Emerging Supranormal Wilderness

Encountering Sites of Folk Belief in Finnish Belief Narratives and in the Field

John Björkman

Abstract
Finnish belief narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contain a wealth of descriptions of supernatural or rather supranormal encounters and interactions taking place at specified, often identifiable places. Such encounters are typically set in areas regarded by contemporaries as wilderness, an environment which in folk belief is typically viewed as unpredictable and unruly. The belief narratives can be seen to express the agency of such unruly environments. The narratives express a worldview in which the wilderness is seen as an agent, which can emerge into different types of interaction with people at specific wilderness sites. This study looks at eighty sites mentioned as places of supranormal wilderness encounters in belief narratives. Ways in which the agency of a place is described in the narratives are compared with first-hand experiences from visiting the sites in person. Field visits to the same sites today show that a person's cultural conditioning clearly affects how the place is experienced, but also that places known for supranormal interaction can give rise to experiences similar to the ones expressed in the narratives.

Keywords: Belief narratives, folkloristics, wilderness, folk belief, autoethnography, legends, field research

This article is about places in the wilderness of southern Finland which are known to act upon or interact with people in supranormal ways. It is part of the broader research project *The Sacred Forests Around Us*, studying the ritualized forest relation of the Finns through prehistory and history. It also builds on my previous studies on sacred natural sites of

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Finnish folk belief and methods of studying them, presented in my dissertation *Healing Springs and Haunted Woods: Sacred Sites of Folk Belief and Spatial Order in Southwest Finnish Village Societies* (2024). In the dissertation, I was unable to focus sufficiently on comparing my own experiences with those expressed in belief narratives. The focus of this article will therefore be on how specific wilderness sites, known in Finnish folk belief recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have power or agency over people who have interacted with them in accordance with such belief, and whether it is possible to experience some aspects of such interactions by visiting the same sites today. I will observe how such interactions are expressed in belief narratives about specific places in the wilderness and also compare this with observations from my own field visits to such places.

The study is based on two kinds of material, archival and autoethnographic. My primary source is 160 historic belief narratives about supranormal encounters at forest sites in western, southwestern and southern Finland. In these narratives particular and named places are described as having some kind of agency either in themselves or via a supernatural being. The materials come from different folklore archives such as the Finnish Literature Society, The Society for Swedish Literature in Finland and the place-name archive of the Institute for the Languages of Finland, as well as heritage-themed journals from the early twentieth century, primarily *Kotiseutu, Hembygden* and *Finskt museum*. The material was collected mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the Finnish-speaking majority population, as well as the Swedish-speaking minorities living in the coastal areas. In this article I also use observations from field visits to 80 of the sites mentioned in the belief narratives and compare my own experiences to the descriptions in the archival material. Does the experience of visiting a site match what has been narrated about it or provide insights about the narratives? Do the places affect me or interact with me in similar or different ways compared to that which is expressed in the narratives? Does visiting the actual site reveal new or surprising aspects about the described interactions or why these places were considered special? I will present an overview analysis of the whole material, as well as an in-depth case example describing my experiences from a field visit in detail.

My study reflects a growing research interest in the agency or social interaction of terrain and landscape, aspects that tend to be lost or under-communicated in studies of written sources. A source of inspiration for my fieldwork/autoethnographic method from Finland is a new school of studying prehistoric sacred sites through sensory engagement (for example Ahola, Lassila & Mannermaa 2024; Rainio & Shpinitskaya 2024;

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Rainio & Vikman 2023; Valovesi & Fredriksen 2023). The study of prehistoric sites lacks access to recorded texts about beliefs connected to them. The physical places and any evidence found in them are all there is to work with, which is why new methods of gaining information about such sites are essential. Studying sites of folk belief from more recent history, associated with recorded belief narratives, brings the benefit of being able to compare those narratives with experiences in the actual place. Recorded belief narratives provide accounts of the usage and meaning of such sites, although the accounts themselves follow certain narrative schemes and patterns. What I do is to combine the sensory engagement approach employed by archaeologists with information from recorded belief narratives to uncover new aspects of how a specific place could have been experienced to engage with people in supranormal ways.

Describing, finding words for my own experience, is to be seen as a form of autoethnography. The historian of religion Jaana Kouri, who has made extensive use of the method, characterizes it as a way of verbalizing situated and embodied knowledge and experiences, and she herself uses the method to describe interactions with water and rowing. As autoethnographic descriptions stem from the experience of the writer, it is extremely important to be reflexive and open about the writer's own position (Kouri 2023:197–208; Adams et al. 2015).

Emic and Theoretical Perspectives

What is meant by *wilderness* in the scope of this paper? Today, strict, objective divisions between nature and culture are considered highly problematic. Already in 1981, the folklorist Lauri Honko pointed out that just naming and sustaining oral traditions about an environment should be seen as a form of cultivation (Honko 1981a:30–31). The anthropologist Tim Ingold, for his part, has suggested that human involvement in natural surroundings turns them into something beyond nature or culture. Ingold sees landscapes as formed by human activity and co-activity with the environment and calls them *taskscapes* (Ingold 1993:157–161).

