

# HORSE SKULLS AND “ALDER HORSE”: THE HORSE AS A DEPOSITIONAL SACRIFICE IN BUILDINGS

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## Abstract

The article discusses the horse's role as a building deposit in historical times. The focus is on Finland but a short overlook on the custom elsewhere in Europe (mainly Southern Scandinavia and the British Isles) is also given. The possible meanings attached to the horse in deposits are also presented.

Key words: building deposit, horse skull, folklore, magic, witchcraft.

## Introduction

This article discusses a part of my research subject, which is building deposits in Finland. I specialize on historical times; a period that in southwestern Finland begins in the latter part of the 12th century and continues all the way to modern times. Thus this article will also focus on historical times. The horse seems to have had a special position in magic and folk beliefs at least in some parts of Europe and it has been used as a building deposit in some regions up to modern times.

First, I will give a short definition of the word “building deposit” and then move on to briefly look into how the horse has been used as one in Northern Europe and especially in Finland. As research material I will not only use the archaeological finds, but also Finnish folklore. The “alder-horse” is presented as a specific example of this folklore and, as one might say, as a curiosity. I will then move on to discuss the possible meanings of building deposits and especially the horse's role as one. At this point, this means only to scratch the surface of this potentially very complex subject.

## What is a building deposit?

A building deposit is an object (or several objects together) *deliberately* concealed in or under a building. It is important to try to determine whether the objects are deliberately concealed, since many objects may also be accidentally lost in the constructs of a building (Fingerlin 2005). This is naturally the case with small objects such as coins, but it is obviously not so easy to accidentally lose a horse in your house. Building deposits have been called foundation offerings / sacrifices / deposits, because archaeologists encounter deposits made in the foundation more often than elsewhere in the building (naturally). There has also been much

discussion about the use of the words “offering” or “sacrifice” when talking about building deposits (e.g. Beilke-Voigt 2007, p.18ff; Carlie 2005, p.24ff). Most researchers, including myself, have decided to abandon these problematic terms and use something more neutral. For example Ines Beilke-Voigt (2007, p.30ff) has chosen the term *intentional deposition*. I will keep the word “building” in the term for now (as many other researchers have done), just to distinguish this form of intentional deposit from others not made in buildings.

The custom of concealing something in a building appeared already in Neolithic times, as soon as buildings were made more permanent (for discussion on Neolithic building deposits in Southern Scandinavia, see Karsten 1994, p.147ff). But the meanings of the deposits have probably changed many times during the long history of this custom. The tradition has not been fixed; it is very dynamic both in the sense of meanings and practice (Falk 2006, p.203ff).

The concealed object may be almost anything, but some types of objects have been favored in different times and regions. A deposit may contain for example animal bones (often skulls, jaws, leg bones or complete skeletons), coins, Stone Age tools, everyday household objects (knives, ceramics, needles, sickles, etc.) and personal objects (such as shoes). Sometimes one deposit contains several different objects (Merrifield 1987, pp.50-57 and 116-136). Naturally, the interest of this article is aimed at the horse's role.

A building deposit is an object *and* its context, meaning it can only be identified as such when accurate information on the find's context is available. Otherwise it is only an object. Deposits seem to be made at the borders of a building, and especially at the openings, such as the door, windows and chimney and in corners. Other contexts are in walls, under floors, in the roof

constructs and the hearth. Prehistoric and early historic building deposits are often in postholes (Merrifield 1987, pp.50-57 and 116-136).

### The horse as a building deposit in Northern Europe

The horse as a building deposit is especially well known in the British Isles and in Southern Scandinavia (Denmark and Southern Sweden). In both of these regions archaeologists and other researchers (folklorists and ethnologists) have written about horses as building deposits (Merrifield 1987, p.123ff; Hoggard 2004, p.177ff; Sandklef 1949; Carlie 2004, p.124ff). And it can be seen that in these parts horse-deposits in buildings have been repeatedly encountered. I do have some information about finds from Germany (Klusemann 1919, p.14) and Latvia (Caune 1993, p.495ff) (and of course Finland), and now I have been informed that there are finds here in Lithuania as well (Bliujienė, personal communication: e-mail 17.01.2008), and I am sure that the custom may be very widespread.

