How to Mound a Horse? Remembrance and Thoughts of Afterlife at Finnish Companion Animal Cemetery

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Abstract
This article presents the results of a combined archaeological and cultural anthropological study of 170 horse burials at a pet (companion animal) cemetery in Mikonkangas, Oulu, Finland. The applied methods include archaeological documentation, interviews with the horse caretakers, and visits to the site. Contrary to socially and legislatively controlled human burial grounds with organized maintenance, companion animal cemeteries with their inherent do-it-yourself character are often displays for more spontaneous expressions of grief and longing. The evidence of remembrance varies from nearly unmarked graves to elaborate memorials with headstones, epitaphs, flowers, and personal objects. The thought of a reunion in the afterlife is evident in some of the epitaphs and could also have influenced the use of crosses and angel symbols on some of the graves.

Keywords
pet cemetery – horse burial – mourning – remembrance – human-animal relations
Introduction

Horses are one of the most influential nonhuman animal species in human history, as they have played a variety of roles in human societies since their domestication about 6,000 years ago. The human-horse bond has the potential to be very strong and is uniquely different from that between humans and other nonhuman animals. This bond is strengthened by the long lifespan of a horse, which is approximately 20 to 25 years, although it is common for horses to have several keepers over the course of their lives. There are several factors contributing to the special nature of the human-horse bond: the interaction between horse and rider; the combination of aesthetics, strength, size, speed, and the social, gentle nature of the horse; the cultural, historic, and economic value due to extensive training; and the amount of care this animal species requires (McGowan et al., 2012; Schuurman & Franklin, 2018). Due to the strong and emotional relationship with this animal, the death of a horse is a great loss to the caretaker.

In this article, we study the ways horse caretakers remember their deceased horses by focusing on the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery located near Oulu, Finland. As of now, this cemetery – the only pet (companion animal) cemetery in the country that allows the burial of equines without cremation – is the final resting place of 170 horses and some 3,000 other companion animals.

The practical questions related to the death of an equine are tied to emotional, ethical, ecological, and economic issues, and these questions are controversial among horse keepers. Some consider butchering dead horses as more ethical and ecological than burying them. In this view, slaughtering is considered recycling, since it follows the idea of not wasting good meat (Schuurman & Leinonen, 2012). In 2018, 23% of all horses put down in Finland were taken to slaughterhouses (Hippolis, 2018). Other possibilities include euthanizing the horse at a clinic or at the stable yard and taking the body to a “special waste” disposal facility or recycling plant for animal carcasses, or, simply burying the carcass.

Horses are an exception in the Finnish law that currently classifies them as
a production animal but allows a single horse to be buried on private prop-
erty when certain conditions are met. Normally, this applies to horses kept on
farmsteads, since ordinary urbanites rarely own parcels of land suited for this
purpose (Schuurman & Leinonen, 2012). Pet cemeteries are a more expensive
option than the aforementioned means of disposal. For example, slaughter-
houses pay the horse caretakers 100 to 200 euros for a deceased horse, whereas
a grave for 10 years at Mikonkangas costs 200 euros, not including the euthani-
zation of the horse and the initial costs for the grave. Altogether, the costs for a
burial at a pet cemetery might rise to 700 euros. For practical, emotional, and
ethical reasons, some prefer to take their horse to a pet cemetery, where the
animal can be buried, or to a pet crematorium (Schuurman & Leinonen, 2012).
Although the aesthetics and symbolism in pet cemeteries derive largely
from human burial practices (Pręgowski, 2016), they also offer a possibility to
diverge from the norms and rules that govern the burial practices and rituals
in human cemeteries (Dresser, 2000). For example, a dog’s tombstone can be
heart-shaped, similar to a tombstone raised to remember a dead child, or a dog
may receive a bone-shaped tombstone (Pręgowski, 2016). Thus, the graves tend
to be personal and tell stories of the buried companion animals and of the
bonds between them and their caretakers (Margulies, 2016). People can choose
the ways in which they wish to commemorate and mourn their companion
animals. This can lead to creative uses of material culture and also inspira-
tion from human graves, and to the adoption of human burial traditions. As
with human burials, material culture, objects, practices, and places help us
to remember and to hold on to the relationships with the deceased animals
(Hallam & Hockey, 2001).

Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery
The Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery is located some 10 kilometers southeast of the
center of Oulu, where it is maintained by the Animal Welfare Association of
Oulu (Oulun eläinsuojeluyhdistys). The cemetery was created in 1993 and cur-
rently covers 2.2 hectares. A part-time worker employed by the association is
responsible for digging the graves and burying the horses. Horse burials represent a novelty at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery. An article published in a local newspaper in September 1998 mentions a solitary horse burial as a curiosity (Kuusiluoto, 1998). The burial of horses in a designated section of the cemetery first commenced in 2006 (Figure 1). The documentation of 127 horse burials in late 2016 would imply that their number had increased on average by 10 to 12 new burials per year. However, a significant growth in burials was observed from late 2017 to May 2019, when the number rose from 132 to over 170 (Figure 2).

At the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery, horse burials represent a species-specific geography (cf. Desmond, 2016), whereas other companion animals – for example, dogs, cats, rabbits, and turtles – are buried in rows with no distinction between the species. While smaller animals get their final resting places in ready-dug trenches separated into individual burial compartments with temporary plywood partitions, horses are buried in individual graves. The section reserved for horses is located in the northern part of the cemetery, and the pet cemetery has expanded in this direction over the past decades.

Figure 1 Horse burials at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery
Photograph: Paula Pelttari
Methods from Archaeology and Cultural Anthropology

With an approach that combines methods from both archaeology and cultural anthropology, we examine the link between the material culture of death, burial practices, and the remembrance of a companion animal, both as it is manifested at the site of horse burials and how it is reflected in interviews with the caretakers. We study both the performative aspects of remembrance and the associated material culture, for example, tombstones, décor, and landscaping. This reveals the relation between humans, their companion animals, and the material culture used for mourning.

Previous studies have indicated that companion animals are conceived of as family members and their graves demonstrate a close human-animal bond (Brandes, 2009; Gustavsson, 2011; Pręgowski, 2016; Schuurman & Laurén, 2016; Auster, 2018). Even though horses are large utility animals and are rarely kept at home like pet animals, their status is shifting towards that of a companion animal (Schuurman & Leinonen, 2012). Due to this shift in status, one can reasonably expect to find particular marks of remembrance and nuances in ritual
practices specific to this species. Although the first horse burials in pet cemeteries date back to Paris in the early 20th century (Spiegelman & Kastenbaum, 1990), the fact that horses are buried in pet cemeteries in itself reflects their changing status from utility to companion animals (cf. Kean, 2013).

The first round of documentation was completed in early November 2016, when all 127 horse burials were recorded on pre-printed forms, photographed, and mapped. Later on, we realized that the conditions at the time of the documentation were characterized by sub-zero temperatures, and ground frost formation had been far from ideal. For this reason, the documentation of every burial was double-checked in July 2017, with five new graves added to the research material. This second round of inspection turned out to be essential, as several important features such as epitaphs written on some frost-covered materials had gone unnoticed in the first round. In July 2018, the documentation of twenty new burials was added to the research material, bringing the total number to 153 (Figure 2). During the most recent visit in May 2019, the number of horse burials at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery had risen to 170.

We used a standardized form for the documentation of the horse burials (Appendix 1). This form is an adaption of the form promoted by the Finnish Heritage Agency for the documentation of human burials. The data collected with the form can be divided into five main categories: general remarks, information about the buried horse, data regarding the funerary monument or its absence, adornments on the grave mound, and additional observations.

During the second and third documentation rounds, the changes observed at previously documented horse burials were marked with a photocopy of the original documentation form. This method enabled both short-term monitoring of the actions taking place in the section reserved for horse burials and building an archive containing data from a longer period of time.

