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The Death of the Horse: Transforming Conceptions and Practices in Finland

Introduction. Along with the general transformation in human–animal relations in Western societies, the roles and meanings of the horse have changed significantly during the modernization and urbanization process. In the 1950s in Finland, the agrarian society still used as many as 400,000 horses in agriculture, forestry, transportation, trotting races, and the military. After a dramatic collapse in numbers (down to 31,500 in 1980), the horse has engaged in a new role in leisure and sport, and in 2010 there were some 75,500 horses and ponies in Finland (Suomen Hippos, *Tunnusluvut*). Thus, the horse, which has been used in the development of societies throughout the ages, has adapted to modernization and found its place in contemporary society. Despite often working for its living, e.g. in riding schools, the status of the horse is shifting towards that of a companion animal. This change reflects the growing trend in Western societies toward keeping animals primarily for companionship and leisure purposes (Franklin).

The way in which the death of a domestic animal is understood and organized reflects the recent changes in human-animal relations (Vialles; Marvin; Burt; Higgin et al.). According to Marvin, the deaths of domesticated animals are “culturized,” meaning that the deaths are brought about and controlled by humans (16). Marvin also suggests that the practice of killing animals and the general acceptance of the killing are fundamental parts of the social order shared by humans and animals (11). The acceptability of killing animals, however, varies culturally, and the ways in which the actual killing is performed are contextually diverse, governed by different rules, codes, ideologies, and practical and material concerns (Higgin et al. 174, 183). As Higgin et al. write, “there is not one single accepted version of what constitutes ‘a good kill’ but rather many different versions, each of which embody [sic] different human-animal relationships, different versions of animality and different versions of the acceptability of killing” (189).

In this article, we study the transformations of the human-horse relationship in the specific context of equine death. We ask how the death of the horse has been organized and how owners have perceived it during a period of intensified use of horses in agrarian work and forestry from the 1860s to the 1960s and in contemporary riding and leisure horse culture. The study has been carried out in Finland, and the research

material consists of interviews with horse owners and written narratives from the Finnish Literature Society's Folklore Archives. It is our hypothesis that there are differences in the ways in which contemporary leisure horse owners and people who worked with horses in 19th and 20th century farming society relate to the death of a horse. The theme of animal death can be understood as a combination — or collision — of emotional, ethical, economic, and practical questions. The focus of our approach is on the historical changes in the human-animal relationship and especially on the emotional dimensions of that relationship.

The emotional relationship to the animal and its death. The central aspect of an emotional relationship to animals is the emotional tie to either an individual animal or animals in general (Macnaghten). When looking at emotionality in the context of animal keeping, the focus is on the individual animal as a friend, a companion, an object of empathy, or a source of guilt. Furthermore, the emotional relationship to an animal often includes a moral dimension, a willingness to act for the good of the animal. The “culture of care and responsibility” defined by Macnaghten embodies love and respect for the animal, time spent with the animal, and a wish that the animal could live as happily, healthily, and freely from suffering as possible. The actual content of these concepts varies greatly, however, as what is seen as care by some is understood as neglect in other contexts. The emotional aspect of human–animal relations has usually been linked to companion animal keeping (Franklin 98). While the reasons for keeping farm animals are primarily financial and practical, companion animals are kept mainly for social and emotional reasons (Serpell and Paul 129). The horse of Western urban society is increasingly perceived in this way as a companion animal, as many leisure horse owners see their animals as friends and partners and especially as individuals (Birke).

Emotionality and instrumentality have often been seen as opposed standpoints, but they do not exclude each other in the human–animal relationship. An emotional relationship to agricultural animals is especially evident in small-scale agriculture, where the animals are seen as part of the household, as family members, and as friends (Holloway; Tovey; Theodossopoulos 15, 16, 31; Leinonen, *Työkaverista* 3-4). Dimitrios Theodossopoulos has investigated the human-animal relationship in a Greek island farming community and states that the interaction of the farmers with their animals involves care, reciprocity, and the conceptualization of the place and purpose of each living organism on the farm (15). The animals are considered members of the household and the relationships between the animals and their owners are close. Frans de Waal writes that “with close familiarity, the individuality and awareness of other animals becomes evident” (de Waal qtd. in Dutton 139). Working with the horse is one of the closest human-animal

relationships involving personal communication with an animal, and thus the relationship is inevitably between individuals.

Grieving over the death of an animal is seen as a clear sign of an emotional tie to the animal, and it can be compared to the emotions felt after the loss of a close human (Meehan; Howell). This emotional reaction has been associated with the role of companion animals as family members (Arluke and Sanders 11-12). However, producers of agricultural animals also may face situations in which they react emotionally to animal death, although slaughtering is an everyday practice and a pragmatic issue for most producers. Animal death may be especially distressing when a whole herd of cattle has to be slaughtered as a measure of precaution against an infectious disease (Law). The grief is made worse by the loss of the whole livelihood. Thus the ways of relating to animal death illustrate how seemingly opposite systems of meaning, emotionality and instrumentality in human-animal relations can exist simultaneously (Arluke and Sanders, 131). These systems of meaning are often produced locally in a context where interaction with animals is part of everyday routines, such as in hobby farming (Holloway), where the producers often have a close emotional relationship to their animals. On the one hand, the animals are seen as friends and sometimes members of the family, but on the other, they are agricultural animals intended for the market (cf. Harbers).