The horse first appears as a building deposit in Northern Europe in the Bronze Age, but it becomes more common in the beginning of the Iron Age. During the Iron Age there is seen a trend towards depositing only specific parts of the horse, namely the skull together with leg bones and perhaps the tail (Beilke-Voigt 2007, p.237). It seems that later, in historic times, the skull alone is preferred as a deposit (see e.g. Merrifield 1987, p.123ff). In some parts, for example in Southern Scandinavia, it has been common to place a horse skull in the foundation of a building up to modern times (Carlie 2004, p.124). Sometimes there are several skulls deposited together, for example 30–40 horses' skulls were regularly arranged under the floor in an old house in Suffolk, England (Merrifield 1987, p.124).

### The horse as a building deposit in Finland

In Finland the horse as a building deposit is better known from folklore than actual finds (since finds have been poorly documented). Folklore about building deposits has been collected from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century and some of it has been published in the early 1900s by the Finnish Literature Society (Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, SKS) in a compilation series called *Suomen kansan muinaisia taikoja* (Ancient magic of the Finnish people). Also some ethnologists of the early 20th century

have described building deposits when writing about building traditions (Paulaharju 2003, the manuscript is from 1907).

According to the folklore a horse skull (sometimes with some quicksilver in a quill inside it) was deposited under the floor of a building or under the hearth. Sometimes three rib bones of the horse were deposited with the skull, and one example from Eastern Finland mentions that it is the lady of the house who should secretly conceal a horse skull under the floor of a new building (Rantasalo 1933b, p.1212; Paulaharju 2003, pp.87 and 262). Deposited horse-skulls and even whole skeletons of horses are sometimes found in the hearth-constructs of old houses until recently in the geographical area known as Ostrobothnia (Helamaa 2004, p.144; Siltala 2006). But, since they have not been reported when found, these have apparently not been properly documented.

I know of two cases where a whole deposited horse has been found. Both are from Ostrobothnia (Jurva and Halsua), and both were deposited in the hearth-foundation. These finds have both been discovered in the 1950s when an old house has been renovated (Helamaa 2004, p.144; Siltala 2006). Naturally, it seems that deposited skulls have been far more common than whole horses.

The only deposited horse skull in Finland that has come to my attention which has been found during archaeological excavation is from Helsinki Old Town. The excavation took place in 1993 and the skull was under the northern wall of the 16th–17th century outbuilding with a wooden plank floor and no hearth. The building had been partially destroyed, so there is some uncertainty of the skulls interpretation (Heikkinen 1994, p.130; Heikkinen, personal communication: e-mail 24.11.2008).

When put on a map, the known folklore and actual horse-deposits form a pattern shown in Fig 1. They most likely show the area where the custom survived the longest. The white areas in the southern part of the country are probably only because of the poor documentation. In the northern part of the country the horse's importance both economically and in beliefs diminish, since the area is better suited for keeping reindeer than horses. Fig 1 also shows whether the deposition contained a skull or a whole horse, marked with different symbols. It also shows where folklore about the "alder-horse" has been collected. Next we will look more closely at the alder-horse, with an example from Kiiminki.

