Even though these accounts picture a quite different tradition from that known in the British Isles,²¹ there are two cases of finds of concealed shoes in attic structures in Finland that much resemble British traditions. These are both found in towns, in contrast to the folklore gathered from rural areas. One is a find of three shoes placed under a support beam of the attic-floor in the Old Town Hall of Porvoo (built in the 1760s).

The other case is quite intriguing. Ralph Merrifield mentions in his *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* that the Concealed Shoes Index of

Northampton Museum includes finds from Finland.²² The find in question is a woman's black leather 10-button boot made c. 1910, kept in the Helsinki City Museum. According to the museum catalogue, the shoe was found during renovation of the old wooden main building of Meilahti manor in 1983. The building was built in the early 19th century, but during 1905–1945 the estate was owned by the British Campbell family. The attic of the building was renovated in 1913, and this is the time when the boot was most likely concealed in the roof. It seems likely that the Campbells were the concealers.

Concealed cats at the Naval Academy in Helsinki?

Concealed cats are mentioned in six Finnish folklore accounts. As with shoes, it seems that the practice was not as popular in Finland as in the British Isles. Five of the accounts depict concealing a whole cat, and this was done for malignant purposes, to destroy the luck of others. One certain find of a concealed cat has been recorded. It was found inside a miniature coffin in the attic structures of Kiihtelysvaara church.²³ This kind of practice is also known in the folklore of counter-magic against witchcraft, only this cat-coffin is mentioned to have been buried in the graveyard.²⁴

Recently another possible find of concealed cats became public. The remains of two cats (together with some shoes) were found in the crawl space under the floor of the Naval Academy on Seurasaari Island in Helsinki.²⁵ The building was built as a Russian hospital in 1830. The space could theoretically have been accessible for cats to get trapped there, so this is not a certain case. One of the cats was mummified, and it was found lying inside a bottomless tipped-over barrel, while the other was lying in front of the barrel. The latter was not preserved as well as the one inside the barrel (Fig. 3). The cats were left in place after the renovation. It is possible that the sparse picture of concealed cats in Finland is partly due to issues with documentation, but this is uncertain as things stand.

Counter-Magic against Witchcraft

The best-known objects used for counter-magic practices against witchcraft in the British Isles are witch bottles.²⁶ However, this tradition seems to be unknown in Finland.²⁷ Instead, other practices have been used when misfortune was suspected to be the result of witchcraft.

The remains of rituals including the burial of a miniature (c.15–20 cm long) wooden coffin with a frog or other small animal inside have been found in several Finnish churches, where they have been concealed under the floor or in other structures.²⁸ The oldest known example was found in Turku Cathedral, dated to the late 17th or early 18th century (Fig. 4). Other finds date to the late 18th and 19th century, so these practices have been operative until the late 19th century. Up to a hundred individual coffins have

Fig. 3. *The possibly concealed cats in the crawl-space under the floor of the Naval Academy in Helsinki.*

Photo by Marjo Tiirikka.



been reported, but only nine have been preserved. When they were found in the late 19th and early 20th century, they were not considered worth keeping.

These practices are also known in Finnish folklore from the late 19th century. The burial place was not always in a church in the folklore, but this is the only context where these coffins have been found, during church renovations. According to folklore, these coffins have been part of counter-magic against witchcraft: when some misfortune was believed to have been caused by a witch, a complex ritual ending with the miniature burial was performed in order to reverse the effect and punish the witch. The ritual was often very detailed, and involved a lot of ritual treatment: for example, the frog should be caught without touching it with bare hands and it was bound or impaled before being buried in the coffin. The folklore also often states that something of the victim of the witchcraft should be put in the coffin, sometimes even inside the mouth of the frog. These burials also included some textile as a shroud for the animal.

Ritual marks on timbers

Ritual marks in buildings are not part of my thesis, but since these are widely discussed in the British Isles a short comment on the Finnish situation is in order.