The simultaneity of emotionality and instrumentality is most visible in the case of animals whose relationship with humans is perceived in more than one way. For example, Cassidy (39-40) states in her research that racehorses are grieved for not only because of personal attachment to them, but also because of the loss of their economic and breeding value. In 19th century Finland the concept of equine death differed from the death of other farm animals. There was a special closeness between a family and their horse because the horse was kept in the house in winter. The stables, if there were any, were cold and drafty, and hence the horses were taken inside the house to eat, drink, and dry after a day's work (Vilkuna). Consequently, the death of the only horse on the farm was especially distressing because of its economic as well as its emotional value. If the horse died in the middle of the logging season, the farmer lost a great deal of the year's income. The practices surrounding animal death can also be understood through the concept of uncleanness as described by Mary Douglas (100, 101), where dirt is definable as a substance in the wrong place and thus needs to be viewed through a conception of order. Even though the relationship to a horse was close in 19th century Finland, the horse carcass was considered unclean. A combination of traditions based in

folk beliefs and Christianity formed the meaning of equine death and thus influenced the related practices, including dietary restrictions, uncleanness of the skinner, and burying the horse. (Leinonen, *Työkaverista* .)

The conflict between rationality and emotion can be seen in the case of shelter workers who have to euthanize animals as part of their work (Arluke and Sanders, 86-100). In Arluke's studies, the workers used various emotional strategies to be able to justify the emotionally difficult tasks they had to carry out. For instance, the workers justified euthanizing sick or old animals on welfare grounds and tried to make the actual moment of death as peaceful and painless for the animal as possible. An analogous situation is described by John Law in the context of veterinarians euthanizing animals: if the animal could no longer have a good life, it would be given as good a death as possible. Also, when performing euthanasia on an animal, the actual interaction with the animal itself brings a moral and emotional dimension to the task at hand. For shelter workers, the most challenging cases were those where the worker felt that the animal knew what was going to happen, and expressed its agony openly or was exceptionally calm and cooperative. The workers also accused animal owners of irresponsibility and of causing the death of the animal in the first place, which can be compared to horse owners' tendency to attribute bad behavior to the horse's past history or other people's handling of the horse (Birke et al.). Animal welfare is a thoroughly moral issue in contemporary society, and a failure in the care of one's own beloved animal can be a difficult issue to face, as well as a social disaster. Thus, the purpose of such a strategy is to deal with the guilt and shame associated with a failure. The ultimate case of such a failure is obviously the death of the animal.

When animals and their needs are interpreted, they are often anthropomorphized, i.e. compared to humans in their perceptions, actions, and intentions, and in the ways in which they are handled and cared for (Daston and Mitman 2). In pet-keeping, practices such as treating animals with complex medical treatments and burying them in pet cemeteries can be interpreted as anthropomorphism (Serpell). The tendency to anthropomorphize the behavior of pets has been considered a form of faulty reasoning and a welfare risk for animals, on the grounds that it does not take into consideration the species-specific needs and abilities of the animals (Tyler). Anthropomorphism can, however, also be investigated as a method of increasing mutual understanding between humans and animals. According to Buller and Morris, anthropomorphism "offers a conceptual bridging point that brings humans and animals together". According to Bekoff, "being anthropomorphic is a linguistic tool to make the thoughts and feelings of other animals accessible to humans" (123). Bekoff further argues that anthropomorphism

is a necessity, for without it our interpretations of animal feelings and behavior would be sterile and dull, and we would be losing important information (Bekoff 123-125).

Understanding animals empathetically and verbalizing their perceived point of view can also be based on the idea of the animal subject as being distinct from the human (Tyler). This comes close to the contemporary inclination to naturalize or hyper-animalize animals (Buller and Morris), emphasizing, when interpreting the actions of individual animals, their natural and biological qualities, such as the instincts involved. Naturalizing animals stems from both the recent increase in scientific knowledge and also the romantic view of nature characteristic of modern Western societies (Franklin). In studies of horse owners made by Birke, the naturalizing and anthropomorphizing of horses emerge as dualistic interpretations of the animals. On the one hand, the horse is seen as an “other,” an instinct-driven animal interpreted through scientific discourse. On the other hand, the horse is perceived as a companion, a human-like subject, who makes choices and wants the same kind of things as humans.

Interviews and written narratives as research data. Cultural conceptions of animals can be analyzed as commonly shared discourses that define what is considered morally acceptable or unacceptable, valued, rejected, or simply taken for granted. Similarly, the established practices of keeping animals and caring for them can be understood as part of the discourses that have produced them. (Jokinen et al. 19, 238-239) In this paper, the investigations of the death of the horse are studied in the contexts of the personal experiences of people involved with horses at different times.

The research data for this paper consists of written narratives from a writing contest¹ and two sets of interviews conducted in Finland between 1995 and 2007. The writing contest material comes from a collection of narratives called *Collection of horse narratives (Hevostarinakeruu)*, from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society.² The horse narrative material was collected in 2003 by organizing a writing contest campaign that was announced in Finnish newspapers and horse magazines. People were asked to write about their experiences of horses “in the old days,” today, and in professional practice. The archive received 1400 pages of narratives from 107 women and 38 men, and also an interview with one woman. For this article, 35 narratives have been analyzed, of which 23 were produced by women and 12 by men, all of whom were born between 1913 and 1988. The criterion for choosing these narratives was that their focus was on the narrators’ own experiences and emotions in the context of actual events, rather than of general accounts of common practices.