In addition to the meticulous form-driven documentation, the burial grounds were visited on All Saints’ Day, Christmas Eve, and Easter. These days are very important holidays in Finland for remembering the deceased and are characterized by numerous visits to local cemeteries. As it could be reasonably
expected that similar expressions of remembrance would take place at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery, the second author made brief observation trips to the site on Christmas Eve from 2016 to 2018 and on All Saints’ Day in 2017 and 2018. On these visits, lit candles placed on the graves of horses were marked on a map. The intention is to continue these visits years, if not decades, into the future in order to establish a long-term series of observations regarding the site and its development.

A critical remark must be made concerning the documentation carried out on Christmas Eve. At that time of the year, northern Finland is usually covered by a thick blanket of snow, and due to its high latitude, Oulu gets only three and half hours of sunlight daily. The precise identification of the horse burial sites can be a substantial challenge in the Arctic twilight, as most of the features aiding the identification of the burial – tombstones, decorations, etcetera – are not necessarily detectable beneath the snow and ice. For this reason, the distribution maps of the lit candles produced during these visits have an elevated chance of being biased.

Another typical time to visit both human and nonhuman animal graves is over Easter when people leave daffodils on the graves (Hyttinen, 1996; Gustavsson, 2011). The first author conducted an observation at Mikonkangas on Easter in 2019, but although daffodils were left at other graves, horse burials lacked any signs of such visits. This might also be due to the deep snow cover, which made it difficult to approach horse graves (Figure 2), whereas in other places there were paths leading to the graves.

A set of five themed interviews were conducted by the third author in 2017 with the cemetery caretaker and four people who had buried their or their friends’ horses at the cemetery. The interviewees were found through the connections of the authors. Data from the ethnographic fieldwork consist of recorded and transcribed interviews and fieldwork notes, and photos and videos of the visit to the cemetery. The interviews were conducted in private homes, at the university, and by phone. They were analyzed using content analysis. Because of the small number of interviews, the results cannot be generalized,
but they give an idea of the variety of experiences and ideas related to horse burials today. The interviewees were asked about their experiences concerning euthanasia, burial, and commemoration of their horses. All of the interviewees were women except for the cemetery caretaker. This reflects the gendered practice of the disposal of horses and the differences between the riding (for pleasure) and trotting (horse racing pulling a two-wheeled cart) cultures in Finland. The equines buried in the Mikonkangas pet cemetery are mostly riding horses owned by women. Trotters, on the other hand, as part of the male-dominated trotting culture, are mostly taken to slaughterhouses and waste disposal plants.

Rituals of Remembrance

Burial Customs

According to the interviewees, horses are usually euthanized in the stable yard or at a horse clinic, and the horse keeper, or more often a friend or the cemetery caretaker, transports the carcass to the pet cemetery. Euthanasia may also take place at the cemetery if the horse is fit to travel. In such cases, the veterinarian first sedates the horse in the trailer and then leads the animal to the grave, usually with the keeper’s friend or family member. A lethal dose is consequently given to the horse on site, and the witnesses are asked to step back because this phase can be quite dramatic or even dangerous. Normally, the horse just collapses, but during the last moments, the equine may also fight back by jumping up and falling uncontrollably. The interviewees reported that although the veterinarian warns people that this might happen, it may shock those who have not witnessed it before. However, most horses fall asleep and die peacefully, and the occasion is very powerful and emotional for those who are present.

While the horse keepers usually stay at the site until the horse is dead and remove the halter, they are advised by the cemetery caretaker to leave afterwards, as the lifting of a horse by the animal’s feet into a three-meter-deep grave is a grotesque and jarring sight. Some wish for the blanket of the horse to be placed underneath them or that they are covered with it, but usually the horse
is interred with nothing other than their shoes. At this stage, some horse keepers leave and do not return until the next day, while some come back after the horse has been lowered into the grave on their side.