Finnish ritual marks were studied in the 1930s by Sulo Haltsonen,²⁹ whose study mentions the cross and pentagram as the most common marks used in Finland. Other signs discussed by Haltsonen are triangles (including hourglass shapes formed by two triangles), hexagrams, octagrams, looped squares, swastikas, and the *tursaansydän* (heart of a mythical sea creature) symbol, which incorporates a swastika. The M or W symbols, hexafoils, and burn marks well-known in the British Isles³⁰ have not been seen in Finnish discussion. However, hexafoils occur on traditional household objects,³¹ and the current author has recently documented this mark on a window sill of the late 19th-century Makkarakoski sawmill in Noormarkku



Fig. 4. The elaborately made miniature pine coffin containing the remains of a frog wrapped in textile was found inside the jamb of the portal of a burial chapel in Turku Cathedral during renovation work 1923–24.

Photo by
Sonja Hukantaival.

(Fig. 5). Thus, it is likely that a new study might reveal previously undiscussed details on these practices in Finland.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is evidence of both similarities and differences between traditions in Finland and the British Isles. Similarities are the use of horse skulls, and (to a lesser extent) coins and sharp metal tools. In particular, the main purpose, to protect against evil influences, especially witchcraft, is shared in both areas.

Witch bottles were not known in Finland, but the tradition of frogs in miniature coffins served a similar purpose of counter-witchcraft. Concealed shoes and cats also seem to have been less popular in Finland than in the British Isles.

Thus, while the main ideas are similar, chosen objects and practices differ somewhat.

Notes

1. Finnish Literature Society, Folklore Archives: Nurmes, Mujejärvi. Samuli Paulaharju 3484. 1908. Informant: Pekka Pulkkinen, 60 yrs old. Translated by the author.
2. Sonja Hukantaival, *'For a Witch Cannot Cross Such a Threshold!': Building Concealment Traditions in Finland c. 1200–1950*, *Archaeologia Medii Aevi Finlandiae* 23 (Turku: SKAS, 2016).
3. E.g. Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation sacrifices', *Journal of Royal Soc. of Antiquaries of Ireland* 75 (1945) pp.45–52; Margaret M. Howard, 'Dried cats', *Man* 51 (1951) pp.149–51; Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London: Batsford, 1987); Brian Hoggard, 'The archaeology of counter-witchcraft and popular magic', in *Beyond the Witch Trials: Witchcraft and Magic in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Owen Davies and Willem de Blécourt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) pp.167–86; June Swann, 'Interpreting concealed shoes and associated finds', in *Depotfunde Aus Gebäuden in Zentraleuropa: Concealed Finds from Buildings in Central Europe*, ed. Ingolf Ericsson and Rainer Atzbach, *Archäologische Quellen Zum Mittelalter* 2 (Berlin: Sripvaz-Verlag, 2005) pp.115–19; Ceri Houlbrook, 'Ritual, recycling and

recontextualisation: putting the concealed shoe into context’, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 23 (2013) pp.99–112; Brian Hoggard, ‘Witch bottles: their contents, contexts and uses’, in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp.91–105; Brian Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’, in Hutton, *Physical Evidence* pp.106–17.

4. *Karjataikoja I*, ed. Aukusti Vilho Rantasalo, Suomen Kansan Muinaisia Taikoja 4 (Helsinki: SKS, 1933), 256 §. Translated by the author.
5. E.g. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* pp.159–183; Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’; Timothy Easton, ‘Four spiritual middens in Mid-Suffolk, England, ca. 1650 to 1850’, *Historical Archaeology* 48 (2014) pp.10–34; Stephen Gordon, ‘Domestic magic and the walking dead in Medieval England: a diachronic approach’, in *The Materiality of Magic: An Artefactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*, ed. Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015) pp.66–84.
6. See also the ritual vs. acoustics discussion in Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Albert Sandklef, ‘Singing flails. a study in threshing-floor constructions, flail-threshing traditions and the magic guarding of the house’, *FF Communications* 136 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1949).
7. Howard, ‘Dried cats’ p.151; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.106–110.
8. About this agency, see e.g. Laura Stark, *The Magical Self: Body, Society and the Supernatural in Early Modern Rural Finland*, *FF Communications* 290 (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 2006) pp.254–262; Kaarina Koski, ‘Conceptual analysis and variation in belief tradition: a case of death-related beings’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 38 (2008) pp.45–66, doi:10.7592/FEJF2008.38.koski; Sonja Hukantaival, ‘Frogs in miniature coffins from churches in Finland: folk magic in Christian holy places’, *Mirator* 16 (2015) pp.192–220.
9. Finnish Literature Society, *Folklore Archives: Alavus. 1936*. R. Hemminki 17. Translated by the author.
10. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’ pp.177–178; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’.
11. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’ p.52.
12. See, e.g., Christian Blinkenberg, *The Thunderweapon in Religion and Folklore: A Study in Comparative Archaeology*, Cambridge Archaeological and Ethnological Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911); Peter Carelli, ‘Thunder and lightning, magical miracles. on the popular myth of thunderstones and the presence of Stone Age artefacts in medieval deposits’, in *Visions of the Past: Trends and Traditions in Swedish Medieval Archaeology*, ed. Hans Andersson, Peter Carelli, and Lars Ersgård, *Lund Studies in Medieval Archaeology* 19 (Lund: University of