The first set of interviews consists of ten thematic interviews with Finnish draft and trotting horse owners. The interviewees were all male, born between 1919 and 1951. They had learned their horsemanship skills “the traditional way” at home from their male relatives, using draft horses. Four of the interviewees were professional trainers, breeders, horse loggers, and drivers. Three were retired farmers and forestry workers, and one of them had also been a farrier. The rest had made their living in other occupations but had kept horses all the time. All of the interviewees had grown up on farms, except for one. All of them had experience of farming and forestry work with horses. The interviews were conducted between 1995 and 2004 in a wide variety of locations throughout Finland.

Another set of interviews used for this article consists of nine thematic interviews with Finnish riding horse owners. These interviewees were all female, because riding is predominantly a female activity in Finland, as more than 90 per cent of riders are women or young girls (SRL). The ages of the interviewees varied between 20 and 60 years, they all owned at least one riding horse, and some of them also had other roles as competitors, riding instructors, trainers, breeders or yard owners. The interviewees were asked about their background and present practices in keeping horses and the motivations for it, the role of animals in their lives, and their conceptions of horse keeping and animal welfare. The interviews were conducted in Eastern Finland in 2007.

The interviewees were chosen using snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint): the first informants were chosen for the first set of interviews from the Finnish Working Horse Society and for the latter set from the web pages of local stables. Every interviewee was asked to give several names for further interviews. These interviewees were chosen according to the needs of the research, targeting a small but informative group of informants (Flyvbjerg). The interviews for both sets were recorded and transcribed. Then the interviews and the written narratives were analyzed thematically using content analysis (Tuomi and Sarajärvi). The themes used in this article relate to human-horse relations, the use of the horse, conceptions of equine welfare and the practices and conceptions concerning the death of the horse. The interviews and written narratives were coded using phrases, sentences, or paragraphs as units for analysis (Eskola and Suoranta). These units referred to the themes as descriptions of everyday practices, personal experiences, or other anecdotes, which were often explained or argued for in some way.

The development of human-horse relations in Finland. In this section, the role of the horse in society will be analyzed both in the context of the agrarian draft horse from the 19th to the 20th century and also in the context of the contemporary riding horse. Agrarian here refers to the time when horses were necessary for the subsistence of an industrializing agrarian society in Finland, between the 1860s and the 1950s-1960s.

Human-animal relationships in Western societies are often presented as anthropocentric and utilitarian, counter to those in non-Western societies, which are characterized as ecocentric and reciprocal. These views have underestimated the diversity and locality of Western traditions (Morris 2-5; Theodossopoulos 15, 16). When investigating the human-horse relationship in Scandinavia and the changes that have occurred in it over the last five to six generations, one has to consider the locality and the mindset of the agrarian society compared to the globalized present day riding culture. Farming has a profound effect on the ways people relate to the natural world and especially to animals. Farmers care for, train, and protect their animals, and in return they expect them to work for them, to be useful. Christian influences also promote a certain order or hierarchy in their mindset where animals are lower than humans, although care and responsibility for animals are considered important. Finnish agrarian society consisted of small-scale farms, and because the wellbeing of the family was dependent on the wellbeing of the horse and cattle, these received the best possible care in terms of the knowledge that people had (Ylimaunu 115, 121; Suutala 203; Leinonen, *Työkaverista* 3; Talve 69-70).

In the 19th century, farming society horses were mainly used for travelling and small-scale farm work. Towards the end of the century, however, self-sufficient farm work started to intensify, with heavier farming equipment and new techniques. Another new element was the growing importance of the monetary economy introduced by logging. Horses were given heavier equipment and their work increased, but they were poorly adapted to this demanding workload. Feeding was inadequate, the feed was of poor quality, and the horses were too small for hard work. National breeding experiments were not successful amongst the farmers, and thus selective breeding in the 19th century was almost non-existent in remote villages. All the horses of a village were put out to pasture in the forest for the summer, and they bred there freely. Nevertheless, horses were in close proximity to people because of their shared housing in winter and long working days on the logging sites. People tried to find better ways of caring for their horses, and they received information through the national and local farming organizations and associations, which arranged courses and published newsletters. (Leinonen, *Työkaverista*).

The 20th century agrarian conception of the horse was very anthropocentric. The horse was considered an animal dependent on humans and close to humans. For example, one informant spoke about it as an animal that had been “created as a servant for humans” (A), but it is more commonly referred to as a friend and a workmate. This implies that the horse is an integral part of culture and everyday life, and it has indeed been created or bred for work. What it also implies is that the horse is subordinate to the human. A “workmate” is a slightly more equal concept used for a work horse, and emphasizes the bond felt when working with a trained animal. The horse was not, however, merely connected with work. The interviewees also call the horse “a creature of nature” (A, B), and it is thought that humans had “to take care of these creatures for they are helpless when ill-treated” (A). And because horses are creatures of nature they also “like to be talked to and stroked” (B). Nevertheless, horses were an important part of the farming society, where they had their own place and duties.

