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POLITICAL CENTRES OR NODAL POINTS IN TRADE NETWORKS?

Estonian hillforts before and after the thirteenth-century conquest

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In medieval Europe, a new geographical term and cultural concept – Livonia – started to emerge right after the Christian conquest of the Eastern Baltic in the thirteenth century. However, it took some time before the name evolved from denoting only certain districts in present-day Latvia into a concept that embraced more or less all the territory of present-day Estonia and Latvia (Tamm 2011). The gradual development of the name was partly defined by political conditions – northern Estonia was the subject of the Danish crown, while the political power over the rest of present-day Estonia and Latvia was divided between several bishoprics and the local branch of the Teutonic Order. However, coastal Estonia and Latvia had differed from the inland parts of the region throughout the whole of prehistory. The emergence of homogeneous and strongly German-dominated cultural unity – medieval Livonia – was a long-lasting process that during several centuries had to cope with old local peculiarities.

Since it is unjustified to think of Livonia before the conquest, the names Estonia and Latvia should in this chapter be understood approximately covering the areas of the present-day countries. In a medieval political context, the northern part of Estonia is called Danish Estonia, while the name Livonia is used for the southern half of the country and most of present-day Latvia. The focus of this chapter lies, however, on sites and processes characterising the area of present-day Estonia.

One can presume that in Estonia, which was and still is a country at the crossroads of international trade routes, the discussion on the emergence of medieval towns in the thirteenth century is intermingled with the interpretation of mercantile networks, nodal points and routes in the region in the twelfth and earlier centuries. However, the role of trade in the local development before the crusades is still under discussion, and there is no consensus about the role the Estonian local elite played in it. Polar opinions occur even in very recent studies,

from writings treating trade as one of the most essential factors in the early development of the country (Mägi 2015, 2018; Kiudsoo 2016) to works considering trade as an insignificant factor in late prehistoric Estonia (Lang 1996: 372–3, 2004; Tvauri 2001: 191–3, 208–12, 2012, 56–9; Valk 2014; Selart 2019).

From the latter part of the Iron Age, 800–1200 AD, several dozen hillforts are known in Estonia, more than 20 of them rather extensive. In this chapter, predominantly the ones which may be connected with mercantile networks will be taken into consideration. Several of them continued their existence after the conquest by German and Danish crusaders at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Interpreting the pre-conquest hillforts

The function of Estonian hillforts is the matter of an ongoing discussion, which is made no easier by the fact that only some of them have been excavated at a sufficient level for decision-making. Nearly all archaeologists have distinguished refugee hillforts as a special category, and another specific type of hillforts – possible sacral places – has been pointed out in recent years. Other hillforts were treated more or less homogeneously, aside from discussions about the size or morphological characteristics of the fortifications. An important starting point in the discussions about the function of hillforts is the opinion that intensive cultural layers and everyday items found indicate permanent inhabitation in these constructions. First put forward as early as in the 1930s, the point of view has influenced all further interpretations of the function of hillforts, even though no additional argumentation has normally been presented for supporting it (Mägi 2019b).

Earlier researchers emphasised the relevance of hillforts as military constructions, although the location at crossroads, centres of trade and crafts have also been seen as essential factors (Laid 1939; Moora 1939). In frames of national-romantic history writing in the first half of the twentieth century the enemies nearly always came from outside, and the location of hillforts was, accordingly, defined by considering possible attacks in border zones. The emergence of hillforts along the northern coast of the country in the sixth to eighth centuries was, along these lines, caused by the need to defend the locals against Viking attacks, and hillforts in the eastern part of the country indicated attacks from Russian princedoms in the east.

Since the 1990s, when Estonian archaeologists started to emphasise social factors for interpreting the prehistoric evidence, hillforts have been predominantly treated as power centres. Their emergence and development were now primarily defined by social factors, e.g., by different clans and chieftains struggling for political power (Lang 2002; Oad 2014; Siig 2014; Valk 2014). This theoretical approach derives from the Central Place Theory and still prevails in Estonian archaeology.

