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# Folk Magic and the Haunting of the Second World War in Finnish Lapland

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*This article engages with certain peculiar finds and features that we have documented at former German WWII military camps in Finnish Lapland, with a particular emphasis on an excavated assemblage that has affinities to traditional ritual (sacrificial) practices. The relevant finds and features date from the post-war period, but they are meaningfully associated with WWII sites. We consider the possible connections of these finds and features to folk magic and the supernatural, especially with regard to boundaries and boundary-making. The material is interpreted in relation to the painful histories and memories of WWII in the high North, and in the broader context of northern ways of life and being and perceptions of temporally layered landscapes. More specifically, we focus on how locals have coped with the difficult and haunting presences of WWII in northern landscapes and mindscapes after the war in a particular natural, cultural and cosmological lived environment which people have long co-inhabited with various non-human and spiritual entities. We aim to contribute to the broader discussion of the folklore of WWII as a dimension in conflict heritage and memory.*

## Introduction

This article engages with a set of peculiar and unexpected finds and features discovered at Second World War (WWII) sites in Finnish Lapland, and in particular their possible connections to folk magic and the supernatural. Northernmost Finland is the traditional homeland of the indigenous Sámi, although long settled also by ethnic Finns, and the sites in question are mainly Prisoner of War (PoW) and work camps established by Nazi German forces to hold Soviet and other prisoners during the period of the war when Germany and Finland were allies (1940–44). These remote camps were places of extreme suffering, violence and death, and are remembered as such by the local Sámi and Finnish population (Fig. 1). We examine how these memories of the conflict and the associated places in the landscape and mindscapes have been integrated into post-war landscapes of heritage and commemoration, and

how these practices in turn are linked to northern cosmologies and folk traditions concerning spiritualities, non-human beings and powers, and the relations between the living and the dead.

There are numerous studies across several disciplines exploring the connections between the violent conflict of the twentieth century and the emergence and growth of supernatural beliefs and practices. These range from the First World War 'Angel of Mons' (e.g. Clarke 2004) to the occult studies conducted by the SS *Ahnenerbe* (Kater 2006). These links between conflict and the supernatural were observed as far back as the First World War, although the meanings of these changes remained subject to debate (see, for example, Davies 2018). During that conflict we find numerous accounts of religious, spiritual or supernatural aid to warriors in distress and there is also some emerging research on this superstition and magical thinking in wartime (Saunders 2003; Davies 2018), though such subjects



**Figure 1.** Top: Multinational Sápmi and the discussed sites in northern Finland. (1) Inari Hyljelahti; (2) Inari Haukkapesäoja; (3) Inari Kankiniemi; (4) Inari Martinkotajärvi; (5) Sodankylä Kopsusjärvi; (6) Savukoski Seitajärvi. (Background map: Esri.) Bottom: Soviet Prisoners of War (on the left) outside their log house with German guards (on the right) at Inari Haukkapesäoja, Lapland. (Photograph: Max Peronius 1941–1944/Antti Peronius.)

are still very much in the margins of both the research and the grand narratives of modern war.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there are indications that superstitions, with their material/talismanic expressions, abounded also during WWII, as illustrated by MacKenzie’s (2015; 2017; see also Gregory 2019) research on superstition as a means of coping with the constant threat of death. Recent work in Finland has indicated that premonitions and other strange (‘supernatural’) experiences were common among Finns both on

the front lines and on the home front during the war (Myllyniemi 2020). Rather than considering these practices as merely ‘irrational’, there have been some attempts to regard magical thinking and superstitious behaviour as associated with a sense of control and heightened situational awareness in combat (see e.g. MacKenzie 2015; Wallrich 1960).

War and magic often come together in popular culture and pseudo-historical accounts, from spells and magical weapons in fantasy fiction to Nazi

engagement with occult powers. The global legacies of WWII in particular have given rise to a vast body of research, ranging from oral histories and studies of contested memory, the political geographies of memorials and memorial landscapes, cultural representations of the conflict through time and interdisciplinary archaeological studies of the war (Linares Matás *et al.* 2016; Moshenska 2006; Stele *et al.* 2021). Within this rich field we can see a diversity of method and explanatory frameworks, competing notions of cultural or collective memory and a growing sophistication in critical approaches to memory politics in the present day.

Alongside these studies of conflict heritage, memory and commemoration there has been growing attention to folkloric elements of post-conflict cultures, much of it by anthropologists exploring connections between war trauma and the supernatural, in particular in relation to histories of invasion, occupation and mass death. Carole Faucher's study of ghost stories in post-Second World War Singapore uncovered 'a host of tales embedded with horrific qualities drawn from traumatic memories of the Japanese Occupation': this included horror literature and supposedly 'true' accounts of supernatural encounters (Faucher 2004, 191). Similarly, Nicholas Long has argued that ghost stories are a culturally permitted means of expressing memories of the Japanese Occupation of Indonesia's Riau Archipelago. The supposed violence of these ghosts is used to contextualize accidental or unexplained deaths: 'today's "mysterious happenings" and tragedies translate the atrocities of the Japanese Occupation into a contemporary context' (Long 2010, 883).