In the 1950s farming community, the horse was a necessity and “it meant everything” (D). For example, it was called “the only vehicle and all-round tool” (C). After the war, horses were needed for sustenance and rebuilding. They were valuable, and they were not destroyed as long as they could stand on their feet. Many horses were worn out, and were therefore sore and aggressive. Communicating this to the men, who were tired, financially poor, and traumatized by war, did not help but easily resulted in the animal being shouted at and beaten. According to the narratives, horse handling was violent especially on the logging sites, for men were eager to make money and the wellbeing of an animal was not their main concern. Some horses were badly abused and killed through overwork and ignorant treatment, as described in the following extract:

Some savage masters loaded so many logs on the sleigh that neither the will nor the strength of the horse was enough to move it. Then some savages started beating the helpless horse with a pole. I personally witnessed how an owner beat his horse so badly that it fell in the snow. The furious man kept beating the animal, which was making pitiful sounds. Then my friend took his axe, went over to the savage, and said: Unless you stop beating the horse I will smash your head with my axe. The savage man looked murderously at my friend and mumbled: “That devil is disobedient.” We watched the situation. The savage man stopped beating the animal and it stood up. He made the load smaller and the badly beaten horse started pulling the load.

Death released some badly beaten horses from their pains. They died at night in the stables. In the miserable conditions some horses took sick. They looked depressed and were coughing.—The horse was usually medicated by pouring half a bottle of moonshine down its throat and then the owner went logging with it. Sometimes a feverish horse like this died in the woods, much to the annoyance of its owner. (M)

Some relationships were longer-lived, some were briefer. Some men changed horses frequently. They would buy them from markets, Gypsies, and neighbors, and soon sell them again or change them for a better ones. Some horse dealers made a profit on logging horses. They would buy a horse cheap after the logging operations in the spring, and sell it again in the fall for a better price. If it was a “good horse,” the interviewees would use it 5-15 years for hard work, and then sell it, or use it for lighter work, keeping the horse until its death. Thus the relationship might be short-lived, but when working fulltime, the man and the horse spent many hours together each day, and the horse lived in a stable at home or at the logging site.

In the equestrian culture of the 2000s, many aspects of the agrarian conceptions of the horse have been retained, but there are also new views and discourses that delineate the relationship to the horse. One of them consists of an emphasis on the horse as a biological animal and as part of nature. Thus, the moral commitment of the owner to her horse is tied to the naturalized idea of the horse. One of the riding horse owners states that “it is still an animal, so you should treat it more like an animal than a human” (K). Another interviewee sees that horses were “more like horses” in the 1980s, and that contemporary “urban horse owners are more alienated from horseness and nature” (I). The mental capacities of the horse are referred to by describing the horse as an active subject, “a thinking animal” (E), as defined by one interviewee. Thus, the horse is compared to humans by emphasizing its cognitive abilities and a subjective viewpoint on its life. This can be interpreted as an anthropomorphic account, but it can also refer to an understanding of the horse as a conscious subject and an animal distinct from humans. This discourse is opposed to the idea of the horse as a near-machine, as in the following citation from a riding horse owner: “an animal that is very badly planned” (I).

What has changed most in the role of the horse is the everyday relationship between the horse and its owner. The ways in which the horse’s life is organized and the daily routines of the horse and the owner affect this relationship. Hence, the transformation of

the everyday has important implications for the animal itself, its welfare, and ultimately its death. In the contemporary riding horse culture, the purpose of the horse is to provide companionship and athletic opportunities for to the owner. Some riding horses live at the owner's own stables at home, whereas many are kept at livery stables, where the owner pays for the care of the horse and usually simply visits the animal for the purpose of riding. These practices also vary in intensity, with some owners spending nearly all their leisure time with the horse, even if it does not live at the owner's home yard. Thus, some interviewees cannot imagine life without their horse, since it has become part of their everyday routine to take care of the horse and to ride: "I could not be without [them], it is like another world for me and another way to relax, so that I communicate my own stuff with them" (E).

For some owners, the opportunity to compete in riding is the prime motivation for keeping a horse. This kind of relationship with horses cannot, however, be described as purely non-emotional or instrumental. For an amateur rider who keeps just one or two horses, these may be close companions in the intensive training and competition life. As one show-jumping enthusiast emphasizes, "you respect them, they are our friends" (F). The abuse of horses in competitions is also reported in the interviews, which can be interpreted in the context of this emotional relationship. When the rider does not succeed in competitions, the horse may be blamed for it. This is somewhat analogous to what happens in human friendships where both parties are considered equal — thus, relating to the animal emotionally comes very close to anthropomorphizing the animal.

All the informants emphasized the need to treat horses well. For the male interviewees, the horse was a workmate and a creature of nature that was helpless if abused. Hence, humans had a moral responsibility to take care of their horses. Another reason for grooming and feeding the horse well was because the horse "tells about its master" (A). In other words, in the 1940s and 1950s a happily moving, fat horse not only looked good but was also an indicator to the community that the owner was a skilled horseman. In addition, these men felt that their horses liked being talked to and patted. In other words, when taking care of their horses the men took the horse's point of view into consideration, and the aesthetic side also signaled the morals and skills of the horseman to his community.

When contemporary riding-horse owners seek the horse's point of view, they talk about the "happiness" or "enjoyment" of the horse as a justification for certain practices. They argue that the horse "enjoys," e.g. being on the pasture, or hacking out, because it "is fun for the horse" (F). One interviewee wonders: "Why do things which the horse doesn't

enjoy!” (E). Sometimes, the perceived equine point of view becomes an important factor influencing the decision-making of the horse owner. It may be verbalized anthropomorphically, but in many cases the aim of the owner is to understand the needs and feelings of the horse as an animal different from humans. One interviewee explains how the happiness of the horse is connected with the question of horse welfare: “The cornerstone of a good equine life is ... that it lives in an atmosphere of trust and security ... and when it is calm, when it is not stressed, it prospers” (H).