On this point it is important to take note that our ways of connecting to the environment have departed significantly from that of nineteenth- or early twentieth-century agrarian societies whose members spent most of their time working with land in various stages of cultivation. A bourgeois, or middle-class, idealization of wilderness stands for a completely different relation, which has been described as more distanced by the ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, or, in the words of the Scandinavist Matthias Egeler, a "looked-at" environment in contrast to a

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"lived-in" one (Frykman & Löfgren 1979:46–69; Egeler 2024:279–302).

Other folklorists have, however, identified that systems of folk belief maintain *emic* differentiations between "wilderness" and "inhabited land". Boundaries between the two are often emphasized, the two zones are inhabited by different types of supernatural beings and are also often seen as the domains of different genders (Tarkka 1998:92–94; Granberg 1935:229–242; Stark-Arola 1998:36).

Even clearer indications that some parts of the terrain, on an emic level, were seen as a separate category of environment can be found in the way land was organized and governed. In the Swedish system of land division dating back to the medieval period, village lands were divided into "inner property" or "heartlands," encompassing unitary grain fields and meadows, and "forests and outlands" which were utilized for finding construction materials, fuel, gathering of berries and mushrooms, coal-burning, tar-making, as well as grazing, hunting and fishing (Talvitie 2013:52). From Ingold's point of view, we could see this as a division of taskscapes according to different types of tasks. This *emic* division of land into heartlands and forests and outlands is also clearly visible in village and partition maps, where the latter is always marked in a different colour and, especially in partition maps, is sometimes even drawn on a separate map from heartlands (see Figure 1).

In this paper, I proceed from the emic differentiation of the societies I study. I have thus classified as "wilderness" areas which on historic village maps have been defined and marked as forest, or sometimes as lakes or hills. The belief narratives used as material typically refer to the place by a place name, or refer to a specific lake, rock, hill or fork in the road. Occasionally they make general descriptive references such as "places far away from habitation" or "crevices on rocky hills". As the terms used in the source material are quite varied, I have opted to talk about "wilderness" rather than "forest", although the land definitions used on village maps would also justify the latter.

At the same time, I must remain aware that I can never fully experience the places as part of the taskscapes they were to villagers of the past. I have grown up viewing the wilderness as a taskscape for mainly recreational open-air activities which are generally considered healthy. I have enjoyed spending time in the wilderness since my childhood and have in my adult years taken up orienteering and trail running as hobbies, through which I have developed a relation to the wilderness mainly as a stimulating environment for physical exercise. Further, my research on sites of folk belief, which has been going on since 2017, has made the wilderness into a new type of taskscape for me; it is an environment in which I look for places which have been considered supranormal and observe them with my senses.

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Figure 1. Old village maps make a clear distinction between what was considered cultivated land (green and yellow fields) and wilderness (other areas). Maanmittaushallituksen uudistusarkisto. MHA U Uudistuskartat ja -asiakirjat. B UUDENMAAN LÄÄNI. Espoo. B8a:26/1–6 Velskola / Vällskog; Karta öfver egorne med delningsbeskrifning (1775–1783). Kansallisarkisto (Accessed 12 August 2025).

The thought of things having agency and existing in relationships of interaction has also been central among post-humanists. Some central names that have developed theories for the interaction between humans and non-humans include the sociologist Bruno Latour, the feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad and the philosopher Jane Bennett. All three start by criticizing the idea of separable individual beings, usually humans, possessing agency and acting upon things and each other. All three also emphasize that non-human things, "material" or "nature" should be seen as social or interactive agents which, according to Bennett, have the power to "aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us" (Bennett 2010:ix). Especially Barad thinks along much the same lines as Tim Ingold, emphasizing that things only emerge into existence through inter-action (or "intra-action") and that changing the interaction causes different phenomena to emerge (Barad 2008:128, 175, 178). In other words, post-humanists not only see and acknowledge the interaction of people and things but also acknowledge the power of things over people. In many respects, this school of thought might provide better perspectives to understanding folk belief than more anthropocentric humanism.

Rather than individual entities, we should focus on the connections that bind both people and things together. According to Latour, "attachments

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are first, actors are second" (2005:217), whereas Barad claims that "there are no bounded entities behind phenomena. Phenomena come to exist through intra-actions" (2007:128).

Several folkloristic scholars have focused on cultural patterns of engaging with nature, especially among Fenno-Ugric peoples, including ritual modes of communicating with the wilderness and understandings of wilderness agencies (e.g. Arukask 2017; Stark 2006; Tarkka 1998). However, folklorists for their part tend to focus on the intangible cultural elements, rarely paying much attention to possible material counterparts.