Next, the cemetery caretaker releases the feet of the horse and sets them down gently. A moment of silence takes place beside the grave before it is filled – no words are said, and at this point, the keeper, if present, is in tears. The caretakers usually bring flowers or a candle and lantern with them, and these are left on the mound. For emotional and practical reasons, many horse keepers choose not to attend the burial at all, especially if the horse is euthanized elsewhere and taken to the pet cemetery by the cemetery caretaker.

The size of a horse demands special attention in this context. Whereas smaller companion animals can be buried in a container or wrapped in a textile, it is hardly possible to avoid seeing the dead body of a horse during the burial – it is almost as if the body is there to be seen. Sørensen (2009) has discussed the agency and materiality of the dead body as the living’s reaction to “the presence of death, its social and mental affinity and the materiality of the corpse” (p. 130). The considerable size of a horse is also reflected in the burial mound, the average size of which at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery is around 4.0 × 2.5 × 0.5 meters. While the size of the mound correlates roughly with the size of the animal, its shape seems to primarily depend on the quality of the soil. At Mikonkangas, mounds containing more silt are higher and elongated in shape, whereas mounds containing more sand are shallower and rounded in shape.

**Times To Visit the Grave**

The number of visits to the graves varied greatly between the horse keepers. Some keepers reported that they had visited the grave site only once, right after the burial, whereas others kept coming back every day for months. Later on, these visits usually took place once a month and on the anniversary of the death of the horse. In addition, visits to the burial site normally took place on important holidays such as All Saint’s Day and Christmas Eve. The site also receives
many visitors on the day of the Declaration of Christmas Peace – a tradition pertaining to the medieval period that is considered to be an essential part of Christmas in Finland.

Although the visits to the horse burial sites at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery on All Saint’s Day and Christmas Eve have been monitored only for a couple of years, it is safe to say that performances of remembrance take place at some of the burial mounds. The number of lanterns with lit candles on graves has been systematically higher on Christmas Eve, ranging from 20 to 40. About 5 to 10 lanterns were spotted on horse burial mounds when visiting the site on All Saint’s Day, and around the same number was observed during the Declaration of Christmas Peace.

The clear emphasis on Christmas may be due to an older tradition of winter solstice celebrated for the light in mid-winter, which Christianity later claimed as St Stephen’s Day (Tapaninpäivä). The day also celebrated horses, who were fed special treats, and horsemen who feasted by eating and drinking at the stable. The apex of the festivities was a sleigh ride known as “the ride of Stephen’s Day.” The sleigh ride tradition continues even today, while horse stables are customarily decorated for Christmas and treats such as carrots, apples, and gingerbread are given to horses (Leinonen, 2013).

**Maintenance and Visits**

Unlike in human cemeteries, where the maintenance of graves is usually the responsibility of the local parish, the maintenance of the burial mound is up to the person responsible for the acquisition of the burial place of a horse at a pet cemetery. This means that the burial mound has to be frequently weeded and kept clean from fallen twigs and pine needles. Not every horse caretaker does this, and there are numerous cases at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery where the grave of a horse is likely to have been abandoned immediately after the burial. For example, one interviewee stated that she is busy enough with her other horses and is not in the habit of visiting the graves of her human relatives either, even though she feels bad about it. In fact, it is perfectly possible that
the caretaker of the animal never visits the grave.

In contrast, some burials show clear signs of continuous maintenance: spent candles are taken away, withered plants and flowers as well as decayed wooden elements are replaced with new ones, and new decorations and/or artifacts are added to the funeral monument or on the burial mound. In one extreme case, the burial mound received a complete makeover after two years of its existence: the mound was reshaped, a proper tombstone was installed, and several decorative items as well as plants were added. While there seems to be a slight positive correlation between the frequency of the candles placed on a mound with the level of general upkeep of the burial site and its age, candles have also been spotted on old and unkempt burial mounds (Figure 3). After 3 to 6 years, unkempt burial mounds are typically densely covered in willowherb. However, while a horse burial sprouting daisies or even pine saplings may look abandoned, a lit candle placed in a lantern on the grave show that it is not necessarily forgotten. Such a setting might indicate that even though the animal was a close companion, the keeper might rarely have access to the outlying cemetery or is not in the habit of visiting graveyards or taking care of gravesites.