The Central Place Theory classifies settlements according to their size and hinterland, and sees local social powers as the main actors in the development

process of the central places. It was first formulated by Walter Christaller in the 1930s, and later intensively explored in archaeological studies. In Scandinavian archaeology, Johan Callmer, in the 1990s, put forward a theory about two main modes of development for early urban centres in northern Europe: evolving from either political centres or from trading places (Callmer 1994). His attitudes, but not all of them, have influenced Estonian archaeologist Valter Lang, who, however, suggests that the evolution from political centres was dominant in Estonia (Lang 2004). He considers Estonian Viking Age hillforts as power centres supported entirely by agriculture and the evolving feudal system. Still, some large Late Iron Age hillforts, such as Varbola and Pada, could also function as early urban centres.

Lang supports the theory of hillfort districts, i.e. power districts with a central hillfort, which may have existed independently from the administrative division (Lang 2002). The idea was originally put forward in the 1930s (Laid 1939; Johansen 1964: 304 and references), but has only since the 2000s dominated in Estonian archaeology (e.g., Siig 2014; Valk 2014). However, not all archaeologists agree (Mandel 2014; Mägi 2018: 117–26). The theory treats nearly all Late Iron Age hillforts as primarily political centres and elite residences that secondarily could also function as trade and craft centres or military bases. The appearance, development or abandonment of the hillforts has been, according to these ideas, mainly explained with social changes (e.g., Valk 2014).

Critics of the Central Place Theory have pointed to its weaknesses in methodology, especially when applying the theory to historical societies. Heterogeneous formation principles, first of all long-distance trade, may have played an earlier and more important role in the development of settlement patterns than the Central Place Theory suggests (Hohenberg and Lees 1996: 55–9). The same ideas can be developed even further when applying the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) presented by Bruno Latour (Latour 2005: 174ff). This is a theoretical tool and a conceptual framework, where heterogeneous actors, e.g., peoples and artefact, images, institutions and ideas, form networks, where all components are considered at an equal level, thus creating what is sometimes called ‘flattened landscapes’. For trading centres in early medieval northern Europe, ANT approaches have been used, for instance, by Søren Sindbæk (2007) and Dagfinn Skre (2007).

Estonia is located at the crossroads of some of the most relevant routes between the east and the west, and the position taken in this chapter suggests that the role of trade in the land’s development cannot be overestimated. As demonstrated by the last decades’ study, changes and crises in especially long-distance trade immediately brought along changes of cultural landscape around the main communication routes in Estonia. It seems to be particularly well demonstrated in the development of hillforts along these routes (Mägi 2018, 2019b).

Although social factors certainly influenced the development of Estonian hillforts, the extent of this impact could vary from one site to another. The location of a particular hillfort seems to be the most essential indicator for defining its

function. Fortifications situated in the middle of arable lands probably functioned as political centres, while several others' location along topographically defined trade routes, but at the edge of arable lands, suggest regional or long-distance trade as the main influential factor behind their existence.

Many of these hillforts cannot be classified as elite residences. Archaeological excavations have revealed only comparatively small homogeneous buildings, and almost no precious artefacts that could suggest higher social status. The Estonian late prehistoric hillforts along the trade routes probably possessed semi-seasonal inhabitation, with only some of the inhabitants, e.g., caretakers, craftsmen and garrison members with their families, staying at the site permanently (Mägi 2013, 2019b). As such, several of the hillforts may be compared with regional trade centres in Viking Age northern Europe.