The concept of emergence through interaction with things can also prove useful in studies related to heritage and understanding the past. Harald Bentz Høgseth, professor of arts and crafts education, has proposed, based on Latour and Barad, that material remnants of the past are not to be seen as separate from the past, but things that join the past with the present, and further, that engagement with such remnants can provide insights into past ways of understanding, albeit from the premises of the present (Høgseth 2024:68–69). This builds upon Ingold's idea of landscape as "an enduring record" of "the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it" (1993:152). Although Høgseth talks primarily about buildings and engaging with them using traditional tools and techniques, I propose that the same philosophy can be applied to interaction with wilderness sites. Although their surroundings and even the sites themselves may have changed, they are the same sites, and they "contain" the totality of their past. It is possible to engage with them bodily and materially by walking in them and observing their surroundings, and to gain insight into how people have experienced these places in the past. Preserved folklore about these places provides a central tool for such interactions.

I view belief narratives about supranormal agencies at wilderness sites as expressions of meaningful interaction between a person and wilderness (or intra-action in Barad's terminology). According to current research, belief narratives are not only viewed as expressions of actual belief but also acts which actively maintain and create belief (see e.g. Valk 2021:176–181; Koski 2011:348). Recurrent narratives about encounters at certain places exceeding the ordinary emphasize those places and encounters as especially meaningful. From a Baradian, or even Latourian point of view, the meaningful or supranormal place only emerges through the encounter. It exists only through the encounter. According to folklorist Lauri Honko, existing belief traditions played a key role in how such encounters were experienced (Honko 1981b:92–105). This approach, however, leaves the role of the actual environment out of the picture.

My own approach, based partially on my own experience of having

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moved in the wilderness a lot ever since childhood, is that the environment definitely has an agency and co-acts with humans who, to use Ingold's (Ingold 1992:52) term, *dwell* in it. The terrain can direct a human's choices of routes. Trees, rocks or streams can block one's way. One tends to not want to walk into wetlands or boulder fields. The possibility of falling and getting hurt is often present. If the ground is treacherous, steep or slippery, the environment becomes dangerous. Impressive views can unexpectedly present themselves, or even landscapes and bad weather and mosquitoes can make a forest dull and uninviting. Moving around in wilderness is, in fact, a highly social and interactive activity.

Belief narratives about supranormal, possibly sacred places in the wilderness often contain mentions of supernatural beings connected to those places and tend be vague about whether agency experienced at the place is ascribed to the supernatural being or to the place itself. Such supernatural beings can be seen as a way for the local tradition to "give a shape" to the agency of the wilderness, or in Bennett's words, to ascribe a "governing central head" to it (Bennett 2010:24).

We must also bear in mind that belief narratives are not necessarily very direct expressions of an individual's experience but are formulated according to certain schemes identified within the local tradition, regarding both form and content. A belief narrative about, say, encountering a lake spirit at a specific lake, is to be seen as an adaptation of an individual's experience, fitted into a local belief tradition. It must also be acknowledged that even my own accounts of my own experiences cannot possibly capture the totality of the experience itself. Considerable information is already lost in the process of translation into text, even more so as the text is formulated into a field report or academic text. But, although both belief narratives and academic field reports are to be seen as separate accounts, they both stem from experiences of interacting with the same physical environment, which has a potential to "join" the past with the present.

Supranormal Wilderness Encounters in Belief Narratives

In this section, I will provide an overview analysis of how supranormal encounters at wilderness sites are described in the belief narratives, and through what kind of agencies these sites are said to interact with people. As mentioned previously, I have used 160 belief narratives about 80 identifiable sites. I have combined all narratives about the same place into one entry. The numbers in parentheses in the following descriptions should be

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seen in relation to the total number of 80 sites.

> In Torbacka river in Degerby, there is a deep place where the water spirit reigns. Should you see a blue and purple mist spreading over the place, it is time to take flight, because it is a sign that the water spirit is about to rise" (SLS 72.1:37).

The most commonly mentioned agency or effect connected with the encounters is fear. That a place itself causes fear is mentioned outright in 22 cases, often by describing how someone fled the place in fear. In most cases, however, a supernatural being at the place is the cause of fear (14). In addition to the belief narratives directly mentioning fear, many more can be interpreted as insinuating fear. Examples of these include mentions of strange noises (17). These are often described as booming or thundering sounds, but also often disembodied voices talking or weeping. Strange visual effects that can be interpreted as frightening include will o' the wisps (1), unexplained flames (1) and strange, coloured mists (1).

Another very commonly mentioned supranormal agency is that of healing, which is always connected to water (20). Most of these cases are sacred healing springs, which are usually located in forests near human settlements (see Björkman 2020). An additional effect sometimes connected to the same types of places as healing, i.e. springs, is being able to see or predict the future at the place (3).

Descriptions of the place being dangerous, even potentially deadly, can also be seen as causing fear. This hazard is especially often connected with the healing springs already mentioned. The theft of money or other items offered to the spring is said to bring illnesses of varying kinds to the thief (7). In some cases, the places are described as actively taking lives by causing people to drown in water or sink into the earth (4). In one case a place known to be inhabited by the Devil is described as potentially fatal: "Many dead people are said to have been found there." The same place is also said to lead people into the forest's cover or leave them supranormally lost (Kotiseutu 1910:352–353). In another case, a supernatural being is said to deal out physical punishments to those passing by (SLS 20:41).