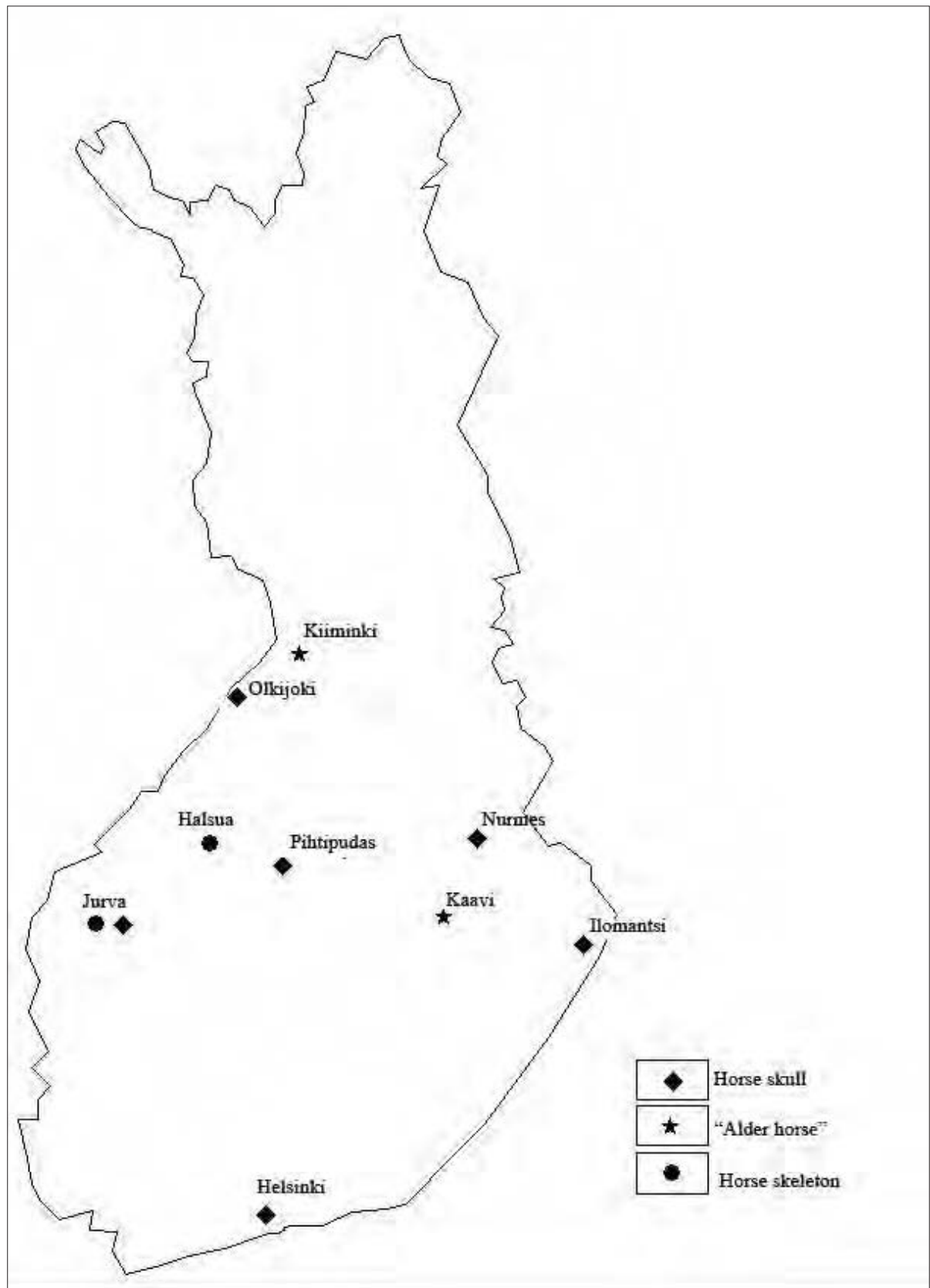


Fig. 1. A map of Finland with the examples from folklore and known finds of horse as building deposits marked (drawn by author).