Generally speaking, the transformation in horse keeping has clearly changed the way horses are perceived in everyday life, where they live and interact with humans. However, despite these changes, many aspects are shared between the different generations and contexts of horse keeping. The essential combination of emotional and instrumental relationship to the animal and the importance of communicating with the animal and of seeking its point of view in pursuit of its care and welfare can be seen in both contexts. What is new is the way in which owners naturalize the horse and try to understand it as an animal distinct from humans. In addition, the decision-making process concerning equine care and welfare is more public and reflective.

Practices of horse slaughter, burials and flesh-eating. In the 19th century, adult horses usually died of old age, poor care, or too much work. The work horse of the agrarian era was used until it was unable to perform its duties anymore. Horses that were killed were usually old, skinny, almost toothless, and could barely stand up. There were some exceptions, however, because free breeding on the summer pastures resulted in more foals than could be supported. Thus, fillies were usually killed, as were the foals that were born in the fall. Colts were valued, and could be sold. (Leinonen, *Työkaverista*)

Historically, it was not a common practice to eat horse meat in Finland until the 20th century, even though horses were sacrificed and ritualistically eaten in the pre-Christian era. In the 19th century, a dead horse was considered unclean, and it was not usually killed by its owner but by a local skinner. The skimmers were held in contempt and they were not allowed to eat at the same table with others, while the dishes that they used were destroyed. This ritual uncleanness affected the position of the skinner in the agrarian society. Touching unclean horse carcasses placed the skimmers in their own distinctive place on the margins of society (Douglas). The skinner killed the horse by stunning it with a blow to the forehead with the back of an axe or a poleaxe (cf. Higgin et al.) and then cutting the throat open. After that, he skinned the horse and buried the carcass. He took the skin, which was valuable in making boots and other leather goods.

(Leinonen, *Työkaverista*; Haavikko; Lehikoinen.) The flesh was not eaten, for that would have been considered a sin, as we can see from this quotation from 1915.

My horse is buried in full regalia, collar around its neck, bridle in its mouth, saddle on its back. This is the way my horse is always buried. As God has created it to pull, no one eats its flesh. It is a sin even to skin it.
(N)

The prohibition against eating horse flesh and considering the horse carcass unclean are probably due to both folk beliefs and Christian traditions. In Finnish folk tales the horse was born in the sacred grove where the ancestors lived. Thus, the horse was a mediator between two worlds: the living and the dead. Before the arrival of Christianity, horses were sacrificed, and bits and other horse-related items have been found in Iron Age graves, usually in men's graves, but also in women's. In Scandinavia during the Viking and Iron Ages, horses were thought to take the dead to the afterlife, being the helping spirits of shamans as well as valuable personal property (Shenk 5). Christianity reached Finland in the 12th century and introduced new practices concerning the horse. The Catholic Church wanted to draw a line between Christians and the pagans who ate horse meat, and it had abjured horse meat from the diet in the 8th century, thus drawing a line between the profane and the sacred. It was also believed that pure animals suitable for food had cloven hoofs and ruminated, and that God gave the horse to humans as a servant and therefore it could not be eaten. (Sherman 57; Douglas 101) The reluctance to slaughter horses for food has prevailed to some extent in many Western countries (Thompson 25; Vialles 120).

In the 20th century attitudes changed and horse carcasses were no longer considered unclean. Horses were shot, but they were still buried on the farms, not eaten. Old, injured, and sick horses were, however, often sold on at market, and this was seen as cruel by the emerging animal protection movement. At the turn of the 20th century, animal advocates and agricultural schools tried to promote the use of horse flesh for human consumption (Nieminen; Leinonen, *Työkaverista*). The purpose of this was to encourage the slaughtering of old and injured horses in order to prevent further suffering. At the time, the idea was still too controversial and the activity did not last long.

During the Second World War, altogether 22,000 Finnish horses were killed or lost (Waris). Delivering food to the front lines was not always possible, and sometimes horses were killed for food. Horse meat was sometimes a welcome addition to the one-

sided diet of the soldiers, but usually it was a “necessary evil” that took some getting used to by the men. Men would rather eat Russian horses, and horsemen did not eat a horse they had known (Leinonen, “Finnish Narratives”). Sometimes horses were even buried on the battlefield (Ojala). Dying horses were symbolically seen as war heroes, like the men. “Heroes” and “veterans” were words often used of war horses as well. By speaking of the horse as a hero or veteran “doing its duty in defending the country” (O), people justified their actions and explained their guilt about making horses suffer. It was difficult for people to think of the pain, fear, and agony that horses felt during the war. In harsh conditions horses became very important to many soldiers; they shared the same traumatic experiences and men felt solidarity, affection, respect, guilt, gratitude, and appreciation for the animal (Leinonen “Finnish Narratives”).

After the Second World War, slaughterhouses paid good money for horses, and slaughtering began to become more popular. More and more slaughterhouses were set up, following developments elsewhere in the Western world (Vialles 17, Burt 122). Thus the common way to deal with a horse that was not fit for work was to take it to the slaughterhouse. There were, however, still those who considered it unethical to sell the old horse to be slaughtered, and rather shot and buried it on the farm. Some even called these places burial grounds, and pets, such as dogs and cats, were sometimes buried there, too. In the 1950s and 1960s, a neighbor or a relative might come to take the horse to be butchered, and on these occasions the owner of the horse would leave the farm. This tells about the emotional bond that people had with their horses, and it can also refer to the old taboo of the unclean carcass and the custom of letting someone else kill the horse. (Leinonen, *Työkaverista*). Nevertheless, many owners had to sell the horse to be butchered even though they would have preferred to bury the horse on the farm. The draft horse was considered a faithful servant until the end and even beyond, as we can read in the following.

