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20

Waters at the edge: sacred springs and spatiality in Southwest Finnish village landscapes

John Björkman

The knowledge of sacred springs in Finland has mostly been forgotten. Archival sources, however, tell us that they were still in common use in the nineteenth century and local history associations have pointed me to many undocumented sites. Sacred springs in Finland have not been much studied. They are briefly mentioned in some archaeological surveys from the early twentieth century (see e.g. Tallgren, 1918), in some presentations of regional folklore and customs (Harva, 1935; Sarmela, 1994) as well as later studies on vernacular faith (Toivo, 2016). Finnish sacred springs have had two main historical purposes: as sites of healing rituals and as gathering places for the young for midsummer revelries. These traditions have died out, but the sources suggest that they were still practised in the late nineteenth century and perhaps in the early twentieth. This essay queries the kind of space sacred springs occupied in the social and cultural landscapes at their recorded time of use.

To consider the spatiality of these sites, this study draws on descriptions of 68 sacred springs found in the folklore archives of the Finnish literature society, the *Finlands svenska folkdiktning compendium* of Finland Swedish folklore, literature on local history and lore, archived newspaper articles and, in some cases, oral lore. Material derives mostly from the mid-seventeenth century to the early twentieth. Thirty-two of these springs can be located on digitised village maps from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Of these, six have been lost and the author has exactly located eighteen in the field.

The meaning of these vernacular sacred sites relates to how communities worked and lived to a large extent off the land. Appreciating their location in relation to village geography identifies unexpected patterns. A geographical perspective on folklore or vernacular religion is in no way new. However, the focus has so far mostly been on a larger scale seeking regional differences. A closer, microgeographical perspective using cartographic material on the village level can bring new insights.

Southwest Finnish villages in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries

Despite having endured numerous wars, calamities and shifts in both rulership and religion, southwest Finland is a region characterised by structural stability. Catholicism (and with it, Swedish rule) was slowly introduced from the west in around the twelfth century, whereas the sixteenth-century conversion to Lutheranism was more sudden.[1] However, archaeological findings and place-name research have shown that the region was organised into proto-parishes and villages already in the Iron Age (which lasted until the mid-twelfth century in Finland). This territorial structuring remains to this day (see Tallgren, 1933; Orrman, 2003:72–77).

The best source material in which we have to understand the cultural-spatial layout of Finnish villages approximately 200 years ago are maps drawn for “the great partition,” a process of redistribution of land among the landowners in each village, initiated in 1757 (see e.g. Saarenheimo, 2003:349–365). Partition maps of southwest Finnish villages from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries show us different ways in which space has been divided culturally. Most villages had a unitary central open area, “heartland” with grain fields, pastures and meadows. The farm buildings were generally in a relatively dense group on one edge of this area. Providing sustenance for the people, the heartlands comprised the most

valuable land and were visible from the farms. Socially, this means that it is a space most closely supervised by the farm owners.[2] Outside this "heartland" were the village outlands, which were mostly forests intertwined with outer meadows. These "secondary" lands could be characterised as a separate "space," and they were even sometimes drawn on separate maps from the heartlands. Outlands provided fuel and timber, and were where the cattle and sheep of the village were brought to graze in the summer.

Sacred springs in Finland Proper

> On the meadow of Varttola, in Haltiahaka (was a healing spring). It healed eye diseases. Coins and needles were left there. If you stole them from the spring, you would be afflicted by disease. You had to leave without looking back.
>
> (SKS KRA Paimio, translated from Finnish by the author)

Sacred springs seem to be more common in southwestern Finland than other parts of the country. The most common reason for visiting healing springs was particularly to heal eye and skin diseases. Those hoping for a cure left a needle or a coin "sacrifice" at the site. Devotees collected water at the spring that was thought to ease childbirth and also employed the water in baptism. Going to a healing spring is sometimes referred to in the sources as a "pilgrimage." As the aforementioned quote makes clear, the coins left in the spring were usually connected to a taboo: taking coins left by others brought affliction with the diseases they were sacrificed to heal. Other taboos prohibited a backward glance or stopping to urinate when leaving the spring.