Remembrance and Material Culture

Decorating a Burial Mound

Lanterns are arguably the most common object used to adorn horse burials at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery and were found at 67 graves. They are present as loose lanterns placed directly on the burial mound, placed on the top of a staff, or on a lantern hanger. Compared to other pet burials, where lanterns are also common adornments, these lanterns are somewhat larger in size – the biggest being 45 × 20 × 20 cm – thus reflecting both the size of the buried animal and the size of the burial mound. The majority of the lanterns are metal, painted in black with a square section. However, wooden and plastic lanterns; lanterns painted in white, red, or pink; as well as lanterns with hexagonal or round sections were also documented.
The importance of a lantern is related to its function as protective casing for a candle: an object that has been traditionally used for the remembrance of the deceased. Candles were observed at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery, not only inside the lanterns, but also placed directly on the burial mounds. Most of these candles are the same type of grave candles that adorn human burials: a translucent plastic casing topped with a metallic rain lid. More elaborate and thus expensive candles with taller decorated glass casings were also observed on some burial mounds.

At Mikonkangas, the soil consists of sandy glacial till that contains significant amounts of heterogeneously sized stones ranging from small pebbles and hand-sized rocks to large boulders approaching a cubic meter in volume. Each type has a specific use at the cemetery. Small, decorative designs (hearts, circles, etc.) have been created with pebbles, while rocks have been utilized either to rim or to partially cover the burial mound. An occasional smaller boulder has been turned into a headstone or similar visual element emphasizing the longitudinal axis of the burial.
Mikonkangas is situated in a flat, dry heath supporting the growth of a young pine forest with underbrush dominated by bilberry, heather, and Cladonia stellaris – lichen. Heather and lichen are plant materials often used to adorn both human and nonhuman animal burials in Finland; their availability and application for horse burials at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery emphasizes the spontaneity of burial customs, a feature previously observed within the context of smaller pets. The spectrum of plants purchased from markets and greenhouses and brought to adorn burial mounds is equally considerable, ranging from strawberry seedlings to pansies and roses. Additionally, plastic flowers and plants have been used as adornments of these burials.

**Belongings of the Deceased as Grave Decorations**

The habit of leaving the belongings of animals at their graves has been noted worldwide, for example, in Poland, France, and the United States (Pręgowski, 2016). Koontz (2019) has noted that “because they allow owners to both literally and symbolically recreate the sensory experiences of pet ownership, material items such as hair, impressions, collars, cremains, and models are ideal ways to remember deceased pets” (p. v). According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1989), artifacts can “call up in paradigmatic fashion memories of the many contexts” (p. 330) where the object was and is used. At the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery, a horseshoe is by far the most common “personal” object associated with horse burials. These shoes probably belonged to the buried horses, as the examples detected include winter shoes with spikes, special shoes for horses with certain foot problems, and horseshoes of various sizes – every horse has slightly different hoofs. Occasionally horseshoes were present in pairs at the grave, while all four horseshoes were noted just in a couple of cases. A single horseshoe attached to the headstone or other type of monument was observed to be the most common way to integrate horseshoes with a burial, while others had been placed directly on the burial mound. Some of the horseshoes had been plated in gold or silver. The most lavish, but also clearly exceptional, example of the creative use of horseshoes for the purpose of com-
memoration consisted of two crosses placed on a single burial mound, each welded together from eleven horseshoes and equipped with a central candle-holder recycled from a glass baby food jar (Figure 4). In a few cases, the memorial had also been adorned with bits, halters, and/or bridles, and plastic oat buckets had been placed on the grave on rare occasions – in one particular case, an epitaph had been painted on the oat bucket.