Networks take shape

Viking Age ships, and especially cargo ships, normally needed harbours where to overnight, thus creating networks of harbours along the main sea routes. Topographic and cultural conditions, however, had an impact on the formation of trade routes. Pre-state harbour sites where it was possible to stay longer or even overwinter needed proper arable lands in the vicinity, enabling, in the case of emergency, the supply of the temporarily increased population (Mägi 2018: 107–17). Sindbæk, who has seen the emergence of Viking Age trading places as a combination of impacts from many different actors, emphasises that the hierarchy of these sites did not necessarily reflect a political network, but could also be directly defined by needs of long-distance trade. Hubs or nodal points met the interests of long-distant traders, while other central points around them formed a far-reaching web of local actors and centres. The latter predominantly served regional trade (Sindbæk 2007).

In the fifth to seventh centuries, when the eastern trade gained momentum, a number of hillforts with open adjacent settlements appeared along the North Estonian coast, as well as in the inland part of the country. Although sometimes considered in Estonian archaeology as indicating the concentration of settlement caused by some less defined social pressure (Lang 1996: 476–7, 2004), the hillforts along the coast marked topographically the best landing sites and presumably formed central places in the network of regional trade (Mägi 2015: 20–5, 2018: 255–63; Kiudsoo 2016: 31–43). However, different actors behind their appearance can be identified, according to their more precise location. Even though the archaeological evidence in the hillforts do not seem to indicate international nodal points, their locations in the lower reaches in some river close to the coast suggest that it was greatly outward actors, e.g., merchants or other travellers, whose interest caused the emergence of these sites. Only a few of these hillforts have been archaeologically excavated, but even without large-scale excavations only seasonal habitation of the sites can be presumed, during the months when the sea was navigable.

Not far from the places near the coast, normally some kilometres upstream of a river, other hillforts and adjacent settlements indicated the ambitions of the local elite to control the regional trade. These complexes were typically situated at the edge of arable lands, sometimes close to wetland zones. Travellers and craftsmen who were interested in the local market or were forced to stop longer because of weather conditions probably stayed in these places, where the fortifications and the families controlling the place could guarantee a sort of safety for their commodities and for the travellers themselves. Elite families controlling the hillforts and settlements and collecting taxes for their protection did probably not reside in the hillforts, but in their manors in the neighbourhood of the hillfort complex. Their residences were marked by abundant ninth- to tenth-century hoards consisting of dirhams and West European coins. The hoards were clearly concentrated around such hillforts, up to about one day's travel from them (Mägi 2018: 331).

The network formed of local and long-distance trade routes and the nodal points on them came to change abruptly around 1000 AD. The inflow of dirhams to the Baltic Rim started to cease in the 970s and by the second quarter of the eleventh century a number of trading places were abandoned (Mägi 2018: 334–7, 344–6 and references). However, in most cases one should rather think of move instead of abandonment: new centres emerged in the vicinity of the old ones, indicating the continuous relevance of particular areas. In some cases, the old centres were re-built in a new and more powerful form.

What really caused the major changes at the beginning of the eleventh century is the matter of ongoing discussion, which reaches far out from the frames of this chapter. Changes in economy, land mass upheaval, technological improvements in shipbuilding and consolidation of political systems in the Baltic Rim countries have been the most frequently suggested reasons. The fact that no centralisation of power can be assumed in the areas along the eastern coasts of the Baltic Sea, where similar processes however occurred, seems to support mainly other rather than social factors behind the changes. It also suggests international trade as the main actor defining the development of Estonian coastal hillforts and adjacent settlements, even when these complexes only functioned as smaller nodes in the networks surrounding international nodal points.