Heonik Kwon's *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* examines the supernatural afterlives of the American War, asking 'What are the actions of war ghosts in Vietnam and what troubles, if any, do they cause the society?' (Kwon 2008, 13). These troubles range from the political to the medical: war ghosts are mobile, greedy and can insinuate themselves into living people's bodies. Kwon draws connections between these ghosts and the reappearance of the war dead, as from the 1990s a more prosperous Vietnam saw infrastructure developments and the resulting disturbance of mass graves. This links back to the archaeological, where there has traditionally been a greater reluctance to acknowledge or discuss the folkloric and supernatural dimensions of fieldwork. Here again conflict archaeology has taken a lead: Gilly Carr has spoken and written about her own encounters during fieldwork, despite negative reactions from colleagues (e.g. Carr 2018). A similar degree of scepticism was encountered by the

expedition to Myanmar to investigate tales of Spitfire fighter aircraft, supposedly buried complete in their packing crates on an old airfield (Brockman & Spaight 2020). This is a popular trope in the public memory of the Second World War worldwide, and most commonly around American airfields: war materiel 'packed in grease and perfectly preserved' for modern treasure hunters. The expedition in this case was launched—with financial backing—on the sliver of a chance that there was truth to the rumours, but nothing was found (see Ferguson 2018 on the spiritual dimension of the Myanmar legend).

These studies of the folkloric and fantastic in conflict heritage and archaeology provide the background and context for our research presented here. While this article examines in detail a specific set of sites and artefacts of apparently folk-magical significance, our wider aim is to contribute to this opening-up of discussions around the folklore of WWII as an important aspect in conflict heritage and archaeology, and to encourage and engage with analogous work in global contexts. The legacies of the war are lively and resonant in the contemporary world and find expression in all aspects of cultural and social life. As WWII reaches the edges of living memory, we witness a growing body of legends emerge around its sites, monuments and materialities. With a better appreciation of the mechanisms of folklore and folk belief, we can be equipped to study these trends in all their rich peculiarity. From this basis, we approach a set of peculiar finds and features that we have documented through dialoguing between finds, sites, cultural traditions and environmental relations in circumpolar worlds. Through such an approach, we go beyond the individualistic interrogation and assessment of these phenomena to understand the complexities of heritage processes and the experience of landscape as a whole and in relation to the past, present and future.

### Excavating a curious site nearby a German WWII military camp in Lapland

The presence of German armed forces across Finnish Lapland during WWII has created a landscape with a wealth of sites and remains. Most of these are fragmentary, largely destroyed and often barely visible today. As part of a larger project, we organized public excavations at one of these sites at Hyljelahti in Kaamanen, Inari. The site originally covered nearly five hectares, but there are relatively few and modest remains visible on the surface. While surveying the area in 2016, we spotted a large boulder close to the shore of the Hyljelahti Bay, in the northwest

corner of the camp just outside the yard of an inhabited house (Fig. 2). The boulder stood out in the landscape owing to its shape and size in the otherwise flat landscape, and because rusty metal artefacts, some of German military origin, had been piled around it, and several reindeer antlers on top of the boulder (Fig. 2; see also the Supplementary 3D model). This is a reindeer-herding area, so reindeer and their antlers are commonly encountered in Sápmi/Lapland, but it was the intentional placing of the antlers on the rock that caught our attention due to the importance of reindeer antler in some Sámi spiritual practices (see below). These features have a curious resonance with traditional Sámi sacrificial sites, *sieidi*, although we took it for granted, based on discussions with local Sámi and the archaeologists from the Sámi museum Siida, that this was not a 'true' *sieidi*. We excavated the area around the boulder in 2017 as part of our community heritage project and with the consent of an elderly (Finnish) couple living in the houses right next to the site. The couple knew the dump, but professed to know nothing about its history, except that it had already been there in the 1980s when they moved into the house that had been built and previously been owned by a Sámi family.

The excavation started with the removal of surface material from the front of the boulder. This material consisted of a range of WWII-era items, such as jerrycans, but also material that dated several decades after the war. The largest item was the metal frame of a folding bed, apparently of WWII vintage. This surface 'layer' of metal items turned out to cover a deposit of glass bottles, mainly for alcohol. The bottles and other material appeared to date from the 1940s to the 1970s/80s, although we have not attempted to date every find. Some of the bottles were distinctly of the particular brands that we have found at other German WWII sites, such as Marnier-Lapostolle liqueur.

One of the features that had attracted our attention was a set of four reindeer antlers placed on the top of the boulder. In 2017, while we were clearing the ground around the boulder, we realized that there was one more antler partially buried at the 'rear' of the boulder, furthest away from the lake and from the pile of artefacts on the lakeshore side of the boulder. We excavated this rear area to determine whether this second antler was connected to the antler on the boulder. Peeling back the overlying turf revealed a very large antler, that then resolved into three separate pieces of antler (Fig. 3). The antler poking out of the turf was lying intertwined with another very large antler similar to the large antlers

on the top of the boulder. The third piece was a smaller fragment with a tine branching off. Interestingly, overlying these antlers was a single German military leather jackboot of the WWII era (Fig. 3). The antlers were very different to one another. The lower antler was larger and clearly came from a mature adult. The upper antler was much smaller, divided into two equal tines, and was still attached to a large section of skullcap. The larger antler had four full tines and a nascent fifth tine. The intertwined antlers were overlying the roots of the tree that grows over the boulder and from which the lamp hangs.