> On Simpsiönvuori hill [in Lapua parish], there is a large cairn. In old times, the only road to reach the community went across that hill. It is told that the hill had such a hard spirit that nobody could get across without tossing some object by the road. Even stones sufficed as offerings and the large cairn is said to have been formed by such offered stones. It is said that Bishop Hemming once passed by here, and that he sat down on a rock to preach a sermon to the spirit of the hill. Demoralized by the sermon, the spirit withdrew into the hill and since then, every traveller has been able to pass without offering a stone (Kotiseutu 1912:148).

ISSN: 2002-4185 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.61897/arv.81.48412

Hindrance of passage or approach is another form of agency often mentioned. The descriptions vary between what would today be considered rational and supernatural causes. Some places are simply described as hard to reach, for example because they are so steep or narrow (5). Hindering passage often happens by having an effect on the traveller's horse: the horse becomes mysteriously unharnessed, or simply stops in its tracks, refusing to move (4). Some islands can also be described as unapproachable: it is impossible to reach shore with a boat and should you succeed, your boat will be mysteriously unfastened, leaving you stranded on the island (2).

In the example of Simpsiönvuori hill, above, we see another example of Christianity providing power to people over nature. In this example, the power of the bishop's sermon was enough to permanently banish the spirit of the hill and its power to stop travellers, altering the interaction between people and Simpsiönvuori hill. Sites of supranormal encounters are also described as having a connection to human activities in the forest. Primarily, it can either predict or affect one's fishing or hunting luck (5). This is often said to happen through interaction with a wilderness spirit such as a lake maiden.

> In the Little Lake of Gästerby, Snejdåback [a farmer] used to see the lake maiden between two and four in the morning, when she used to wash herself in the lake. She had long hair, a beautiful face and long breasts that she would throw over her shoulders when bathing. If you stood in the lake maiden's favour, you could catch any amount of fish, but if you did not, it was pointless to even try to fish there. Snejdåback knew how to win her favour and he always caught plenty of fish. Forty years ago (from 1928) he used to go fishing there often and saw the lake maiden (FSF II.3.2: 340).

This belief narrative show how fishing at the same lake can emerge in different constellations of interaction, depending on your relationship to the water spirit. The Snejdåback farmer knew to interact with the lake and lake maiden in a way that was beneficial.

But forest sites could also affect people's activities in negative ways. Certain trees, for example, could not be felled (3). The well-known effect of being caught in the forest's cover (see the case example below) is mentioned in only two instances. But they are good examples of interaction where nature claims power over people.

It is worth noting that in comparison to supranormal effects, actual physical characteristics of the places or their effects on human activities are rarely described. Probably the most commonly occurring physical description is of some place being steep or containing large boulders. Occasionally a place can be described as "cruel-looking and horrifying"

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(Kotiseutu 1910:285). One possible explanation for the belief narratives often lack physical descriptions could be that locals were so accustomed to everybody in their local surroundings being familiar with the terrain that describing it would have been seen as redundant. It is rather the specifics of the supranormal encounter which are meaningful enough to be narrated, and they tend to be narrated following certain traditional and recurring motifs.

In order to understand why the encounters occurred or shed some light on their meaning in their contemporary culture, it might also be in place to observe what the people in the legends were doing at the places. These activities can possibly be seen as the basis for the connection between person and place and are retold either as planned interactions, such as healing at a healing spring or interacting with a lake spirit to gain fishing luck, or disruptions of the planned activities, such as a traveller being hindered from proceeding. Economic activities connected to the forest and wilderness are mentioned, but perhaps less frequently than might be expected. Such activities include herding sheep or cattle (7), hunting or gathering (4) or fishing (3). More common reasons for going to places known for supernatural power include healing illnesses at sacred springs, which has already been mentioned (20). Other activities of a magical or supernatural quality are also mentioned (5), from predicting the future to purposefully seeking out supernatural beings in order to gain wealth or magical knowledge. In some cases, festive gatherings have been held at such places, especially on Midsummer's Eve (4). The most common context for supranormal encounters at wilderness sites, however, is simply when passing by (27). In these cases, passage is usually interrupted or prevented, but there are also descriptions of people stopping at specific places to perform ritual actions that will ensure safe passage.

Supranormal Wilderness Encounters in the Field

I have made field visits to all the 80 wilderness sites used as material for this study. The original purpose was to see if the places have some kind of agency upon me. But perhaps a more appropriate approach would be to describe the interaction or engagement between me and the places. According to Høgseth's philosophy, the places and their terrain connect their entire past with the present. Even though a haunted rock or sacred spring is not an artefact physically shaped by humans, they have emerged in meaningful interaction with humans in the past (of which there are archived belief narratives as evidence). By engaging with the same places today, just by respectfully walking in them and observing them, I am able

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to have access to at least partly the same experience of interaction which has given rise to belief narratives.