Fig. 5. Hexafoil on a windowsill at Makkarakoski sawmill.

Photo by Sonja Hukantaival.

- Lund, 1997) pp.393–417; Kristiina Johanson, ‘The changing meaning of thunderbolts’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 42 (2009) pp.129–74.
13. Ilmar Talve, *Finnish Folk Culture*, *Studia Fennica Ethnologica* 4 (Helsinki: SKS, 1997) pp.32–43; Liisa Seppänen, *Rakentaminen ja kaupunkikuvan muutokset keskiajan Turussa. Erityistarkastelussa Åbo Akademin päärakennuksen tontin arkeologinen aineisto* (Turku: University of Turku, Archaeology, 2012), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-5231-1>.
 14. E.g. Hoggard, ‘Archaeology of counter-witchcraft’ p.173.
 15. Ann-Britt Falk, *En grundläggande handling: byggnadsoffer och dagligt liv i medeltid*, *Vägar till Midgård* 12 (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2008) pp.105–106; see also Ann-Britt Falk, ‘My home is my castle: protection against evil in medieval times’, in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert, and Catharina Raudvere, *Vägar till Midgård* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006) pp.200–205.
 16. Sonja Hukantaival, ‘Horse skulls and alder-horse: the horse as a depositional sacrifice in buildings’, in *The Horse and Man in European Antiquity: Worldview, Burial Rites, and Military and Everyday Life*, ed. Audronė Bliujienė, *Archaeologia Baltica* 11 (Klaipėda: Klaipėda University Press, 2009), p.351.
 17. Ó Súilleabháin, ‘Foundation sacrifices’; Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.111–114.
 18. Sandklef, ‘Singing flails’ pp.26–43.
 19. Hoggard, ‘Concealed animals’ pp.111–114.
 20. Finnish Literature Society, *Folklore Archives: Vuokkiniemi*. 1900. I. Marttini b) 141; b) 495. Translated by the author.
 21. E.g. Swann, ‘Interpreting concealed shoes’; Houlbrook, ‘Ritual, recycling and recontextualisation’.
 22. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual* p.133.
 23. Hukantaival, *A Witch Cannot Cross* pp.201–202.
 24. Matti Varonen, *Vainajainpalvelus muinaisilla suomalaisilla* (Helsinki: SKS, 1898) p.29.
 25. Marjo Tiirikka, ‘Merisotakoulun kissamuumion arvoitus’, *Kontrahti* 4 (2015) pp.28–29.
 26. E.g. Hoggard, ‘Witch bottles’.
 27. One bellarmine bottle found in a foundation in Lyttylä is a possible but highly uncertain case: Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen, ‘Bartmann-Krus i Finland’, *Hikuin* 8 (1982) pp.243–244, 248.
 28. Hukantaival, *A Witch Cannot Cross*.
 29. Sulo Haltsonen, *Suomalaisista taikamerkeistä: Kansatieteellinen tutkielma* (Helsinki: Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, 1936).
 30. E.g. Timothy Easton, ‘Apotropaic symbols and other measures for protecting buildings against misfortune’, in Hutton, *Physical Evidence* pp.39–67.
 31. E.g. Haltsonen, *Suomalaisista taikamerkeistä* p.68.