At first glimpse, the situation was similar in the south-eastern quarter of Estonia. Several Viking Age hillforts indicated central places of regional trade, where merchandise, first of all furs, were gathered for transporting them further to international nodal points in present-day north-western Russia (Leimus and Kiudsoo 2004). However, the combination of actors forming hillfort networks in inland Estonia seems to have differed from the coastal parts of the country. Firstly, several hillforts in inland Estonia had been used before the fifth century, although seldom continuously through all prehistoric periods (Valk 2009). The same phenomenon characterised present-day Latvia and Lithuania, where only single hillforts were known near the coast (Mägi 2018: 267–8 and references). Several inland Estonian as well as Latvian hillforts were situated in the middle of

arable lands and their location then fitted well with the ideas of the Central Place Theory. Many of them can be considered political centres, and the networks they formed were presumably predominantly defined by social and political processes in the society. The influence of outward mercantile actors was less important, although certainly not absent. Heiki Valk has convincingly demonstrated how political ambitions of Kiev-Rus princes and the political and administrative centres temporarily established in south-eastern Estonia were the main reasons why a number of Viking Age hillforts were abandoned there in the first half of the eleventh century (Valk 2009, 2014: 335).

The eleventh century in Estonia was characterised by transforming networks of hillforts. Many of them were abandoned and even when they continued their existence, the intensity of their exploitation cannot in most cases be compared with that during the long tenth century. However, it was exactly in the eleventh century when preconditions for new networks consisting of mighty hillforts, sometimes near the old centres, but sometimes in quite new locations, were created.

New networks, new hillforts

Most of the eleventh century was characterised with a depression in long-distance trade, where destinations, means and interests of different agents were in constant flux. Estonian hillforts, their disappearance and (re)appearance just formed a part of these processes. Especially the first half and the middle of the century was affected by state-making in Scandinavia and Russia, as well as by political struggles over the dominance in the areas between, i.e. the Eastern Baltic (Mägi 2018: 348ff). The situation seems to have stabilised by the end of the eleventh century, when several hillforts also demonstrated signs of intensified use.

The eleventh–twelfth-century trade through Estonia was in several aspects different from that in the Viking Age. It was much better organised, controlled by consolidated powers, and was predominantly carried out between Russian princedoms and West European and Scandinavian countries. It also brought along intensified use of additional trade routes. While trade in Scandinavia was predominantly based on ships and seaborne routes, the northern Russian traders mainly exploited land or river transport, especially in wintertime, when wetlands, rivers and lakes were frozen (Edberg 2003). Nothing indicates medieval Russia as a maritime power in the Baltic Sea, although Russian merchants have left their footprint in some overseas areas, for instance, in Gotland. The coast controlled by the Princedom of Novgorod was comparatively short and mostly not suitable for medieval inhabitation, and other Russian princedoms were inland countries. The northern areas were covered with vast wetlands and forests, where rivers formed the best routes and winter was traditionally the best season for travelling over large territories.

Estonia and Latvia were where the winter routes and the seaborne routes met each other. Northern harbours were inaccessible to sea vessels during several