The sacred springs are associated with different supernatural beings, animals, saints, legends, myths and divinities. These beings and stories serve to make the spring sacred or mythic, a *place* with a special meaning, and power, which transgresses the profane. The most typical "patron"

for sacred springs in southwest Finland is St. Henry, a missionising saint alleged to have converted the pagan Finns into Christianity in the twelfth century. The motif of St. Henry preaching to the pagans at a spring and then using the spring water to baptise converts is popularly associated with multiple sites including the spring of St. Henry on the island of Lapila, the Bishop's spring in Rymättylä, the Ristinkylä spring in Taivassalo, the Kupittaa spring in Turku and possibly the Heikinlähde, also in Turku (see Tallgren and Montin-Tallgren, 1918:49). Many other springs are named after saints as well, such as St. John, St. Bridget (of Sweden) or St. Gertrude. Some springs are named after animals, especially bears. One spring name contains the word "hiisi," which can mean "sacred site" or "giant" (see Koski, 1967, 1970). Some spring names contain the word "sampas" which can refer to the mythic Sampo (a supernatural bestower of fortune and prosperity, see e.g. Tarkka, 2012). The word can also mean "border marker." Some descriptions of sacred springs mention *haltija* (the Finnish term for local spirit) and implied that springs had spirits residing in them.

Locations of sacred springs

The majority are located more or less peripherally, either on the outskirts or borders of villages, or even further out, in parish backwoods. Historian Raisa Maria Toivo has noted that after pilgrimages to specific churches became prohibited in the Lutheran era, the customs became redirected to more peripheral locations (2016:51). Analysing the locations of sacred springs on partition maps, a very interesting feature becomes apparent: 15 springs lay on village or parish borders, or they lay on hills which mark such borders. It is also noteworthy that many, but not all springs that lie on borders, have a solitary erratic boulder in their proximity, but there are also springs with such boulders that are not connected to borders. In addition, there are known "border stones" which have springs next to them.

Although geographer Yi-Fu Tuan says that “Nature, other than the human body itself, doesn’t seem to provide convenient yardsticks for the measurement of space” (1979:391), it seems that features which “stick out” in the terrain, such as springs and large solitary boulders, can be just that, and often these types of “yardsticks” gain a sacred character. A close comparison to the boulders viewed as special when found near sacred springs are the “blue stones” of central Russia; Linguist Arja Ahlqvist suggests that blue stones were markers of orientation in the landscape. They are also used as border markers for villages so that a village is said to reach “up to the blue stone,” or conversely, the stone is said to lie between this and that village (2012:442–443).

However, in the written records about Finnish sacred springs, the boulders are rarely mentioned. One exception is formed by the “bishop’s stone” and “bishop’s spring” in Rymättylä (see Tallgren, 1918:75). Some descriptions also mention trees in connection with the springs, such as the spring and birch of Witigsuo in Lieto or the spring and oak of St. Henry on the island of Lapila. A possible explanation to why tradition around springs has prevailed, whereas tradition around sacred stones and trees has more frequently disappeared, is provided by historian of religion Therese Zachrisson. The church in medieval Sweden (which included present-day Finland) forbade the worship of trees, groves, cairns or stones, but springs or wells were not mentioned. Thus, the spring cult was able to endure much longer (2017:225). It is possible that the springs and their surroundings once served as sites of more complex rites.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of the old sacred healing springs were re-employed by the upper layers of society as mineral springs (see Zachrisson, 2017:215–219). A well-known example in Finland is the spring of Kupittaa on the outskirts of the city of Turku (which was the administrative capital of Finland at the time). In 1649, academy student Petrus

Magnus Gyllenius wrote in his diaries that people gathered at the spring on midsummer's eve to light fires and play games (Gardberg and Toijer, 1962:108). Only four decades later, Elias Tillands stated that the water of said spring had a health-improving effect, and a sanatorium was established there. Later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sanatorium developed into a bath-house for the upper classes (Hyvönen, 2011:40–57).

Sacred springs and youth revelry

The custom of gathering at sacred springs to celebrate St. John's Eve is best known in the region around Turku and was assumed by Uno Harva to be a Swedish influence (1935:50). Many records of midsummer traditions even from other regions especially mention "scrying" in a spring or well at midnight (foretelling the future over a reflective surface). The most popular subject was discovering one's future love:

> In the region of Hinnerjoki people used to run three times backward around a spring on midsummer's night so one could see one's groom-to-be or hear extraordinary things.
>
> (SKS KRA Uusikaupunki < Hinnerjoki. Salokannel, Tyyne KRK 9:115. 1935, translated from Finnish by the author)

Anthropologist Matti Sarmela has released a collection of "tradition maps," illustrating regional variations of folk tales, beliefs and festival customs (1994). According to Sarmela's material, 90% of participants at midsummer spring celebrations in the area of study were youth (map 25). The focus on scrying for one's future groom/fiancé also makes it clear that the rites were for the unmarried and allowed young people to imagine themselves taking over the role of farm master or mistress. Depositing coins or needles into the spring is also mentioned in the context of scrying.