Nisse was put into the butcher’s truck just like Vappu because we could not afford to give either of them a peaceful final resting place at our home farm, even though we had once planned to do so. Our family needed the money, and Karjapohjola (slaughterhouse) paid good money for an old horse. — Maybe Vappu did not expect to have peace after death. And it was helping the family for the last time as the money from its flesh was used for the good of the family. (P)

Today, equine death raises several practical questions that the owner of the horse has to solve: first, whether the horse is to be killed or not; second, how the killing will be carried out; and third, what to do with the carcass. There are basically two ways of killing a horse in contemporary Finland: a mechanical one and a medical one (cf. Marvin 16). The horse can be euthanized with an injection given by the vet, or it can be slaughtered at an abattoir or at home, in which case the meat cannot be consumed by humans. After Finland joined the EU in 1995, the prices for horse meat fell, which in turn led to a decline in slaughterhouses accepting horses. There is no tradition of horse rescue charities in Finland, and unfit and unwanted horses are in many cases sold on, just as they were a hundred years ago. This welfare problem has been discussed amongst the equine industry and relevant organizations, and they have sought solutions in improving the slaughtering options (Suomen Hippos, *Hyvinvoiva hevonen*). The questions of equine death, slaughtering, and euthanasia seem, however, to be controversial amongst horse owners.

If the horse is euthanized, there are four ways of getting rid of the carcass. It is possible to take it to the dump, but horse carcasses are now considered risk waste and have to be covered immediately (Iinatti). Burying the horse on the farm is strictly limited to certain conditions due to environmental regulations, e.g. whether the farm is in a groundwater area or not (Suomen Hippos, *Hyvinvoiva hevonen*). Thus, a common practice is to have the carcass taken to a carcass elimination plant. As many owners wish to have a place where they can remember their horses and take flowers to their graves, it is now possible to have horses buried in pet cemeteries or cremated at a pet crematorium.

Sometimes the death of a horse is caused by an accident or illness. For example, in the 1950s an interviewee's horse died at a logging site. The horse was going downhill with a load, fell, hit its shoulder on a tree stump, and had to be shot in front of its load. In another case, in a village in Lapland, a horse was killed after sinking into a lake and freezing. Contemporary horses may die in traffic accidents, as described in one of the interviews. Other causes of death mentioned include slipping or falling in the paddock and breaking a leg. Incidents of fatal illness such as colic and Cushing's disease are also mentioned. These examples illustrate how the risks for horses have changed along with the practices of horse keeping.

Grief, guilt and hard decisions. The practical questions of equine death are tied both to ethical issues and also to the emotional relationship to the animal. Often the situation emerges unexpectedly, but sometimes there is more time for the owner to be prepared for the loss. The grief caused by the loss of a horse is described in the data in many ways.

In the agrarian era, the death of a horse was grieved over by the whole family. Men especially talked openly about the grief of losing a horse. This is because the man-horse bond remained central in Finnish horse culture until recent decades, and grieving over a horse was “allowed” for men in agrarian society. Grief over a dead horse was particularly strong if the horse had been the man’s personal favorite. One interviewee said that the only time he had shed tears over a horse was when his good trotter was killed suddenly at the races.

Similarly, the death of a riding horse is openly mourned to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to recount the incident to the researcher. Often even the thought of losing the horse is hard, as when the horse is ill for a long time with no certainty of its recovery. The sudden death of a horse is grieved over for a long time afterwards, as described by the interviewee whose horse had been euthanized because of a broken leg. She had preserved the broken bones, as they helped her remember that euthanasia had been inevitable:

There was nothing you could do about it. Actually, I have the bones over there in a basket in the closet, I cooked them so that... That’s another way of dealing with your grief, I cooked the front legs ... but when you hold the coronal bone in your hand and it’s, it’s just a handful of pieces, you know for sure that you made the right choice, that you didn’t try whether it could have been saved by an operation. (I)

Sometimes talking about the death of a horse was difficult for the interviewees, especially if the incident had been very recent. One interviewee still remembered that the vet had talked inappropriately about the dead horse, referring to it as “the carcass: They must have some respect” (F). Another interviewee felt that her horse had fallen ill and had to be euthanized due to incorrect feeding, and she blamed the livery stable for it. This reflects the tendency to attribute problems to external conditions as a strategy to avoid guilt (Birke et al.).