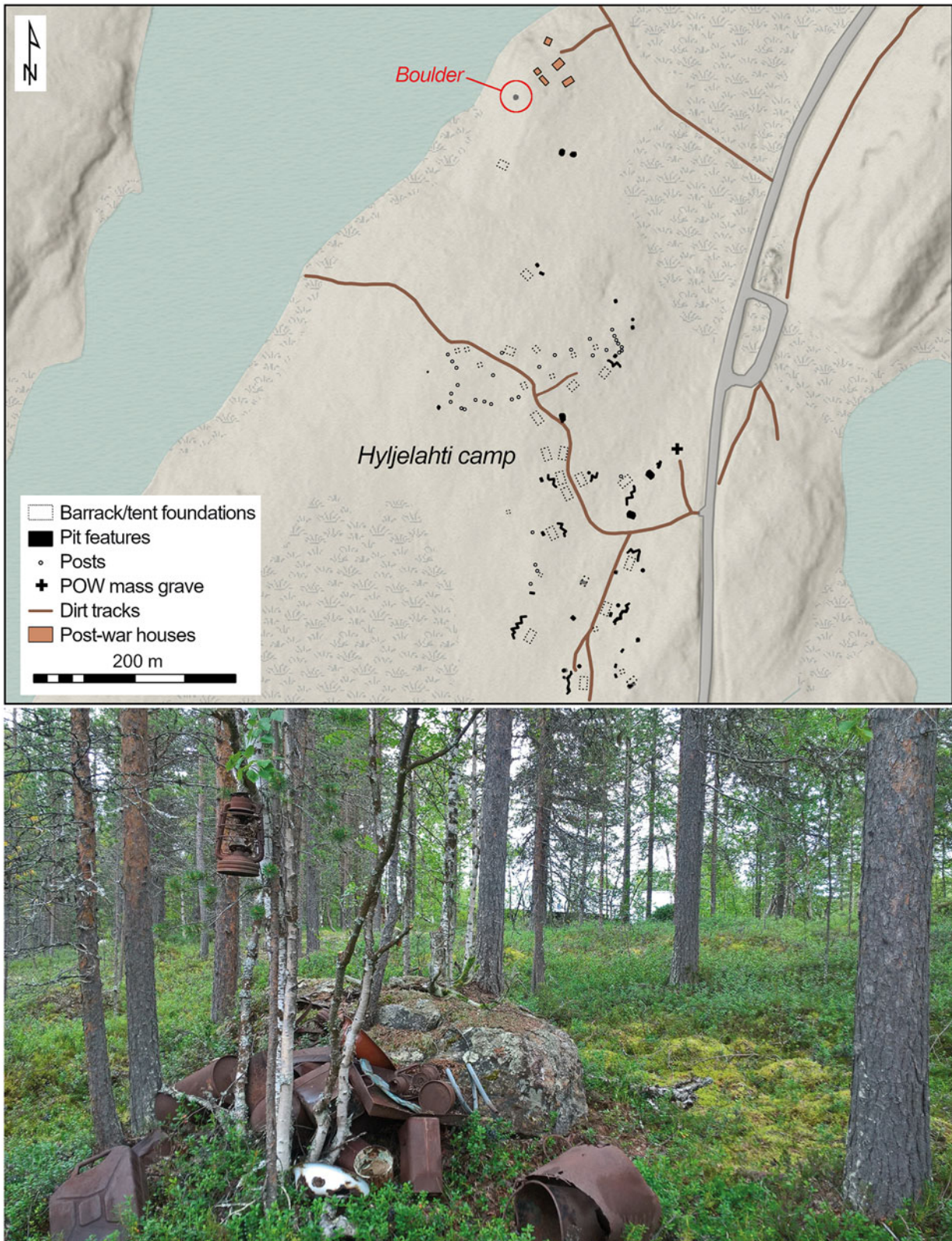
While cleaning the area surrounding the antlers, it became clear that there were also other items buried alongside the antlers besides the German boot. Several iron staples, each measuring roughly 20 cm in length with sharp points at both ends, were uncovered. These did not appear to have been used to pin anything down, but were instead lying loose within the soil alongside the antlers. There were a series of other metal objects, probably relating to vehicles, which were buried at a similar depth to the antlers, but further towards the surface deposit at the 'front' of the rock. Finally, a few of the glass bottles reached to the 'back' of the rock but not as far as the antlers. Other finds of a particular interest included a pair of women's shoes and a set of four perfectly functional files found under the turf on top of the rock, deposited neatly in a bundle under the antlers.

The antlers lay on a highly organic layer of orange-brown humic material. This ran almost parallel to the rear of the boulder and was clearly separate from the forest soil, which was a darker brown organic silt that contained small white angular stones (<1 cm). The highly organic layer connected to the antlers lays over the natural forest soil, showing that it was a relatively recent deposit. This organic material appeared to have some level of structure and may have been a sheet of wood or a thin layer of pieces of wood. Below this was a layer of burning, clearly apparent in the fragments of charcoal present. Again, this seemed likely to have been a sheet of wood or a thin layer of pieces of wood. All these features added to a sense of strange, structured deposition relating to the antlers and the accompanied objects.

### Other curious finds from German military sites in Lapland

The finds suggest some form of 'structured deposition' after the war, although the intended meanings of what was unearthed remain uncertain. Some items were clearly carefully laid in place while others, such





**Figure 2.** Top: General map of the Hyljelahti camp, the excavated boulder on the northern edge of the camp circled. (Map: Oula Seitsonen & Annukka Debenjak-Ijäs; background map: Esri.) Bottom: The boulder with reindeer antlers on top and surrounded by a deposit of wartime and later rubbish. The houses built using German wartime remains are visible in the background. (Photograph Vesa-Pekka Heron.)





**Figure 3.** Selected features documented around the boulder at Hyljelahti. Top left: Reindeer antlers on top of the boulder and three more antlers entangled with the tree roots being excavated at the base of the boulder. Top right: Four files found in a bundle under the turf below the antlers on the top of the boulder. Bottom left: Iain Banks uncovering the three antlers and the German military jackboot that covered the antlers at the base of the boulder. Bottom right: The German jackboot excavated by the boulder, after conservation. (Photographs: Iain Banks, Oula Seitsonen, Vesa-Pekka Herva, Kirsi Rumbin.)

as paint cans, look like casual dumping of rubbish. Whether or not there is a direct link here, the non-casual depositing echoes traditional Sámi sacrificial practices at *sieidi* sites. There is a long history of ‘spiritual engagement’ with the environment and various landscape elements in northern Fennoscandia, sometimes involving depositional practices, from prehistory to modern times, and not only among the Sámi (e.g. Äikäs 2015; Herva & Lahelma 2019). Several features of the Hyljelahti boulder have connections with finds and features from some other sites in Lapland that relate to the folkloric traces of the German military presence in WWII. Overall, we

have encountered peculiar remains at four other locations with links to the wartime presence of the German troops and their multinational PoWs: two finds at the Haukkapesäoja PoW camp in Inari and three apparently post-war carvings on pine trees at other PoW camps and wartime contexts in Inari and Sodankylä municipalities.