## The “alder horse”: a folklore example from the 19th century

The alder-horse (in Finnish *leppähevonen*) is known in folklore both in the eastern and the northern part of the country. This example is from Kiiminki, and it has been written down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and published in the above-mentioned compilation of Finnish magic practices in 1933 *“When a new stable is built a horse is made of alder-wood and for it a small stable. A blanket for the horse is made from a piece of the skirt of a woman who has recently given birth, and the eyes are painted on the horse with the woman’s blood. Barley and quicksilver are placed in a basket and put in front of the horse. This alder-horse and its stable are put under the floor of the new stable to give the horses good health and luck.”* (translated by the author) (Rantasalo 1933a, p.9).

The alder-horse is an example of *imitative* or so-called *homeopathic* magic (Frazer 1922, pp.14-43). The actual horse-deposit is replaced by the image of a horse. One might say that this is definitely a more economic way to make a horse-deposit than if a real horse was used. The example is full of magic elements: firstly alder is the preferred wood in Finnish magic, and the use of the skirt and blood of a woman who have recently given birth is also very typical. Both barley and mercury (or quicksilver) have also been repeatedly used in household magic in Finland (e.g. Sirelius 1921, p.554ff). So, the alder-horse is in its place and the horses’ luck is ensured... Or is it? The folklore example continues: *“If the alder-horse is stolen and put under the thief’s stable, the horse-luck will follow with it. If the alder-horse is knocked upside-down, the horses in that stable will die. If the alder-horse is stolen and the pastures are circled with it and then the alder-horse is buried upside-down close to an ant-hill on the north-side of the pastures, the horses (of the stable where the alder-horse was stolen from) die at those pastures and the horse-luck will not return unless a new stable is built in another place.”*

This gives an idea of the ill-willing magic or witchcraft that people were afraid of. Envy was a really dangerous thing and every neighbor was a possible witch (Nenonen & Kervinen 1994, p.39ff). It also shows the believed link between alder-horse and the real horses in the stable. This kind of magic is perhaps more familiar to us today as Haitian voodoo-dolls, because they have been introduced to us by pop-culture (such as films and comics). This kind of magic has been known in various

parts of the world, though. The alder-horse -deposit differs from the other horse-deposits since (according to the folklore) it is always placed under a stable, never under other buildings. This is easily explained with the notion that the alder-horse is a building deposit which meaning is essentially linked with ensuring the well-being of horses.

## Why were building deposits made in historical times?

Many of the folklore examples I have encountered include a small explanation of the described deposit. This gives an idea of why deposits were made in the 19th century. In Finland the fear of witchcraft is the main reason given for the deposits in the collected folklore. There seem to have been a need for protective magic, especially protecting the borders of a building from outside threats.

The feared weakness of the household’s borders has been noted by both Jari Eilola (2003, p.314), in his studies of witchcraft and magic in the latter half of the 17th century, and Touko Issakainen (2005, p.272), in his studies of 19th century magic. The weakest points in a building were the openings, doors, windows, and chimneys. It is important to remember that in its context magic is not opposed to rational behavior (see e.g. Kieckhefer 1994; Brück 1999). To a person who believes that witchcraft is a real threat, it is very rational to protect oneself from it.

Closely related to the fear of witchcraft is the endeavor to ensure good luck. A lucky building is protected from evil such as sickness, death, misfortune, fire and lightning, things that were believed caused by witchcraft. Luck is for example fertility, health and a good crop, and those were things threatened by envious neighbors. The reason for a deposit may also sometimes have been ensuring for example fertility, without the fear of witchcraft as the underlying motive. As a matter of fact, some researchers, for example Bob Wilson (1999), have stressed fertility-magic when discussing the meaning of deposits.

The fear of witchcraft has probably not always been as strong. Maybe it has surfaced only when misfortune such as crop failure and many bad years in a row threatened the society. One interesting reason for depositing is not protection of witchcraft but actually a malicious act of witchery. When a deposit is secretly made in another person’s building one is thought to be able to curse the building or even steal the luck from it. This fits with Eilola’s (2003, pp.187 and 226) notion

that witchcraft was the act of breaking the borders of a household for example by introducing an alien object to it.