Figure 4 Two crosses made of horseshoes with central candleholders recycled from glass baby food jars
Photograph: Paula Pelttari

Funerary Monuments and Epitaphs
Memorials are present on 71 burial mounds at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery. The materials and forms of funerary monuments are more varied than those in human cemeteries, and they may be self-made, which is a trend that has also been noted at other pet cemeteries (Hyttinen, 1996). The most common type of monument is a natural stone turned into a gravestone with some modifications. Usually, the modification involves an engraved metal (most often brass) or plastic plaque attached to an otherwise untreated flat rock surface. Cut and polished gravestones made of dark plutonic rock types with carefully engraved
and gilded letters are absent with only one exception. Deadwood is a material used for the construction of grave monuments at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery. Some of these monuments consist of a 60- to 100-cm-wide piece of a deadwood log with an attached metal plaque identifying the deceased with a pair of horseshoes adorning it on both sides.

Figure 5 Two horse burials with funerary monuments reproducing the short façade of a front-gabled house.
Photograph: Janne Ikäheimo

Funerary monuments constructed of timber are also common and most often resemble a small billboard, with the shape reproducing the short façade of a house with a saddle roof (Figure 5). This type of memorial offers a substantially large flat surface for attaching an epitaph and related memorabilia such as horseshoes and bits. The shape of these memorials vaguely resembles traditional Orthodox burial monuments in Finnish Karelia named kropnitsa, which feature a house-like wooden structure above the ground. As most Finns in the Oulu area belong to the Evangelic-Lutheran church and images of Orthodox funerary monuments are probably not familiar to them, it is highly unlikely that this connection is intentional. This type of monument is growing in popu-
larity as an adornment for both horse and small pet burials.

A burial including two horses interred five years apart from one another (2006 & 2011) must be mentioned here. An equally peculiar case is a single horse burial with a mound adorned with two headstones. While the text on the headstones is identical and seems to suggest an upgrade of the burial monument from coarsely painted natural stone to a computer-printed wooden plaque, this mound could also be explained by the existence of two proprietors who were both driven by the desire to create personal memorials.

A new burial type was noticed for the first time during a visit to the horse burials in July 2018. A round and shallow feature, much smaller than an average horse burial, was observed next to a new mound. While it is uncertain whether the grave contains the remains of a stillborn or a foal, it may indicate the considerable affection felt towards horses who have died before a stronger human-animal relationship could have been established. The mare, dear to her caretaker, would have carried the foal for 11 months and, whether the foal was stillborn or lived for only a few days, would have been special to both the mare and the caretaker. Often a great deal of money, time, and hope have been invested into finding the right stallion to inseminate a mare and into taking care of her. All of these efforts become immediately undone with the premature death of the offspring.

Epitaphs for companion animals may contain more information about the departed than is usually customary in human cemeteries (Pręgowski, 2016). At Mikonkangas, most epitaphs accompanying the horse burials contain only minimal information, if anything at all. In addition to the name (N = 58) and the year of death or dates referring to the lifespan (N = 45), the epitaphs offer additional information about the deceased animal only in rare cases. For example, the sex and breed were indicated only in one epitaph, the precise use of the animal – show jumping and horseracing – in two. Longing and gratefulness were voiced more often using conventions such as “forever in our hearts” and “thank you for the years we had together,” but messages with more personal tones such as “In my dreams you are always present, dear Tubby” were
also present.

Pregowski (2016) has noted that declarations of dedication and love, testimonies of an interspecies bond, and vows to remember the animal forever are also common themes in Polish gravestone inscriptions for companion animals. Similar expressions of loss, reminiscence, and love, are observed in the writings on Swedish and Norwegian Website memorials for companion animals as well as on the gravestones in pet cemeteries of these countries (Gustavsson, 2011). Nonetheless, the epitaphs offer surprisingly sparse information on the caretakers and other people related to the horse except for the occasional reference to their names. It seems as if additional expressions of affection are as restrained as they are with human burials.