While the boulder at Hyljelahti comprises a particularly intriguing case, our interest in folk magic in the context of WWII sites in Lapland—or the significance of the supernatural in mediating people’s relationships with them—was initially sparked off by two finds from the PoW camp at Inari

Haukkapesäoja made in 2015 that can plausibly be associated with traditional folk magic. The first is made up of two conjoined pieces of cattle bone found on top of a PoW rubbish dump. When the two bones were separated, two small metal items were found wedged inside them: a bullet and a metal cylinder capped with a wooden cork. Inside the cylinder was a knotted electrical wire (Fig. 4).

Curiously, a closely analogous find was made about the same time in the city of Oulu during an excavation at a 1930s memorial for a Finnish man hanged there by the Russian officials in 1916 (Finland was part of the Russian Empire until 1917). This find comprised a bone with glass shards and a piece of iron wire placed inside a bone and capped with a shoe sole (Fig. 5). The deposit has been interpreted by the excavators as an expression of folk magic and intended to 'bind' or 'pacify' the restless spirit of the hanged man, which, according to local stories, was later said to haunt the place (Ikäheimo *et al.* 2016). This man was widely regarded as having been unfairly sentenced to death by the then ruling 'authorities of the Russian tyranny', as the inscription on the memorial plaque puts it. Although we are not aware of similar specific stories associated with the Haukkapesäoja site, it is regarded locally as a gloomy place (Arvelin 2009).

The other unusual find from Haukkapesäoja camp was made by a volunteer to our excavations, who spotted a blue child's shoe wedged under the corner logs of a collapsed building used for housing PoWs. The dating of the shoe is unclear: it is decades old, but clearly post-war (Fig. 6). More importantly, there is no obvious 'rational' reason for the presence of a single child's shoe under the corner of a collapsed wartime building in such a remote place, unless someone had deliberately squeezed it in there. This find resonates with folk traditions of hiding shoes on the one hand and making 'ritual' deposits in the foundations of buildings (e.g. Davies & Houlbrook 2021; Herva 2010; Hoggard 2004; Hukantaival 2016; and see below). The shoe from Haukkapesäoja suggests a 'retrospective' foundation deposition (made after the abandonment and likely the collapse of the building) reflective of people's awareness of the painful past of this site—and most importantly its spectres in the present—with an intention to bind them to a particular location so that they will not infiltrate into other places. The corner where the shoe was placed is also closest to the doorway of the building.

The deposit from the hanging-tree memorial in Oulu also incorporated the sole of a shoe that

'capped' the above discussed bone with the glass sherds and iron wire. The metal items and sharp items from both Haukkapesäoja and the hanging memorial have analogies in northern folklore and magic. Metals, especially iron, were seen in Finnish and Sámi folk beliefs to be strong in the 'force' (Fi. *väki*), which is a complex and ambiguous concept but could be understood as the supernatural 'use-power' of magic (Pulkkinen 2014). The knot tied in the electrical wire could also symbolize the tethering of the restless spirit or spirits to a specific locality (Hoggard 2004). All objects related to death were perceived as exceptionally rich in *väki* (Pulkkinen 2014).

The hanging-tree memorial in Oulu had numerous crosses carved into it, now barely visible. This is yet another point of similarity with the WWII sites in Lapland, which feature a variety of these 'arborglyphs' (cf. Kobiałka 2019). At Kankiniemi, a logging camp using PoWs as workforce, a heart-shaped carving was identified through a crowd-sourcing exercise and later confirmed by fieldwork at the corner of the old guard path surrounding the PoW compound (Fig. 7). According to one local informant, the heart was there in the 1950s, but carved post-war (he did not know who made it). The informant's uncle had identified two PoW graves on top of a small hillock near the camp in the early 1950s, marked with Orthodox crosses, and instructed by the local police, opened the graves for reburial in the PoW mass grave in the graveyard in Ivalo.

After locating the Kankiniemi heart carving, we were informed of two more carvings at wartime sites in the Sodankylä and Savukoski municipality. Several informants told us that a pine tree, now long fallen, had stood at the corner of a PoW camp in Purnumukka, Sodankylä, called the 'hanging pine' that the Germans had used to hang prisoners. On this tree was carved a hammer and sickle, apparently dating to the post-war period. Some local people used to stop at this spot on their travels, even after the tree had fallen, often touching the tree in an almost ritualistic manner (see Magga 2010).

The other arborglyph in Sodankylä is a so-called 'partisan star' carved into a pine tree beside the Kopsusjärvi track that the German forces constructed using PoW labour. The star has a bullet hammered into its centre (Fig. 7). Locals attribute the carving either to Soviet partisans who roamed in the wilderness and were a constant threat to civilians during the war, to Russian PoWs, or to their post-war commemoration. It seems unlikely that the partisans would have carved such an eye-catching feature along a German military track unless they wanted





**Figure 4.** Top: Conjoined pieces of cattle bone found on top of a PoW rubbish dump. Bottom: The underside of the bones, and the items found concealed inside them: a bullet, a metal cylinder and a wooden cork that capped it, and a knotted electrical wire found inside the cylinder. (Photographs: Oula Seitsonen.)

to intimidate the Germans. Notably, the star is upside-down for a Soviet star and also has the inner lines carved within the star, thus resembling the pentagram symbols used in traditional folk magic.