Midsummer revelry, involving drinking and noise-making at sacred springs, was also known in Sweden. According to Zachrisson, “worldly” behaviour such as drinking, dancing and playing was not seen as contradictory to the sacrality of the place (2017:203–205). Cultural geographer Ronan Foley has brought up similar customs at holy wells in Ireland. Celebrations would first begin with pious activities such as rounding rituals and prayer, but would at midnight turn into revelry with music, drinking, nudity, sex and violence. Foley describes these customs as “unhealthy and unholy performances,” conflicting with the sacred and therapeutic nature of the holy well (2013:56–57). However, is this a projection of modern conceptions of sacrality onto older vernacular ways of venerating a sacred site? As Veikko Anttonen has pointed out, our view of “the sacred” has changed over time and older forms of vernacular religion could have encompassed very different views on sacrality (1996:158). According to one of the sources Foley cites, being on sacred ground was seen to free the revellers from “normal” repercussions of such activities (2013:57). To consider such vernacular conceptions of the sacred, this essay presents two case examples of sacred springs in Finland Proper that were particularly known as sites of youth gatherings on St. John’s Eve.

The spring of Muhkuri

In the early 1800s, the young Erik Julin, the 15-year-old son of a pharmacist who had recently moved to Turku, took part in midsummer rites at the spring of Muhkuri in the village of Pitkämäki, and described the event in his diaries:

> During the Catholic era the spring of Muhkuri at Pahaniemi was sacred; sacrificial feasts were held there. Still on midsummer’s eve 1812 people spoke of making a pilgrimage to Muhkuri, to sacrifice for coming luck.

> Together with many others even I visited said spring on the midsummer night in 1812 and sacrificed a copper coin into the spring like the others. I do not know if this sacrificial feast has brought any luck, but I wait and hope. The amount of people gathered kept growing, and soon old ladies with coffee pots and liquor bottles showed up. This lead to disturbing behaviour, brawls and noisemaking, which caused the police to empty the site and prohibit further gatherings.
>
> (Dahlström, 1918:16–17, translated from Swedish by the author)

Julin's description is one of the more detailed of the midsummer revelries at a sacred spring. It is worth noting that Julin was not a member of the agrarian population, but a member of the bourgeois. The village of Pitkämäki, although part of the city today, was definitely countryside in the early nineteenth century, belonging to the rural parish of Maaria. Yet, it seems that people went there not just from neighbouring villages but also from the city. In what Julin referred to as a "pilgrimage" at Muhkuri bourgeois city-dwellers and villagers gathered to mingle. Not just village and farm borders, but even social borders were erased.

Muhkuri is a wooded hill at the southern edge of the village of Pitkämäki, formerly of Maaria parish (Julin erroneously states that the spring is in Pahaniemi, which is a neighbouring village). The hill lies on the village border, but on the side of Pitkämäki. The hilltop offers a good view of the surrounding landscape. The partition map of Pitkämäki (drawn in 1785, approximately 20 years before the young Erik Julin's midsummer visit) shows the four farms of the village laid out in a row from east to west at the northern edge of the village heartland. The open heartland consists of grain fields and meadows with the farms on the northern edge. On the south side of the opening is the hill of Muhkuri, and behind it the village border against the lands of Isoheikkilä manor. North of the farms is a broader wooded area.[3] The location of the Muhkuri

hill could thus be considered peripheral in the village space, outside the open view of the heartlands, outside the lands directly controlled by the farm masters and bordering to another village. Thus, Muhkuri can be seen as a “yardstick” which defines the cultural landscape; it limits the open heartland and divides the landscape between the two villages of Pitkämäki and Isoheikkilä.

A sacred spring at such a liminal spot was a great attraction for people on a liminal holiday (the longest day of the year, after which the days grew shorter). In agricultural life, St. John’s Eve also marked the end of the relatively leisurely period of early summer, when the young had more free time, and marked the beginning of the work-intensive high summer and harvest periods, when the youth would not have much freedom for merry-making. The harvest period was characterised by rites and celebrations performed at the farms, with the farm masters and mistresses taking the main roles. At midsummer, however, people came away from the farms and village centres, and even from the nearby city, to celebrate in manners which placed the youth at the centre. A gathering outside the farms (areas socially controlled by the farm owners) allowed the youth to interact on their own terms and engage, unobserved, in unruly behaviour as described by Julin.