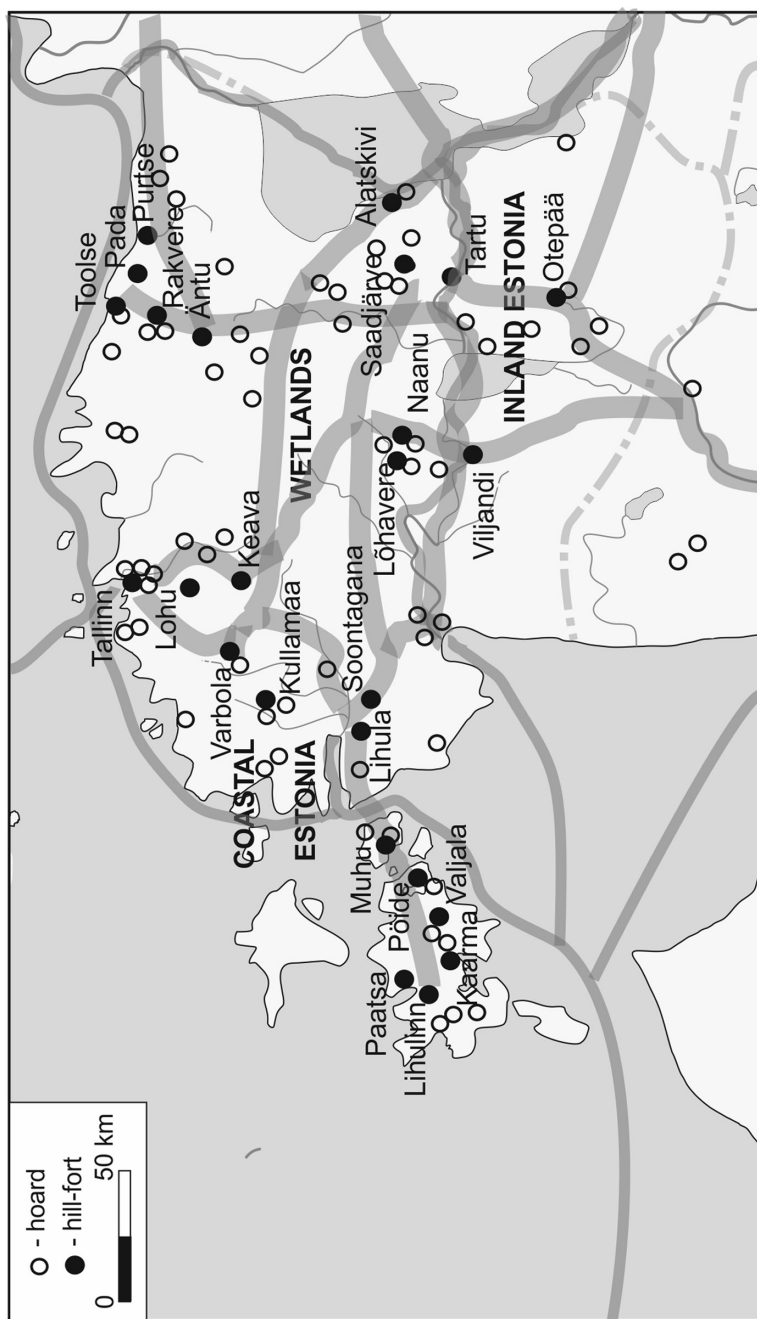
months of the year; traders arriving from the Russian princedoms along the frozen winter routes had to wait in some safe place until the sea became navigable again in March or April. And *vice versa*, when travelling from Western Europe to Russia, it was common even as late as in the seventeenth century to sail to some Eastern Baltic harbour town, wait some months for suitable sledging conditions, and then continue towards Novgorod or some other Russian centre (Edberg 2003). Spring flooding seasons were often also used, when water from thawing snow raised the water level in rivers by several metres (Mägi 2018: 109). Approximately at the same time when the rivers were flooding, the sea became navigable, and it was possible to continue westbound.

The nodal points where travellers waited to change their means of transport were in later times always towns. Earlier in history, when the trade with Russian princedoms became more relevant at the end of the eleventh century, hillforts or other fortifications could play the same role. As a result, new hillforts appeared or some old ones were in intensive use in coastal Estonian inland areas close to the big wetland zone that spanned the whole country. Some of them were conspicuously big and well protected, and blossomed throughout the following centuries.

A certain type of eleventh- to twelfth-century hillfort in Estonia can hardly be classified as a political centre, even though several researchers have tried to do that (e.g., Laid 1939; Lang 2002; Valk 2014). This type of hillfort (e.g., Varbola, Soontagana, Keava) was situated near wetland areas with only some restricted clusters of arable lands in the vicinity, or at the edge of arable lands near the big wetland zone. A river was normally connecting the area of the hillfort with the sea up to 50 km away. Not all hillforts of this type were of the same size and importance, but the connection with winter routes over frozen wetlands was presumably the dominant factor in the choice of their location.