The Savukoski Seitajärvi carving shows a stick figure holding a rifle and a knife or bayonet in his hands, or so it is interpreted by the locals (Fig. 7; Väisänen 2022). Locals attribute this image to Soviet partisans and recall that it appeared on the tree when most civilians had been evacuated from the area. Seitajärvi was the scene for an especially shocking attack by the Soviet partisans against Finnish civilians, on 7 July 1944, which resulted in the death of one soldier and 14 civilians, including 10 teenagers and children, the youngest of whom was only six months old (Martikainen 1998). The tree carvings are of special interest here because they parallel *karsikko*, a traditional Finnish practice of manipulating trees in the context of burial

(Ikäheimo & Äikäs 2018; Herva & Seitsonen 2020; further discussed below).

#### The 'strange' finds in relation to German WWII sites as 'weird' places

The boulder at Hyljelahti initially caught our attention due to its strong resemblance to traditional Sámi sacrificial sites. *Sieidi* sites come in many forms, but they are often 'special' or prominent loci in the landscape that stand out from their surroundings, whether certain types of lakes (especially those with the so-called 'false bottom'), or indeed boulders that stand out or appear to be out of place (e.g. Äikäs 2015). *Sieidi* have been subject to scholarly interest for a long time and the practice of making sacrifices at *sieidi* sites appears to date back over a thousand years (Salmi *et al.* 2018) and continued in places to the twentieth century (Äikäs 2015). Reindeer antlers





**Figure 5.** Finds uncovered at the base of the Taavetti Lukkarinen hanging-tree. (a) The bone and the finds concealed inside it; (b) The shoe sole that capped the bone deposit. (Illustration: Emilia Jääskeläinen. *Ikäheimo & Äikäs* 2018, 102.)

have been an important and valued sacrificial item throughout much of the history of the Sámi *sieidi*, attested by sources since the sixteenth century (Olaus Magnus [1555] 1998). While the boulder at Hyljelahti is not a *sieidi*, this comparison helps to put the site in a broader historical context of northern human–environment relations, instead of regarding it merely as an isolated curiosity.

The excavation at Hyljelahti revealed evidence of structured deposition, but the site seemed peculiar already at our first encounter with it: the objects around and on top of the rock looked ‘staged’ or ‘curated’, as if carefully arranged. This was epitomized by a rusty German wartime lantern

‘picturesquely’ hanging on a pine-tree branch (Fig. 2; see the Supplementary 3D model). There was a sense of deliberateness or intentional ordering to various things documented during the excavation. The other intriguing features involved the single German military boot placed beside the rock on top of a reindeer antler and a small deposit of ash and charcoal, along with a pair of women’s shoes placed inside a part of a wartime stove found underneath a pile of assorted metal objects on the other side of the boulder (Fig. 8).

The shoes from Hyljelahti—both the pair of women’s shoes and the German military boot—suggest potential connections to magical practices,



**Figure 6.** Post-war child's shoe found wedged under the corner logs of a PoW log house at Inari Haukkapesäoja. (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen.)

which also takes us back to Haukkapesäoja that produced the child's shoe placed underneath the corner of a PoW house and the 'bone bundle' from the PoW dump at a border of the camp. If Ikäheimo *et al.* (2016) are correct in their interpretation of the Oulu memorial site, the bone bundle from Haukkapesäoja could be interpreted as an analogous 'spirit trap', intended to pacify a locally ill-reputed site. The shoes from Hyljelahti and Haukkapesäoja echo a different but related folk tradition, in which shoes have been assigned special cultural meanings due to their 'liminal' character. Shoes are artefacts between self and the world, and they are 'imprinted' materially with the footmark of the user and the personality of their wearer, which make them distinctively personal artefacts (Randles 2013; Swann 1996).

We are not aware of any specific ghost or related lore associated with Hyljelahti, but parts of the assemblage show clear connections to the WWII past, especially the military boot and other German objects. This suggests that Hyljelahti, Haukkapesäoja and various other PoW camp sites were conceived as special places with a literally or figuratively haunting nature anchored on their real and imagined histories, but also because of certain visual, material and contextual characteristics that contribute to a weird atmosphere of these sites. These factors can provoke unsettling feelings and emotions which are sometimes instantiated as ghostly experiences and stories (see Herva 2014). Typically, little survives of the German sites in Lapland, as the German troops generally destroyed

them upon their retreat. Thus, encounters with the scatters and concentrations of military objects in the forest often seem to lack a meaningful context. They appear to be 'matter out of place' in what otherwise may look like an 'empty' northern wilderness. This disjointedness of time, matter and place creates unsettling and haunting encounters (see Paphitis 2020, 344), contributing to the performance of local legends and 'magical' depositions.

There is, then, an element of strangeness and surprise to encountering decaying remains of German sites. Some objects, such as oil barrels and tin cans, are easily identified for what they are, but many remains are enigmatic and unidentifiable, which feeds a sense of mystery and discovery, a feeling that there is more to these places than is obvious on the surface. Moreover, in a land of rich and living folklore, the anomalous wartime remains feed into a sense of a buried underworld out of reach of modernity, yet themselves reflective of modern materiality. This juxtaposition of materials of modern warfare and their seemingly pre-modern context/articulation potentially contributes to a haunting effect. The German sites are powerful landscape punctuations that provoke curiosity and puzzlement, which also makes them an appropriate setting for strange experiences, a material 'infrastructure of enchantment' fit for ghost stories and ghostly experiences (Herva 2014; Holloway 2010). The sites also provide anchor points for the contradictory and disturbing memories of Finnish–German wartime relations (see further Matila & Herva 2022). This includes local memories





**Figure 7.** Top: Heart carved into a pine at the Kankiniemi PoW camp. (Photograph: Vesa-Pekka Heron.) Bottom left: 'Partisan star', a pentagram carved on a pine along a German-built wartime Kopsusjärvi track in Sodankylä, with a bullet hammered into its centre.