It must, however, be noted that:

1. These are observations based only on my own visits and interactions with the sites. Another person might experience them differently. I have also been researching sacred natural sites for many years and have observed that my previous experience has an effect on my way of perceiving them, as pointed out in my dissertation (Björkman 2024:75–77).
2. I am a product of a different time and different social context than the informants who narrated the legends used as materials and who were members of highly place-bound agricultural village communities. My perception is not culturally conditioned by the same factors as the places are not tied to my everyday living environments. In other additional respects, my tools for engaging the places, both physical and immaterial, are not the same as people had more than a century ago.
3. The environments of wilderness sites are likely to have changed in the course of 100–150 years. In some cases more, in some cases less. Even places which have seemingly remained in a "natural" state have undoubtedly changed in some ways, for example changes in the vegetation. As an example, a hill described in 1938 as covered by a beautiful birch forest is today an almost impenetrable spruce thicket. I have left out places whose surroundings have certainly changed radically, for example if they have been rebuilt into roads or parks.

Is it possible to separate aspects of the holistic bodily, physical, sensory and even emotional experience of visiting a natural site and interacting with it into "themes"? We can begin by looking at central themes in the belief narratives. As outlined above, the most prominently repeated theme is that of fear and a sense of danger. I cannot say I have often been *afraid* during field visits, nor have I felt urges to escape the sites or run away from them. I have also not encountered perceivable supernatural beings, frightful or otherwise. However, many of the sites have features which have instilled in me a sense of awe, a fascination mixed with respect, which even has hints of fear involved. This reaction is likely to be partially affected by the knowledge that I am looking for a site of supranormal encounters and knowledge of the lore surrounding the site. I can believe that archaeologists discovering previously unknown prehistoric sites experience similar emotions.

But is there real or perceived danger? I have experienced both accidents and physical harm. Slipping and falling have occurred numerous

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times. In 2019 I fell and fractured my wrist while visiting a sacred spring. The terrain at supranormal or sacred wilderness sites is often difficult, more difficult than in their surroundings. This is most typically due to sheer slopes and steep cliffs (21 cases, see Figure 2) or, more rarely, soggy and wet ground (five cases). I have not experienced the risk of getting unexplainably lost or taken into the forest's cover particularly often. Over more than one hundred field visits, I have felt seriously lost only two cases, one of which is described in the case example later. The risk of getting lost in the woods is of course significantly smaller in a time when we have access to compasses as well as both digital and printed maps to rely on. But on both occasions when I have got lost, the environment in that particular place has been somehow inexplicably confusing. A further reason for a sense of danger could be wild animals. On one occasion, I have heard wolves howling in the forest and once I have encountered a female elk standing in my way. Both cases did give cause for a more respectful approach to the site.

Figure 2. Sheer hillsides that make a place difficult to approach are characteristic of places of supranormal activity, such as Kasberget in Pojo, known to be an abode of trolls. Photo: Author.

I have taken care surrounding places which in folk belief have been associated with deadly danger. I have for example not risked swimming in waters that are known to drown people. I was told by a local that one such body of water, the Svartå river in Karis, is known for frequent drownings even today. The knowledge of these deaths causes the waters of the river to appear both ominous and powerful.

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There are, as mentioned, many cultural elements which obviously hinder me from experiencing the places or their agencies in the same way as described in the belief narratives. Some of them are purely practical: I do not own a horse and carriage, and modern roads are not intended for horses. Travelling by horse could probably create wholly different potential interactions with the environment. I do not have a hunting licence or rifle. Neither am I very skilled at fishing and it would be hard for me to judge a place's effect on my fishing luck. Others are immaterial: I have been raised and educated to believe that illnesses are cured by modern medicine, not spring water. It would be mentally hard for me to risk my health in order to test whether water from a sacred spring could cure me when I am sick. I thus cannot experience the exact same *taskscapes* as the people in the belief narratives. For me, the taskscape is a different one – one of searching for supranormal sites from historic folk belief, which, without doubt, affects my experience of the interaction. Yet the landscape is in many significant ways the same and I argue that I can share many aspects of the experience with people from the nineteenth century, or even from earlier times. I might even be able to discover aspects of the environment's agency which have been omitted from the belief narratives.

Many prominent and recurring aspects in the environments of supranormal wilderness sites have not been described in the narratives. These are particularly connected to perceiving the sites and how the sites cause themselves to be perceived. One aspect is that of visibility from close range or far off, or from a specific direction. This aspect has previously been emphasized by archaeologist Tiina Äikäs in her study of Sámi sacred sites in the landscape (Äikäs 2011:78–80). Many supranormal sites in southern Finland as well have "hidden" identifying features which can only be detected close-up or from a certain direction, or the whole site can be detected from close range (20). For example, the so-called Eyespring (Finnish *Silmälähde*) of Rasvala village in Kiikala lies in a deep recess with a stream running from west to east. When looking for the spring, I approached the site from the south, climbed down into the recess, crossed the stream and climbed up again on the opposite side without having found the spring. I had, in fact, walked right past the spring, which is next to a north-facing rock, without noticing it. Only when I came back the opposite way, facing south, did I see the spring right in front of me (Figure 3). It very much felt like it had emerged or materialized out of the environment.