The meaning of the building deposits as offerings for supernatural beings has sometimes been suggested as the oldest reason for the custom (Carlie 2004, p.217ff). This may be true, but even the Finnish folklore from the 19<sup>th</sup> century recognizes this meaning. So, it seems that layers of meanings of different ages have co-existed. This is one example of the dynamic nature of this custom. Naturally various other reasons for the depositions than the above-discussed are possible as well.

### The role of the horse as building deposit

Where horses special animals in deposits? It seems that all domestic animals and some wild animals (for example bear in Finland) have been used in deposits (see Wilson 1999 for examples of other animal bones used for various ritual means). The horse seems to have required a special meaning among domestic animals though. This is seen for example in iconography beginning in the Bronze Age and in Iron Age horse sacrifices (Beilke-Voigt 2007, p.238ff). There are some written documents about the horse's meaning in ancient religion as well: For example the oldest Nordic law texts give the idea of the horse as the most important sacrificial animal in the official cult (Carlie 2004, p.124).

When discussing the role of horses' skulls as building deposits, some earlier researchers (Sandklef 1949) have argued whether the skull-deposits have had a ritual or practical reason. Even though this distinction is criticized and perhaps even outdated today (Brück 1999; Bradley 2005), I have chosen to first present the suggested meanings as if they were separate.

### Magic and symbolism

Firstly, the horse's head is said to be a symbol of power (Merrifield 1987, p.126). The horse in general has symbolized power and vitality and it has been a symbol of the sun (Biedermann 1993, p.73ff). This aspect may have something to do with its magic properties as well. The magic power of a horse's skull is also widely known: it brings luck and expels evil (Caune 1993, p.496). Brian Hoggard (2004, p.178) remarks that much of the folklore of the British Isles associated with the horse concerns luck and it has been said that the horse skull brought luck to the house. How this association began is not clear though, he continues. Bring-

ing luck and expelling evil are also the main reasons for horse deposits that Finnish folklore recognizes. As seen above it is the meaning of the alder-horse as well. The answer to the question how this association began may lie with the special meaning of the horse in ancient religion as a sacrificial animal.

Iron Age horse sacrifice in wetlands and pits is well known in Scandinavia. Bogs and wetlands are often borderlands between different inhabited areas and are also thought to be passages to the Otherworld and, as such, borders to the unknown and uncontrollable. This is one reason why Anne Monikander (2006) suggests that the horses sacrificed in wetlands became liminal creatures keeping guard against the uncontrollable (the realm of the dead, of chaos and of anything unknown). In this way they helped maintain the social order and protected people from chaotic powers from across the border of the unknown.

It is not such a long leap from being liminal creatures keeping guard on the borders between this world and the Otherworld to guarding the assumed weak borders of a building. Perhaps the role of the horse as building deposit begun as a guardian against evil outside powers; a property inherited from the horse's meaning in the perhaps more official cult involving horse sacrifice in wetlands. This meaning may later have faded from the memory of the depositing people. As seem to have happened with the horse shoe, which has earlier been considered a powerful talisman against witchcraft (Merrifield 1987, p.161ff) only the luck-bringing property of the horse deposit is remembered more widely.

### Acoustic skulls

The practical, non-ritual, reason given for horse's skulls concealed in buildings is that they are placed under floors to create an echo. This has been suggested both in the British Isles and in Southern Scandinavia (Merrifield 1987, p.123ff; Sandklef 1949, p.26ff). The earlier mentioned 30-40 skulls from the house in Suffolk were probably laid there for this purpose. Ceramic pots have also been concealed in buildings for acoustic reasons. The acoustic skulls were placed in churches, in houses and in Scandinavia especially in threshing-barns (Merrifield 1987, p.121ff).