**Figure 8.** Women's shoes placed inside a wartime stove. (Photograph Vesa-Pekka Herva.)

of PoWs and their harsh treatment, which disturbed local people, and perhaps explains why PoW camp sites have a particular 'haunting potential', with memories and places becoming entangled so as to make them experientially disturbing.

The unsettling character of German sites in the wilderness became clear during our public excavations in 2016. One evening, two volunteers went to visit the PoW camp of Kankiniemi on their own and the next morning recounted their strange experiences there. They told us that the melancholic and desolate atmosphere of the place in the darkening evening had made them anxious and they left the site after taking some photographs. Back at their cottage, they had gone through the photos and were horrified to discover that, in one picture, there seemed to be the face of a man in front of the only building that is still standing in the prisoner area. Scared by what they saw, they said, they immediately deleted the photograph (which we were unable to recover from the memory card), but they drew a picture of the man's face for us. The story continued about a week later with a dream that one volunteer's mother had, featuring a male figure that resembled the one that her daughter had seen in the deleted photograph. In this dream, the figure had grabbed the mother's arm in a non-threatening way and lamented: 'There are still many of us here'. Subsequently,

the two volunteers contacted the local Orthodox priest of the Skolt Sámi, and two months after their unsettling experience a memorial Orthodox cross was erected at Kankiniemi with a public memorial service (Herva & Seitsonen 2020). This incident attests to the strong emotions that WWII sites in Lapland can evoke in connection to the experience of the sites themselves and with broader folkloric resonances.

#### **Life, death and the uncertain boundaries between**

What Hyljelahti and the other sites surveyed above have in common is that the peculiar finds and features are all associated with boundaries. The Germans themselves were concerned with defining and marking the boundaries of their spaces, which was probably in part because they felt uncomfortable in the alien northern wilderness of the far North, and boundary-making promoted a sense of control and was therefore symbolically and psychologically important (see Seitsonen 2020; Seitsonen *et al.* 2017). On the other hand, in the local (Finnish and Sámi) view, the world in northern Fennoscandia has traditionally been characterized by 'openness' and a degree of borderlessness between various physical and spiritual realms. However, despite—or because of—that, boundaries and boundary-making



with their metaphysical or cosmological dimensions have been important for centuries and even millennia. Moreover, various practices of folk magic have been associated with borders or boundaries in many contexts (e.g. Auge 2013; Leonardi *et al.* 2021).

The boulder in Hyljelahti is technically located just outside the house plot and the house itself was built by a local Sámi family after the war, probably using scraps of German military materials in the construction. The boulder stands on the northern border of the military camp, although the precise boundaries of the camp cannot be defined. The boulder, then, is located on the perimeter of both the house yard and the German camp—effectively between them—although the two are of a different age. The house looks in the direction of the camp and the boulder could be considered as a symbolic border mark between the two, whether or not there is any intentionality there. Nevertheless, the signs of structured deposition (e.g. the antlers, files and shoes) readily resonate with ‘magical’ boundary-making. These objects and their interrelations echo the historical and widely documented practices of making ‘ritual’ foundation deposits, as mentioned previously, and involving diverse purposely hidden objects, for instance under fireplaces and corners of buildings (e.g. Davies & Houlbrook 2021).

The motivation for depositing the child’s shoe at Haukkapesäoja is unknown, but it is noteworthy that it was made on the corner of a building used for accommodating PoWs, and that shoes are highly personalized and liminal artefacts. The Haukkapesäoja ‘bone bundle’ was also associated with the fenced-off border of the camp. It is possible that the person(s) hiding the shoe at Haukkapesä—and the person(s) depositing the pair of women’s shoes and the German boot at Hyljelahti—did not even have any clear idea of the intended purpose or cultural meanings of such depositing practices, but they nonetheless resonate with broader and long-standing traditions, however consciously or unconsciously they were conceived. While the child’s shoe could, in principle, have been deposited casually or accidentally (although this seems unlikely, given the remote location), the shoes discovered at Hyljelahti show careful and planned deposition inside a German stove associated with other wartime artefacts, just like the German military boot deposited there with the reindeer antlers (whether or not this happened at the same time).

The practice of concealing shoes is known from around Europe and is particularly widely documented in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England (Houlbrook 2013), but Hukantaival (2016, 88) has identified only three such cases in Finland, one

medieval and two late modern. Interestingly, nothing is historically known of this practice of concealing shoes, but Houlbrook’s (2013) analysis suggests that the ‘liminal’ nature of shoes was probably a significant factor. Concealed shoes and other related deposits have often been considered to have a protective function in restraining the movement of malevolent spirits, which is plausibly a main motivation for making the shoe deposits documented at German sites in Lapland: that is, they were perhaps meant to serve as a kind of spiritual ‘border patrolling’, irrespective of how exactly the makers of the deposits themselves conceived their function.