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Figure 3. The Silmälähde, or "Eye spring" in Kiikala is located in a crevice and surrounded by vegetation. It can only be detected from very close range and from the right direction. Photo: Author.

Interestingly, some of the sites whose identifying features can be detected close-up have other features which are visible from afar and even dominate the landscape. These are hills or islands which are visible from a long distance away but hold within them a smaller feature such as a spring or noteworthy rocky feature which can only be seen from close range or from the right direction.

In some cases, especially if the terrain is treacherous, rocky or steep, it can constrain or even direct me to move in a certain way or follow a certain route, which occasionally has led me to find a hidden view as detailed above. For example, on the hill of Kuuvanvuori in Nousiainen, known as a "playground of spirits", there is a distinct rock formation with a very impressive "face" that can only be seen from the southwest. When approaching the hill from the south (the direction of most habitation in the nineteenth century), the terrain forms a natural path toward the rock, from its most impressive side. In other cases, the terrain can form natural constraints, in some cases narrow openings that have to be crawled through in order to reach the most sacred part of a place (Figure 4).

Figure 4. In many cases, sites of supranormal activity can direct a person's movement such as by rocks forming narrow passages, as at the Devil's Gate in Nousiainen, South-West Finland. Photo: Author.

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An even more frequently recurring environmental effect is a sense of isolation. Either through changes in elevation, being surrounded by trees and vegetation or other obstacles, the places feel "sheltered" or isolated from their surroundings (50). This sense of being in a separate place can further be enhanced by a terrain feature such as a rock or spring that acts as a focus or seemingly dominates the place (40). It is also not uncommon for a sacred site to feature several such foci, seeming to have a certain internal interaction (28). Typically, only one of the features is mentioned in the lore. I have also noted that identifying features in the terrain which remind me of other sacred sites can quite suddenly make me see the place in a wholly different way; the layout or "sense" of a meaningful sacred site emerges from what I previously saw as just terrain.

The Cases of Offerberget and Lilltjärnen

Next, I will present an in-depth example to illuminate the possibilities of attempting to understand the agency of a place. One of the best-known ways in which nature or the landscape is said to have had an effect on people in Nordic folk belief is the effect that is often called "being under the forest's cover" or "spirited away", which means getting disoriented or lost in a supranormal manner, walking in circles unable to find one's way out of the forest, or, in a sense, becoming a "prisoner" of the wilderness. This phenomenon has been the object of numerous studies in folkloristics and the history of religion (Enges & Koski 2021; Kuusela 2020; Stark 2006:357–380; Granberg 1935:140–152; Holmberg (Harva) 1925). To my knowledge, none of the previous scholars on the subject has attempted to go into a forest associated with this effect to see what happens. One such place, described in the following belief narrative, is to be found in the South Finnish community of Pojo.

> A troll was believed to dwell on a rocky hill next to Lilltjenan [local Swedish dialect for 'Little Lake'] in the same parish [Pojo]. A woman from the neighbourhood once ventured onto this hill. She was hexed, so that she could not find her way home, despite the fact that she was familiar with the area since her childhood. She kept walking, but always ended up in the same place. Then she asked God to help her. The hex was broken, and she found a path leading her back home (SLS 72:36).

It is possible to localize the place mentioned in the belief narrative above. There is only one lake with an appropriate place name in the community of Pojo: *Lilltjärnen* (Swedish 'the small woodland lake'). It lies next to a rocky hill with a Bronze Age cairn on top (NHA # 606010007). The rocky hill is named *Offerberget* (Swedish 'offering hill'), which gives addition-

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al hints to the ritualized or sacred nature of the place, although the belief narrative does not directly mention any offerings.

I visited Offerberget and Lilltjärnen in September 2024. I will next provide a description of my experience of interacting with the place during my field visit. The hill named Offerberget is quite vast, measuring approximately 20 hectares. A small road circles it on the eastern side, which is from where I approached it. The only historic map I could find was a rather imprecise village map from 1728, which does not show whether the road was there in earlier centuries.