The question about whether to continue the life of a horse or not may be faced by the owner at any stage during the horse’s lifetime, if the horse has an incurable injury or an ailment or a behavioral problem that prevents its use permanently. The owner may also consider euthanizing the horse if she can no longer keep the animal, or the horse does not succeed in competitions in the way it was expected to. When the horse grows old, the owner has to decide whether it will be allowed to live until it dies naturally, or

whether it will be euthanized while it is still fit and well. In the data, euthanasia is mainly discussed in the context of equine welfare. Euthanizing horses is seen as part of taking care of the animal, and thus a moral issue. The interviewees generally believe that horses should not be allowed to live too long when they are sick, injured, or simply too old and weak. As one interviewee puts it: “you have to look at the animal. When its time has come, unfortunately, you just have to let it go” (G). She stresses that the decision is for the owner to make. Another interviewee mentions that she wants to have a nice memory of her horse as it has been while it is still “glossy and lovely” (E). If the animal is suffering, it is considered better if it “can get out”:

people keep horses until they are too old all too easily; they get so weak, and the horses are sick because they are old and weak. People just don't want to put them down, 'cause they are so used to seeing them at the yard. It is, it is wrong. (L)

Among the arguments in favor of euthanasia is the horse's own subjective experience. One interviewee claims that it is not important for the horse itself how many years it is still going to live. This kind of argumentation is similar to the emotional strategies used by shelter workers (Arluke and Sanders). When the animal's point of view is interpreted in a way that supports the owner's actions, any feelings of guilt over killing the animal are avoided. On the other hand, there are owners who are not ready to euthanize a horse even if it is sick, claiming that the horse “must be given the value of staying alive, if it is, if the horse is not hurt” (L). Especially euthanizing a healthy animal is not considered appropriate. These owners point out that the horse sometimes “deserves to be retired” (E) after working for humans for a long time. In this discourse the horse is compared to humans, but there is also an empathetic tendency to identify with the animal itself. Behind it lies the moral question of preserving life whenever possible, but paradoxically, there is a risk of guilt in case the animal is in pain after all.

One of the men interviewed said that he had buried only his best trotter at the home farm, and taken the others to the slaughterhouse. This dualism can also be found in the context of contemporary riding horses. If they do not die suddenly, the question of euthanasia performed by the vet at home versus slaughtering at the slaughterhouse has to be faced when the decision about ending the horse's life has been made. The question about slaughtering horses divides horse owners, but the divide is not always about whether slaughtering is acceptable or not. The main issue is the close emotional relationship to the owner's own horse, which differentiates this animal from others of its kind. As has been the case during wartime, people do not always want to eat the

horse they have known. Thus the moral principles of treating animals are contextually defined, when the familiar horse is not treated in the same way as horses in general.

For ethical and ecological reasons, slaughtering horses is sometimes considered more ethical than selling them cheap or giving them away for free. Many of the interviewees mention the benefits of having horses slaughtered, e.g. a reduction in the amount of imported horse meat, which has been associated with animal welfare problems. In consequence, some owners prefer slaughtering, as can be seen in these two citations: “I don’t want the horse to be in a hole somewhere, because when it’s dead it’s meat” (I); “I would probably take him to the slaughterhouse, because it’s sensible recycling” (J). In these views, slaughtering horses is linked to the naturalizing discourse by defining animals ultimately as organic matter.

On the other hand, statements against slaughtering horses are many, as are the experiences of burying horses. Being euthanized by the vet and buried at home is regarded as mentally easier for the horse itself. Several interviewees do not consider slaughtering an option. One interviewee especially mentions that she has nothing against eating horse meat, but she would still have her horse buried, as she had done before, thus reflecting the above-mentioned attitude towards familiar horses. In spite of the restrictions, many owners do have the possibility of having their horse buried in the stable yard. If the horse is kept at a livery stable, the yard owner sometimes helps by offering to bury the horse on the property. This is considered very good service for the clients and also strengthens the trust between the client and the yard owner. As the two have taken care of the horse together during its lifetime, it is seen as morally appropriate by the yard owner to help out when the horse’s life comes to an end.

The yard owner may also help by taking the horse to the slaughterhouse as “there are many who cannot take their own horse there” (I). In this way the responsibility for the death of the animal is handed over from the owner to a professional whose relationship to the animal is distant (Marvin 17). One interviewee, a yard owner, tells about precisely this:

these clients’ horses that we’ve had and the owner wanted them to be put down, we have handled this so that we take them all the way to the slaughterhouse, so that the owner does not have to see the business. (G)

In Finland, slaughtering horses is not industrial in the same way as it is for agricultural animals. Each case is dealt with separately, thus dealing with the anonymity and many

welfare problems inherent in industrial slaughter (see Vialles 31; Calvo) are not discussed in the context of horse slaughter. For some riding horse owners, however, slaughtering a horse is clearly an emotional issue. This seems to reflect a way of seeing the relationship with the horse as emotional and moral despite the instrumental value of the animal. One of the more experienced owners links the close relationship with a horse with a morally responsible way of dealing with its death: “the people who also experience the horse emotionally, how can they manage the thought that they have loaded the horse into the slaughter transport truck” (H). Consequently, euthanasia performed by the vet is seen as a favor for a faithful friend: “We had 22 years together. So I thought it would not have been the way I think of the world, if I had led her to the animal transport truck and she had gone to the slaughterhouse and someone had eaten her” (H).

One of the strongest arguments against slaughtering is found in the viewpoint of the horse, and especially in the context of being transported to the slaughterhouse, a place unknown to the animal (Marvin 16). According to one interviewee, being euthanized by the veterinarian is easier for the animal because it cannot realize what is happening. The horse is taken out of the stable, it is in familiar surroundings, it sees the other horses and a trusted handler, and then it is all over. In contrast, taking the horse into the strange surroundings of an abattoir frightens the animal and causes stress. This stress is transferred to the meat as stress hormones; here the moral and empathetic argument is strengthened by using an instrumental argument. The example illustrates the ways of relating to equine death more generally: although it has been and still is primarily an emotional and ethical issue, the instrumental meanings attached to it are inseparable from the emotional and ethical aspects.