Just as the two peculiar finds from Haukkapesäoja are associated with boundaries, so too are the ‘tree graffiti’ at Kankiniemi and Purnumukka located on the corners of the fenced-off prisoner areas. The heart symbol at this site was possibly carved in the 1950s, and the hammer and sickle at Purnumukka and the Savukoski ‘partisan carving’ are possibly also of post-war date. These carvings can be considered to echo a much older Finnish folk tradition—one that was also observed at the Oulu hanging tree memorial—of marking the boundary between the living and the dead through manipulating trees, the so-called *karsikko* tradition. This entails cutting off the lower branches and making marks on the trunks of specific trees on the way back from the funeral. Interestingly, this tradition was revitalized after the 1918 Finnish Civil War for clandestine commemoration of the dead on the losing ‘Reds’ side, as commemorating their graves was forbidden by the authorities until WWII (Seitsonen *et al.* 2020). The arborglyphs that we have documented are not formally similar to the old *karsikko* tradition, but the basic idea and concept of marking the trees is perhaps the same: to draw a boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead, which was a significant cultural and cosmological trope in Finland until recently (see Pentikäinen 1990).

Traditional northern cosmologies emphasize that humans co-inhabit the world with diverse non-humans, including various spiritual beings and thus the region is a ‘natural’ home also for the spirits of the deceased. Historical, ethnographic and folklore accounts from Finland indicate that practices related to (the spirits of) the dead have been integral to traditional Finnish culture for centuries. The dead have been subject to fear and veneration and simultaneously played an important part of the everyday lived world, although regarded as beings that should not interfere with the world of the living. The Finnish ‘cultures of death’ have different temporal layers to them, mixing pre-modern animistic-shamanistic

cosmologies with Christian and modern ideas of death and the dead (Pentikäinen 1990).

Used sauna-stove stones piled on the margins of farmhouse yards comprise an illustrative example of liminality and the complexity of uncertain boundaries in Finland. The sauna had prominent associations with the cycle of life and death; it was the place where babies were born, but also where the dead were laid out and washed before burial. These practices persisted into the twentieth century in the countryside, rendering the sauna a powerful, liminal place. This was extended to the heaps of discarded sauna stones and, like other cairns of different age, they were regarded as places of supernatural potency (see Okkonen 2003, 40–42), something like a portal to the worlds of the dead, which in turn was mixed up with the traditional shamanistic underworld with its powers and beings (see Muhonen 2013). In the context of German WWII sites in Lapland, yet another example where the boundary between the living and the dead is clearly demarcated is Martinkotajärvi, where a footpath leads across a former German site with its boundary marked by two wooden Orthodox crosses standing in a gate-like setting, behind which is a mass grave of PoWs who died in the camp (Fig. 9) (Seitsonen 2020).

Overall, the making of special deposits and features at German wartime camps in Lapland can be connected to their troubling nature historically and experientially. These finds seem to be associated with controlling, taming or pacifying places of death and suffering. Traditionally, unjust death has been considered to leave a metaphorical (or literal) haunting presence, hence compromising the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. This resonates with the long-standing idea of guarding the apparently weak and permeable boundary between the two worlds. But this boundary 'leaked' and was subject to constant negotiation: the dead were supposed to stay in their own world, but Finnish folklore is rich in encounters and interacting with the spirits of the dead. Death was ever-present during the war and prominently present in people's life and mindscapes immediately after the war—not least as the munitions left at many sites, often deliberately, constituted a real-world threat to life. Unsurprisingly, then, premonition and escaping death through supernatural means is a prominent part of WWII lore (see Myllyniemi 2021).

The traditional Finnish 'culture of death' is perhaps best understood in relation to the centrality of *life* in northern cultures, specifically the circulation of life-force of which death is a part (see Ingold 2019)—that is, an 'animistic' relational understanding of the

world (e.g. Herva & Lahelma 2019). This is one factor towards understanding the seemingly ambiguous attitudes to death and the dead. This complexity is captured in the notions of the underworld, which is regarded as the domain of the dead, but also many other non-human beings and powers. These ideas, importantly, are closely associated with actual landscapes and landscape elements (e.g. bodies of water, wetlands, etc., that provide a potential access to other worlds). The non-humans in the form of spiritual beings were, and to an extent still are, a taken-for-granted element of 'this world', although interaction with them could also be dangerous. This provides a broader context for understanding the concern between the world of the living and the (under)world of the dead, and why ghosts are often associated with different kinds of boundaries and boundary-making, not only in the context of the specific finds and features discussed here, but also more generally.

## Discussion

The German sites at Hyljelahti and elsewhere in Finnish Lapland are only about eight decades old, but already enigmatic in many respects. Various features documented at the sites point to historically and ethnographically known rural folk-magical practices, although it is not possible to determine their specific intended purpose. These finds and features should nonetheless be seen in the broader context of the pervasive but long overlooked significance of 'magical thinking' which continues to mediate many domains of life even today, including such seemingly rationalist pursuits as modern technology, extractive industries and economy (e.g. Aupers 2009; Herva *et al.* 2022; Moeran & de Waal Malefyt 2018). The significance of magical thinking in the modern world is increasingly recognized today, but what makes the European high North especially interesting in this respect is that it combines 'modern' and 'non-modern' ways of thinking and being in the world in a particularly clear manner, and highlights that magical thinking is not about some misinformed 'beliefs', but rather a mode of perceiving and engaging with the world (e.g. Herva & Ylimaunu 2009). However conscious or unconscious it may be, there is a lived sense and awareness that humans are entangled in a reciprocal relationship with the myriad constituents of the surrounding non-human world.

The vast northern wilderness provokes and underlines this sense of richness of reality, and it is in this broader context that the remains of WWII





**Figure 9.** Orthodox crosses in a gate-like setting on both sides of a path leading to a PoW mass grave on the boundary of a PoW camp at Inari Martinkotajärvi. (Photograph: Oula Seitsonen.)

sites and their impact on people need to be understood. These sites with their various materially and perceptually ‘strange’ features can stir up ‘existential’ reflections about people’s relationship with the surrounding world, as well as the relationships between the past, present and future, as exemplified by the haunting experience of our volunteers at Kankiniemi. The elusive ruins of German sites bring the wartime and its many troubling legacies close to people and force them to face the past in an unmediated manner. This is, conceivably, an important reason why they provide a suitable and powerful ‘infrastructure of haunting’ (Holloway 2010), and thus provoke ghostly experiences and narratives in a landscape that is historically, culturally and experientially ‘fit’ for such experiences.

