Introduction: Magic in a Religious Borderland

This book assesses the mutual dependence of lived religion, magic, and superstition in ‘Long Reformation’ Finland. I examine the fluid experiences of faith, magic, and superstition in an area where local communities were constantly influenced by the political and ideological needs of the emerging state, expansionist politics, and, at times, foreign military threats. As such an area, Finland was in no way unique in the early modern period, but I hope that the clarity of the different factors at play in this context will help make their interdependency clear in other areas too.

Finland as a Cultural Geographic Area, and Its Relevance for Historical Study

Early modern Finland is rarely a focus of attention in the study of European history, but it certainly has a place in the context of northern European religious and political culture. During the early modern period, Finland was a part of Sweden, a Lutheran heartland and an aspiring great power. As a part of Sweden, Finland was involved in major developments in early modern Europe, from the development of contemporary controversial theology to the Polish Counter-Reformation and the Thirty Years War. At the same time, Finland was also a borderland between western and eastern cultures, both politically and religiously. Studying faith, magic, and superstition in this context enables us to identify how the interdependency of these three concepts changed according to the social and political circumstances of the time.

The modern state of Finland we see on the maps of Europe is not the same as Finland of the early modern era. Indeed, in current historiography, when everyone seeks to avoid methodological nationalism,
using terms like ‘Finland’ or ‘Finnish’ to refer to periods before 1809 has sometimes been labelled anachronistic. I am fully aware of the problems involved in studying concepts that at the time did not exist, but, for lack of a better term (and to avoid creating a new nationalist result in trying to avoid one), I shall refer to the place that later happened to become Finland as Finland, and the people who lived there, Finnish (unless a finer gradation seems more relevant to the point I am trying to make). While potentially problematic, this position is not wholly wrong. Whether Finland could be said to have been a country or an area of its own during the early modern period depends on one’s approach. Finland – except for the province of Kexholm in Karelia – had not been occupied or conquered by Sweden; rather, it had been included as part of Sweden when the country first organized its government and taxation. Finns usually considered themselves to be self-evidently loyal subjects of the Swedish King and realm. In one sense, Finland was simply a collection of Swedish governmental provinces on the eastern side of the Gulf of Bothnia. At other times, however, these provinces had a special role and a special place in the realm and its politics, economy, and cultural development, and the provinces were thought of as belonging together. Of course, contemporaries emphasized whichever approach they felt most advantageous to their aims in the situation.

Historical Finland was geographically defined according to three factors: the border between Russia and Sweden, the struggle for access to the Arctic Ocean among Sweden, Denmark, and Russia, and the geographical divisions of government, jurisdiction, and church life within the realm of Sweden. The idea that the provinces east of the Gulf of Bothnia belonged together and formed a place called Finland was – to a great extent – based on language, although Finnish was spoken on both sides of the Gulf of Bothnia and in various areas of Russian Karelia and Ingria. Government officials who were placed in Finland were often (but not always) required to gain a working knowledge of the language. Laws and orders were translated into Finnish, and church liturgies and sermons had to be rewritten in Finnish. All materials produced by the local authorities for the purposes of control by the central authorities – like court records, tax records, and communion books – were, of course drawn up in Swedish.

The geographical proximity of the provinces embraced by the northern shores of the Baltic Sea made governmental unity practical, and most of the mid-level state bureaucracy used the Gulf of Bothnia as a main geographical boundary. When Sweden established a system of courts of appeal, one was established in Turku in 1623, and ‘Finland’