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The spring of Ämmälähde

> Looking into a spring normally happened on midsummer’s eve, but it had to be a natural spring, or one whose waters ran to the north. Looking into it, one would see one’s future groom, and other life events of the coming year. One such spring was the Ämmälähde, at mustakulma of Ojankulma. At this spring the old owner, the great witch who could fly in the

air on his horse, the father of Inkisvuori, would punish his old lady by submerging her in the spring when she was in an unpleasant mood to him.

(SKS KRA. Nousiainen. Leivo, F. 2059. 1936)

In the backwoods of the prehistoric parish of Nousiainen, on the hill of Inkisvuori lies the sacred spring of Ämmälähde (known as “The mother’s spring” or “the crone’s spring”). The Ämmälähde spring is connected both with midsummer’s night celebrations and also with stories of an infamous male figure, a “great witch” or warlock called the old man of Inkisvuori hill. The folklore archives contain stories of this “father” of Inkisvuori: using an axe, he tried to break into the church of Nousiainen at night, but was interrupted. Several stories involve his flying horse: he used it to win racing bets and escape from prison.

The name “Ämmä” (mother/crone) is repeated in many sacred springs in southwest Finland and elsewhere. The Votes are a Finnish ethnic group and in Votian folk belief, “Vesi-ämmä” or “vesi-emä” is a common name for water spirits, roughly meaning “mother of the water” (see Västrik, 1999:17, 19). It could be assumed that a story of the old man of Inkisvuori punishing his wife in the spring is a later folk etymology applied to an older name, which might originally have referred to a water spirit.

The Ämmälähde spring is among the most peripherally located springs in this sample. On a map drawn in 1770, the spring did not belong to a village, but was used as a border marker when defining the boundary between the parishes of Nousiainen and Masku. The Inkisvuori hill is clearly drawn out on the map, which interestingly also marks a resting place for cattle on the hill.[4] Herding cattle in the woods was typically a task for the youth, who had to know the locations of good springs for watering. The location is very far from any farms, but must have been familiar to the youth involved in herding.

Being further away from the centres of habitation might have enhanced the spring's association with stories of an infamous wizard. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nearest villages were approximately 4 km from Inkisvuori hill. Charged with an atmosphere of danger, the spring perhaps was then particularly attractive to youth who had to wander several kilometres through relative wilderness to gather there on midsummer's night.

Concluding analysis

In the scope of what can be presented in this paper, cartographic material such as historic village maps can provide new insights into vernacular sacrality. A noteworthy finding is that many sacred springs are located on village or parish borders. Sacred springs can act as landmarks or yardsticks, dividing the landscape into cultural territories. The sacred seems to be related to spatial divisions, where the spatiality also has social dimensions: the central spaces of the farms are under the social control of the farm owners. The young and unmarried use places which are outside the space, and therefore social control, of the farms. From the point of view of the farm, they are spaces of secondary value, used by people of secondary status. But for the young and unmarried, that space is a space of freedom.

Scrying for one's future spouse in a spring not only expresses romantic desires, but also a longing for social upheaval, to occupy the primary space in the village as a master or mistress of a household. Being outside the actual farms also represents possible futures elsewhere, made possible by attendance of people from outside the village. This is also manifested spatially: the sites are usually located on hills offering a wide view over the surrounding landscape, which forms an "alternative" central space to that of the farms, as well as a "view" over potential futures outside one's own farm or village. In spatial terms, the sacred springs on the outskirts of villages offer a refuge from the authority present at the farms, and being on a border opens up the

possibility to gather as a group not defined by the border. The "sacred" quality of these sites for the youth gathering there seems to have been in their role as places outside the confining borders of the everyday life, as venues for manifesting and performing their identity as a group in manners which were in stark contrast to later conceptions of "sacrality."

Figure 20.1 The sacred spring at Kungsbacken in the Swedish-speaking parish of Kimito lies at a village border. A large solitary boulder can be seen in the background. Photograph by the author.

Figure 20.2 The Ämmälähde (Crone's spring) on Inkisvuori Hill in the backwoods of the parish of Nousiainen, where young people gathered at midsummer. The hill, which formerly marked the parish border, offers a vantage point over the surroundings. Photograph by the author.

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[1] On how the Reformation affected vernacular rituals, see Toivo (2016).
[2] On spatiality as a social practice of control and dominance, see Lefebvre (1991:289–292).
[3] Maanmittauslaitoksen uudistusarkisto. Turku. Pitkämäki; Isojako käsittäen Pitkämäen, Metsäkylän, Suikkilan ja Teräsrautilan kylät 1785–1785 [A105:56/2-5]. http://digi.narc.fi/digi/slistaus.ka?ay=281092
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