Photographic portraits of the departed are not a common sight at human cemeteries in Finland. In Mikonkangas, there were four photographs of the horses. Reasons for the use of photographs are related to memory work. People want to keep the memories alive and recall how their pets looked, and hence the photographs at the graves act as “aide de memoire” (Chalfen, 2003). Statuettes portraying either grieving, praying, or sleeping cherubs are present on some horse burial mounds at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery. They are also frequently on graves of smaller pet animals. As cherub statuettes are also typically present on child burials, Hyttinen (1996) has interpreted them to reflect similar sincerity and purity possessed by both children and animals.

As one of the interviewees said, she sees animals as good, innocent beings and pet cemeteries as peaceful safe havens where she likes to go, “for animals have done nothing bad to anyone, whereas many people have” (interview, July 19, 2017). On the other hand, angel figurines have been connected to neo-spirituality, where angels are seen to dwell around us and enable the deceased to remain in contact with the living from the afterlife (Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019).

In some pet cemeteries, regulations prohibit the use of crosses and other religious symbols (Hyttinen, 1996; Gustavsson, 2011). While there are no such restrictions at the Mikonkangas Pet Cemetery, only five of the horse burials
had been marked with a cross in 2016. Moreover, the cross as a symbol is absent from other types of burial markers. This clearly differs from contemporary human burials in the cemeteries of the Oulu region, where gravestones are customarily equipped with a Lutheran cross. Crosses are also present in higher frequencies on the burials of smaller companion animals. Nevertheless, in the section of the cemetery documented in 2018 to 2019, there were three crosses, so their use is becoming apparent in horse burials. Apart from the aforementioned cherubs, which can also have non-religious spiritual meanings, other expressions of religion and faith are absent in the section of horse burials. This is in contrast to pet cemeteries studied, for example, in the United States, where pet burials are often endowed with religious symbols (Brandes, 2009; Pręgowski, 2016).

**Discussion**

Animal burials have been seen to reflect a close human-animal relationship, and the family member status of the companion animal as surrogate child or grandchild (Chalfen, 2003; Brandes, 2009; Veldkamp, 2009; Ambros, 2010; Gustavsson, 2011; Pręgowski, 2016; Schuurman & Laurén, 2016; Auster, 2018). This relationship can be seen in the ways people spend time and money on their pets, and care for them while they are living and after their deaths (Witt, 2003; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008). The grieving of the loss of a companion animal bears little difference to that of humans (Brown et al., 1996). The ways to remember lost pets also have many similarities in terms of using the human funeral customs with the accompanying religious/cultural backgrounds (Spiegelman & Kastenbaum, 1990; Dresser, 2000; Ambros, 2010; Williams, 2011; Kean, 2013). The same phenomena are also evident in horse burials. However, there is more variation, individualism, and intimacy in the remembrance practices at pet cemeteries than at more controlled human graveyards. Pet cemeteries can also be seen as places that enable hope for a continuous relationship with the horse after their death. The interviewees had mixed ideas about what happens after death. They thought that human and animal
deaths are quite similar experiences. Some believed that there is an afterlife, some kind of horse heaven with green fields, with the possibility of reunion with the beloved horse, and some believed that death is the end of the existence of a being whether a human or nonhuman animal. A reference to the Rainbow Bridge was made on one of the documented horse burials. The Rainbow Bridge is often used as a metaphor for the human-animal reunion in the afterlife (Bardina, 2017; Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019). It is a sort of a backdoor into heaven, which allows humans and companion animals to have a shared afterlife despite the Christian notion that pets cannot go to heaven. The Rainbow Bridge was originally a poem written by an unknown author in the 1980s or 1990s, and it later became popular on the Internet (DeMello, 2016). Ideas of a reunion in a heaven-like place can also be seen in the writings on Swedish and Norwegian web memorials for companion animals (Gustavsson, 2011).