The finds and features discussed above might appear as near-random isolated curiosities, but they make sense in relation to—or as embedded in—the high northern European natural-cultural landscapes, and how they have been relationally perceived and engaged with over centuries and millennia on the

one hand, and local people’s complex relations with WWII on the other. The curious case of the Hyljelahti boulder puts this general point in somewhat sharp relief, as the boulder echoes several more specific aspects of human–environment relations characteristic of northern ways of being and knowing. In a sense, the Hyljelahti boulder is a place of multiple encounters of several different people (and beings) who ‘communicated’ across the boundaries of time and different worlds through the deposition of these items. The collective engagement with the Hyljelahti boulder through material depositions may also be a way of performing an ‘unspoken’ legend pertaining to the haunting nature of the place that is not recorded, but communally understood. It is, consequently, insufficient to consider the strange finds and features only in relation to other similar finds and features, or solely in relation to wartime, even though war comprises the most immediate or primary context to the cases considered here.

Just as some WWII sites stand out from the surrounding landscape and may appear out of place, so

too are the Sámi *sieidi* often characterized by anomalousness. Discontinuities in the landscape and peculiar, sudden landscape elements tend to attract special meanings cross-culturally (e.g. Knapp & Ashmore 1999). From the viewpoint of the people who inhabited and continue to inhabit these northern landscapes, these sites are not just ‘dots on the map’, but meaningful places in a network of relations to other meaningful places, and deeply intertwined in the local transgenerational memoryscapes (see Seitsonen & Koskinen-Koivisto 2017). In this sense, we might understand some of the post-war features and deposits discussed here as material ‘negotiations’ to make sites of oppressive atmosphere and disturbing history ‘safe’ again; we know, for example, that Haukkapesäoja has been used since the war by local reindeer herders.

Historical and present-day ways of life in the high North involve venturing into and engaging with vast spaces made up of mosaics of locales rich with ancestral meaning. This applies to all human environments, of course, but is particularly accentuated in the high North, where people routinely navigate across immersive tracts of wilderness for the purpose of, for instance, reindeer herding, hunting, fishing and berry-picking. This requires intimate knowledge of the landscape informed by a host of environmental, sociocultural and historical factors that guide the appropriate ways of going about and being in that world: where to camp, what places to avoid, and so forth. The landscape thus appears as a tapestry of myriad interrelated places or loci with significance from one angle or another. WWII sites and *sieidi*, for example, do have similarities on a certain level—as exemplified by the Hyljelahti boulder—but are quite different in other ways. Nonetheless, the entire landscape was and is, in principle, intimately known, narrated and remembered, and laid subconsciously or consciously with varying degrees of supernatural potency in different forms. But whatever exactly one chooses to make out of the Hyljelahti or the other sites, and the discussed finds and features documented at them (although our proposed interpretations have a general historical and ethnographic backing to them), they illustrate how engagement with non-human entities—of various kinds and personalities—has been and continues to be central to the northern landscapes and mindscapes.

## Conclusions

This study has highlighted the powerful place of folk traditions and folkloric understandings of

place, material culture and power in present-day encounters with Lapland’s WWII heritage, part of a growing body of work on the supernatural in post-conflict societies worldwide. We have chosen to contextualize these encounters within northern cosmologies of the living and dead, making our interpretations and arguments quite narrowly specific. The folklore of WWII, in particular, is a rich and truly global heritage with a great deal of potential for future work, and in particular for work that moves beyond individual cultures and case studies to attempt comparative and synthetic studies.

Many of the most powerful folkloric legacies of WWII are spaces of cultural collision or encounter, for example, refugee and exile objects and the near-religious legacies of encounters between the materially rich American armed forces and Pacific islanders. Sites and materials of Nazi origin are particularly powerful in this sense—for example, the often-told legend that even today no birds sing at Auschwitz. Nazi heritage is often imbued with a ‘contagion heuristic’ that makes touching or encountering such places or things repulsive or frightening, in ways that feed directly into accounts of haunting and spiritual contamination. As for Lapland sites, and the German PoW camps in particular, it is important to consider them in the context of a living population’s continued awareness of the places’ legacies of suffering, cruelty and death. As these stories have passed out of living memory, they have become concretized, localized and bound at the sites themselves, rendering them places of encounter between past and present, anchor points of troubling memories and spaces of heightened awareness where the walls between the worlds of living and dead grow particularly thin. Not sacred sites, then, but something similar, and deserving of greater consideration in studies of conflict heritage and memory.

## Supplementary material

The 3D model of the Hyljelahti boulder <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774323000495>

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Note

1. Superstition, supernatural, magical thinking and other such terms are highly problematic, and we use them merely as short-hand terms here for referring to forms of behaviour and thinking that operate beyond modernist rationalist conceptions of reality, and conforming to their usage in recent historical research on the subject matter (e.g. Davies 2018; MacKenzie 2015; 2017). We fully endorse the view that ‘magical thinking’ in different forms is an important element of modern western thinking, although long ignored or overlooked. An implicit understanding of what superstition and other such terms refer to is sufficient for the purposes of this article, and they are not subject to theoretical discussion here. However, our discussion of the finds and their ‘meaning’ acknowledges the deeper epistemological and ontological implications of the ‘superstitious’.

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