In churches the acoustics were very important, of course. And in houses were people danced and music was played, but why in threshing barns? It was considered important that the sound of threshing carried far (Sandklef 1949, p.47ff). Could this have some magic purpose? It is well known that in many cultures loud

noises are considered to expel evil forces. So this “practical” custom of acoustic skulls may not be contradictory to magical and symbolic acts at all. One question to consider is also why horses’ skulls were preferred. One would presume that the skulls of cattle would be available more often than those of horses, and possibly just as suitable for acoustics.

### Concluding remarks

There are still many unanswered questions about the horse as a building deposit. For example the study of how widely this custom has been known in Europe and the rest of the world is still waiting to be made. On Finland’s part the picture will hopefully get clearer as my study continues. It is possible that the custom of concealing a horse skull in a building which in some parts survived up to the 20th century is an extension of the horse-cult known in the Iron Age. The more private act of building deposits has without doubt been able to co-exist with Christendom for a long time. And in a way the custom continues today as both public and private buildings often get a deposit of for example coins and newspapers. The meanings have just changed once more.

Translated by author

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Received: 25 January 2009; Revised: 9 March 2009;  
Accepted: 12 June 2009

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VIII

HORSES  
IN ETHNOAR-  
CHAEOLOGY  
AND FOLKLORE

## ŽIRGŲ KAUKOLĖS IR „ALKSNIO ARKLYS“: ŽIRGO SLĖPIMAS PASTATUOSE

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### Santrauka

Straipsnyje aptariamas reiškiny – istorinių laikų žirgo (kaukolės, viso skeleto ar statulėlės) slėpimas pastatuose. Pastatų depozitas yra objektas (ar keletas objektų), sąmoningai paslėptas pastato viduje ar po juo. Depozitai dažniausiai dedami pastato kampuose ar prie įėjimo, tačiau jų esama ir po grindimis, sienose, stogo ir židinių konstrukcijose. Paslėptas gali būti praktiškai bet koks objektas. Tačiau pavienių skirtingų objektų paslėpimo atvejų dažniau pasitaiko tam tikruose regionuose tam tikrais laikotarpiais. Šiuo atveju nagrinėjamas depozitas – žirgo kaukolė, žirgo skeletas ar žirgo figūrėlė („alksnio arklys“).

Britų salyne ir Pietų Skandinavijoje žirgo slėpimas pastate yra gana gerai žinomas, tyrinėtojų aprašytas reiškiny. Šio straipsnio autorės dėmesio centre – Suomijos teritorija, tačiau pažymima, kad tokių atvejų žinoma ir Vokietijoje, Latvijoje bei Lietuvoje. Tikėtina, kad ši tradicija buvo plačiai paplitusi. Šiaurės Europoje arklys anksčiausiai naudotas bronzos amžiuje, dažniau pasitaikydavo geležies amžiaus pradžioje. Kai kuriuose regionuose šis paprotys gyvavo ir naujausiais laikais.

Suomijoje žinoma keletas XIX amžiaus tautosakos pavyzdžių, susijusių su žirgo slėpimu pastatuose; jie iš dalies paaiškina aptariamąjį reiškinį. Pagrindinė folklore aptinkama tokio slėpimo priežastis – raganystės baimė. Panašu, kad būta apsauginės magijos poreikio, ypač siekta apsaugoti pastatą nuo išorės grėsmių.

Suomijos tautosakoje minima, kad pastate paslėpta arklio kaukolė turėjo atnešti laimę ar išvartyti piktąsias jėgas. Panašių pasakojimų žinoma ir iš kitų vietovių. Šio reiškinio ištakos gali būti siejamos su geležies amžiaus aukojimais pelkėse ir arklio vaidmeniu tame rituale. Manoma, kad paaukotas žirgas virsdavo paribio būtybe, saugančia ribą tarp šio ir ano pasaulio (Anapilio). Autorės nuomone, žirgas, būdamas namo depozitu, saugojo pastatą nuo tokių išorės grėsmių kaip raganavimas (burtai, kerai).

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