In contemporary pet cemeteries, references to an animal afterlife and reunion with the caretaker in heaven became more common in the 1990s (Brandes, 2009). Howell (2002) has studied the grave inscriptions in a British late 19th-century pet cemetery in London’s Hyde Park and noted a reference to future reunion. This was sometimes accompanied by citations from the Bible, for example, Psalm L: 10, “Every beast of the forest is mine,” or “not one of them is forgotten before God” from Luke XII: 6. Howell notes that despite the anthropocentrism of Christianity, it gave pet caretakers a hope of spiritual reunion. This belief was also repeated by the cemetery caretaker in Mikonkangas, who has held many discussions with animal caretakers who have expressed their hope of reunion with their nonhuman companions in the afterlife. The afterlife can also be more abstract. In documenting the gravestones at the Metropolitan pet cemetery in Moscow, Bardina (2017) has noted that even though there was a hope of immortality, companion animals were seen to lack a spiritual identity. According to Bardina (2017), “Their afterlife is seen as returning to the family and living in their hearts” (p. 415). Similar phrases were also evident in the horse burials in Mikonkangas.

Remembering animals on Christian holidays is another way that there
are similarities between animal and human deaths. Apart from the visits we documented in Mikonkangas, candles have been lit on animal graves on All Saints’ Day and Christmas Eve at other pet cemeteries in Sweden and Finland (Gustavsson, 2011; Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019). Even religious memorial services for animals are organized worldwide (Iliff, 2002; Veldkamp, 2009; Ambros, 2010). In Finland, there have been special blessings of animals at the Margreteberg domestic animal park in Espoo where a minister blesses the animals each Christmas (Hyttinen, 1996). In Mikonkangas, there is a similar way of blessing the animals, all of them dogs, who are present at the Declaration of Christmas Peace for animals.

The times to visit resembled the memorial traditions at human graveyards. Similarly, in Japan, people feel they should visit the graves of the pets and pray once a month as they would in the case of a recently deceased human relative. Visits should also be made on the anniversary of the pet’s death and on holidays when it is common to visit human graves (Chalfen, 2003; Ambros, 2010). Additionally, in Mikonkangas, the practices related to the death of a horse are similar to traditions connected with human death; horses are buried, and their graves are marked and used for remembrance (see also Schuurman & Laurén, 2016).

The positioning of toys and other pet items on (or in) the graves or memorials as witnessed at horse burials in Mikonkangas has been interpreted as a sign of belief in an afterlife where the pet might need these items, which is an adaptation of old human ritual practices (Schuurman & Laurén, 2016). The opposite, when nothing is put into the grave, is thought to free the horse from work and pain, where the animal can graze and gallop free in the afterlife, as stated by one of the interviewees. Freedom seems to be central to the idea of a horse afterlife and it differs from the afterlife of a dog. In 19th-century Finland, it was common at human burials to place personal objects into the coffin for the use of the deceased. On the other hand, the placement of artifacts into a coffin could also be a more settled way to discard useless objects or as a final act of affection.
As Ucko (1969) has stated: “the pet owners had no thoughts about their animals needing these objects in the afterworld, or on the journey to an afterworld, but simply wished to dispose of objects which had particular emotional connotations” (p. 265). As mentioned earlier, the use of personal objects in remembrance might also be important because they create a sensorial experience similar to that while the animal was alive (Koontz, 2019). According to Pręgowski (2016), in Poland, caretakers bring new accessories to graves on relevant occasions, such as anniversaries. He sees purchasing new objects for the deceased as carrying a similar meaning to lighting candles; “it is a declaration of remembrance and a testament to the significance of the human-companion animal relationship” (p. 50).

**Conclusion**

Overall, both the number of decorated horse burials as well as the number of decorations at the burials in Mikonkangas is surprisingly low and in this respect, the status of horse burials clearly differs from other pet animals buried in the Mikonkangas pet cemetery. There is, nevertheless, great variation ranging from undecorated graves to lavishly decorated ones. In addition, observations of memorial practices demonstrate that undecorated graves can also be places of remembrance, for example, lighting a candle. Together, the material culture and embodied practices of remembrance exhibit a continued human-animal relationship after the horse has died and been buried.

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**References**