The lake Lilltjärnen lay on the opposite side of the hill, only about 500 metres away, with the cairn a little bit closer. Equipped with my mobile phone with the National Land Survey's cartographic app and a pair of sturdy boots, I approached the hill from the east. Viewing the terrain map and the hill from that direction it looked like relatively easy terrain to cross, meaning a quick field visit. After a short ascent, I realized the terrain contained more elevation changes than I had expected and was forced to go downhill again (see Figure 5). I thought I would be just a short distance from the lake at that point, but another glance at the map made me realize that I had only advanced a quarter of the way and swerved too far to the south. As the hillsides were quite steep, I decided to try to follow the elevation curve (a common practice in orienteering) and circle the highest parts of the hill around the southwest side instead of climbing over it. However, dense vegetation in the way made this approach difficult too. I soon reached a promontory with a stony cliff face reminiscent of many other sacred natural sites I had encountered, but which was not discernible on the map. Beyond the next corner, I expected to catch a glimpse of the lake or at least the hill with the cairn on top. But instead, I entered into even steeper ground. The terrain kept hindering and confusing me, never looking quite as I had expected it to. Without the map application, I would have been hopelessly lost at this point, and I was constantly forced to ascend and descend in quite steep places. There were no paths anywhere. When I finally caught a glimpse of the hill with the cairn, my legs were very tired. And the hill seemed both steeper and higher than I had expected. The whole layout of the terrain was like a maze of hillsides that was very difficult to traverse and to navigate – even with a cartographic app. The hilly terrain had made me fatigued and light-headed, which made it even harder to get a grip on my surroundings. I forced myself up the hillside to reach the cairn, finally saw the little lake from the hilltop but before I could reach it, I was faced with a tricky descent down a steep hillside filled with mossy rocks. The difficult slope drained my strength even more, but the sight of the serene forest lake turned my feeling of fatigue into a sense of joy and wonder over the sense of the

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Figure 5. The elevation differences on Offerberget made it tough for me to move and find my way. Photo: Author.

Figure 6. Reaching the lake of Lilltjärnen made my feeling of bewilderment and exhaustion give way to a sense of wonder. Photo: Author.

place (see Figure 6). I noticed a boulder by the water on the opposite side of the lake in a formation that once again reminded me of other sacred natural sites. It made the whole place stand out to me as something special. After admiring the lake for a while, I found a path, which led me on

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a relatively easy route out of the forest.

I could very well see myself having ended up like the woman in the belief narrative – walking and walking but always ending up in the same place. Where she asked for help from God, I trusted my smartphone with a GPS and map application. In fact, I would say that my smartphone affected my interaction with the environment in quite a significant way and my orienteering experience helped me apply the information in the map to ways of traversing the terrain. We both received the help we needed and were finally able to find our way at Offerberget. But most interestingly, my experience from visiting Offerberget had parallels to that of the woman in the legend. I could relate in new ways to the narrative, having repeatedly experienced the environment in that same forest confusing and disorienting me.

As mentioned earlier, previous research about the so-called *forest's cover* has not really focused on the effect of the practical engagement with a specific place associated with the phenomenon. The folklorist Laura Stark saw the sensation of being in the forest's cover as dependent on the early modern person's identity being so strongly tied to the community and its socially ordered spaces of villages and farms, that being outside that space for too long risked a kind of identity crisis, or sense of one's identity "dissolving" (Stark 2006:357–380).

The historian of religion Tommy Kuusela considers belief narratives about being supranormally lost and possibly encountering forest spirits as a set of cultural interpretations of the sensation of being lost, distressed and fatigued in a bewildering territory, as well as an expression of the wilderness outside the cultivated lands being dangerous and unpredictable (Kuusela 2020:173–175). Folklorists Pasi Enges and Kaarina Koski have delved even deeper into the "experience" aspect, comparing "natural", i.e. psychological and neurophysiological explanations of the phenomenon with the "supernatural" explanations of belief narratives. They emphasize the sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity often expressed in records about being in the forest's cover, which fits in well with the psychological phenomenon of dissociation. However, they also state that studying the psychological or neurophysiological causes of strange experiences of getting lost and the cultural meanings and frameworks ascribed to the phenomenon are two different things, and one does not cancel out the other (Enges & Koski 2021). In other words, the belief narratives are, in a way, separate from the individual experience, and formulated according to a traditional set of forms and motifs. Yet the tradition is also anchored to the local environment, and certain features in the terrain (see e.g. Siikala 2008:45–46; Honko 1981a:35).

Although the attachment and adaptation of tradition to the terrain has

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been mentioned before, none of the earlier scholars have considered the impact of the specific, individual sites. Belief narratives about supranormal events and unexplained agencies in the forest are nevertheless accounts of interaction between a person and a place. Trying to explain or analyse belief narratives about interaction between people and places without engaging and taking into account the non-human part risks giving us a one-sided view of the whole interaction (Høgseth 2024:73). Occasionally, belief narratives about the forest's cover and other supranormal agencies interacting with people in the wilderness mention specific places where it can happen.

Supranormal Encounters as Interaction with Wilderness

The way supranormal encounters at wilderness sites are described in belief narratives seems to a large extent be to dictated by local belief traditions. Retellings of supranormal encounters at one place borrow elements from narratives about other, similar places. According to traditional motifs, places can be known to be frightening or inhabited by frightening supernatural beings, they can be known to be able to heal illnesses or have other desirable supernatural effects. The places, or spirits residing therein, can also pester or hinder people in their activities, or help them if they know how to engage with the place and its spirit in a respectful manner. In all these cases, interaction with these places is clearly described as particularly meaningful. They are places which *emerge* from more ordinary surroundings and interact with people in ways that ordinary surroundings do not. A place can be transformed from ordinary to supranormal through a meaningful interaction. A lake in the woods can be just any lake, but if you, like the Snejdåback farmer, know how to engage with the lake spirit in the right way, it can emerge as an enchanted lake, providing plentiful catches of fish. But if you are careless or disrespectful, a place can emerge to interact with you in a harmful way, for example by preventing your passage, or even drowning you in a river.