Conclusions. In this paper, we have discussed the changing practices and conceptions of equine death, from the agrarian work horse era to contemporary riding horse culture. It was our hypothesis that the ways of relating to equine death have changed through modernization. According to our research, there have obviously been changes, but the unchanged aspects can be found in the emotional meanings attached to the horse and the emphasis on seeking the animal’s own point of view.

As an emotional relationship to horses is not a new phenomenon, there has been a restructuring of the contexts and manifestations of emotional and instrumental meanings attached to the horse. In the agrarian era, it was thought that humans have a moral duty to treat horses well. Good horsemen were socially respected. They disciplined and worked their horses hard but also gave them thanks with a moment’s

rest, kind words, and patting. Their goal was to get the work done and keep the horse and equipment fit to perform, but they also respected the needs and experiences of the horse, their fellow worker. Many of the horses were worn-out and angry in the 1940s and 1950s, but as they were indispensable they had to be used for work. In contemporary equestrian culture the animal may be anthropomorphized or naturalized, but there is also a tendency to understand the horse empathetically as an individual animal.

The emotional relationship with the animal, including grief, guilt, and moral questions, has direct implications for how it is cared for, including the decisions involving the ending of its life. Historically, the emotional and ethical aspects seem to be strong, but the instrumental conceptions have varied according to contextual conditions and practices. What is new in contemporary horse keeping compared to the agrarian era is that the decisions are more individual and therefore openly reflected on and argued for. The understanding of what is the right way to deal with equine death is tied to the perception of the horse's own point of view about its own welfare. It seems that the need to reflect on the animal's viewpoint demarcates the contemporary culture from the agrarian one, placing the former firmly within the realms of modern society.

In coping with and managing equine death, the owner of the horse has to solve two main questions. First, whether it is best for the horse to be killed or to be allowed to continue its life. Second, if the horse is to be killed, which method is the most appropriate – and most humane. The emotional and instrumental meanings attached to the animal are embedded in these two questions. The ways in which slaughtering and euthanasia are viewed today reflect the historical processes and practices of different times and material contexts. The acceptability of slaughtering horses bears the economic necessity of the post-war era to use and recycle everything possible. Ethical and ecological reasons are presently used as justifications for the practice of slaughtering horses. There have, however, been tendencies at different times to avoid slaughtering or eating horses with which the owner has had an emotional relationship. Similarly, the wish to bury horses is not a product of contemporary companion animal culture but a historical tradition that is – and may always have been – tied to the emotional relationship with the horse as a workmate and as the significant other. These horses are often euthanized at the yard, which is justified contextually by various strategies such as emphasizing the animal's own point of view. Finally, the practice of keeping old and weak horses alive in the name of retirement, can be interpreted as analogous to dealing

with old age in human companionships but also as a new way of building relationships with animals in a society that is not dependent on horses economically.

The arguments for various solutions in dealing with equine death can be interpreted as strategies to avoid guilt over the death and suffering of the animal. They can also be understood as manifestations of the emotional burden involved in the responsibility of killing an animal to which the owner is closely attached. In promoting a certain way of dealing with equine death, policy-makers, animal advocates, and the equine industry would benefit from understanding the cultural meanings and historical practices of equine death. As the emotional, moral and instrumental questions attached to euthanasia and slaughtering are not homogenous and straightforward, a simple solution is not possible. Considering the emotional ties that people have to animals, the ethical and cultural aspects should be foremost in providing opportunities for individual decisions.

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Notes

1. Writing competitions organized by the Finnish Literature Society are an old and established method used to gather traditional knowledge from lay people.
2. The Finnish Literature Society is a research institute and cultural organization and a publishing house founded in 1831 for the study and promotion of Finnish language and folk culture. The Folklore Archives collect oral tradition, personal narratives and memories.
3. Informants are identified by alphabetical letters, the key to which can be found in the appended List of Informants Cited.

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Appendix: List of informants cited

- A: male, b. 1924, Northern Finland
 B: male, b. 1930, Southern Finland
 C: male, b. 1930, Western Finland

D: male, b. 1919, Western Finland

E: female, aged 33, Eastern Finland

F: female, aged 44, Eastern Finland

G: female, aged 43, Eastern Finland

H: female, aged 60, Eastern Finland

I: female, aged 40, Eastern Finland

J: female, aged 23, Eastern Finland

K: female, aged 22, Eastern Finland

L: female, aged 20, Eastern Finland

M: SKS KRA. HT 94–102. 2003. Male, b. 1930, Western Finland. References to the archive material are made in the following way: SKS stands for Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura (Finnish Literature Society), KRA stands for Kansanrunousarkisto (Folklore Archives), HT stands for Hevostarina (Horse Story) collection, numbers 94–102 stand for the page numbers of the collection, to ensure the anonymity of the narrator, and 2003 is the year in which the narratives were collected.

N: SKS KRA. Paulaharju, Samuli 15594. 1915. Female, aged 47, Eastern Finland. Paulaharju, Samuli is the name of the collector of the information, 15594 stands for the archive number of the information and 1915 is the year in which the information was collected. This citation is from the Ethnology Collection of the Finnish Literature Society.

O: SKS KRA. HT 492–500. 2003: Male, b. 1939, Southern Finland.

P: SKS KRA. HT 192-266. 2003: Male, b. 1935, Western Finland.