The belief narratives can be seen to reflect how the wilderness outside the cultivated village lands were experienced as unpredictable, even unstable. In the cultivated lands, a field is a field and the people in the village interact with it in very clearly defined ways. But in the wilderness almost any kind of interaction can emerge, harmful or helpful. The encounters of belief narratives also express a worldview where the wilderness can have power over people. This can be affected by positive interaction with the wilderness or a supernatural wilderness being, such as via ritual actions or

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offerings, or via the power of the Christian God, which seems to invoke a worldview where man is the master of nature.

Let us return to the case example of the woman being caught in the forest's cover in the woods of Offerberget. Perhaps the place name contains a hint about how the place should be engaged? The woman abstained from making an offering, causing her interaction with the place to take a harmful form, with the place gaining power over her. Calling upon the power of God, however, changed the interaction, with the powerful, bewildering forest changing into a forest that was under control and connected to her home in the village.

Interaction with the same sites today is obviously different. Also, as described above, belief narratives cannot be seen as very direct accounts of encounters with the wilderness but are formulated and adapted to local traditions. Likewise, any written account I try to write about my experiences will inevitably be detached from the actual experience and formulated by current conventions of academic writing. Even the experience itself to some degree can be seen to be affected by cultural factors: the interaction theoretically understood as a *taskscape* would be different if I was herding cattle, fishing, practising orienteering or conducting field research in order to understand past belief traditions. Still, I argue that at the centre of the layers of interaction formed by (a) the retelling of the experience and (b) the perspective of the experience formulated by tasks, there is a "core" of a human interacting with a place, which can provide insight into the experiences of others who have interacted with the same place, irrespective of whether they were herding cattle in the nineteenth century or on a weekend hike in the twentieth. This indicates that tradition, or cultural conditioning, plays a more important role in how such experiences are interpreted and retold to others, than the individual forming of the experience itself, as suggested by Honko (1981b:92–105).

To sum up, emergence and interaction with the sites does occur in ways somewhat similar to what is described in the belief narratives but interpreted through different cultural tools. My education and background make me understand and relate to places in different ways from nineteenth century villagers. At the same time my knowledge of belief traditions surrounding places has a role in how these places are emerging as meaningful to me. It changes my way of interaction with the sites.

Although occasionally the belief narratives also contain individual descriptions of the qualities of a particular place, there is much in the interaction with the physical terrain that is left out of the narratives. Commonly recurring aspects which are never mentioned in the narratives include the terrain guiding one's movement, or that of impressive features "revealing themselves" (emerging) only from a close distance or the right

ISSN: 2002-4185 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.61897/arv.81.48412

angle. Having to undertake special measures such as crawling or stooping to reach a place are occasionally mentioned. In some instances, the sense of danger expressed in the narratives can be associated with treacherous or challenging terrain.

Another aspect that connects the narratives and my own experience is that the places can have power over a human. They have the power to subtly direct me in a certain direction, to prevent my movement in another, to make me lose my way, to spend much more time in them than I had intended, to make me fatigued, to make me slip and fall, even to break my bones. In the most unfortunate circumstances, they could kill me, for example by drowning. When encountering the wilderness, the actual concrete place plays a significant and noticeable role, and furthermore, places described as sites of supranormal encounters often have remarkable features.

In the view of this study, post-humanistic theory and terminology regarding the interaction of humans and things can help us understand belief systems of past societies – in this case how agricultural societies in the north possessed a culture of viewing the wilderness as having agency, even potential power over people and that it was seen as possible to interact and have meaningful relations with it through particular places. Thus, perhaps post-humanist thought is not that new? Whether the agency is seen to exist in dispersed networks or singular actors is somewhat unclear. In more than half the cases, a supernatural being is said to reside at the place and is attributed with the place's agency. Even in the remaining cases, a singular topographic feature, such as a rock or spring, is often pointed out as the "locus" of interaction. However, their actions toward people are often said to happen in a dispersed manner, such as getting fish from a lake or getting lost in the woods.

In many of the belief narratives, the protagonists are already engaging the environment in some kind of more normal or mundane interaction; herding cattle, fishing, hunting, or just passing through. The supranormal intervention, whether sought by the protagonist or not, changes the nature of the interaction from ordinary to meaningful and thus worth retelling. But what comes first? Having heard belief narratives about a particular place is also likely to make it emerge as meaningful to more people. Based on my personal experience, archived belief narratives from a hundred years ago can have that effect as well. Does this mean that supranormal places emerge as *real* only through these interactions, as Barad's theory would suggest? I would rather say that they emerge as *meaningful*, although I interpret the encounter with wilderness in different ways than the archived narrators.

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