Many of the hillforts had thick cultural layers indicating intensive human activity; however, it can also be the result of (semi)seasonal, but long-lasting occupation. The biggest hillforts of this type could give shelter to up to a thousand dwellers in high season, but it is hard to believe that the restricted arable lands around them could provide all of these people with necessary supplies all year round. So many people gathered in these hillforts probably only during some months, while the population could decrease several times during the rest of the year.

These hillforts were probably trade and craft hubs for surrounding settlements, while they certainly also belonged to shared networks with other hillforts, especially with the coastal ones (Map 2.1). The latter had sometimes been in the same area in the Viking Age, but re-built bigger in the eleventh–twelfth centuries (e.g., Purtse or Pada in Northern Estonia). West Estonian coastal hillforts, Lihula and Muhu, were only erected in the eleventh century (Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 251–2, 256–7). No precise data is available about the hillfort of Tallinn, but it hardly existed before the twelfth century. It is impossible to say, due to later building works, whether a hillfort existed in late prehistoric Narva.



MAP 2.1 Estonian hill-forts, hoards and most relevant routes of the twelfth century. Drawn by Marika Mägi. After Mägi 2019b; Fig. 2.5.

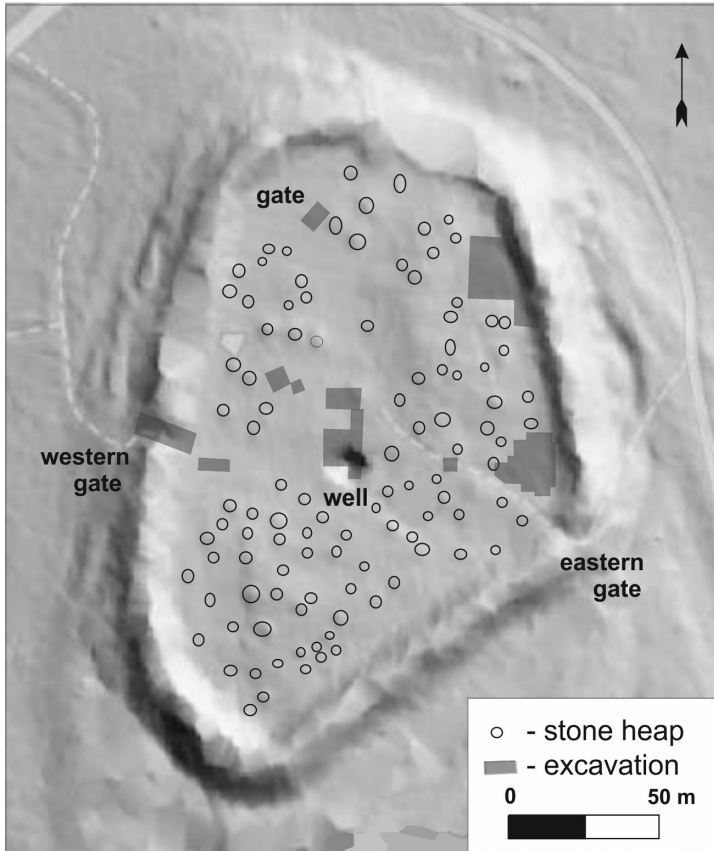
As was argued before in this chapter, hillforts in suitable landing places were probably closely connected with long-distance trade and agents of trade-related networks – merchants and travellers. At the same time they were also income sources for the local elite, as harbours are in all societies. Traders paid for selling or storing their merchandise, shipmen for landing and supplying their vessels, craftsmen offering their products for sale, and all visitors paid for shelter and food. The activity as a trade-hub did by no means exclude other functions, such as being a military post, political and ritual centre. The exact ratio of the different functions varied, but for Estonian late prehistoric harbour hillforts it was presumable trade that prevailed.

The use of hillforts close to winter routes was probably arranged along similar lines, thus making them profitable for the elite families controlling the fortifications. Lang is right in calling them the earliest urban centres in Estonia (Lang 2004). Hillforts, such as Varbola, surrounded by a massive stone wall and characterised by about hundred oven-provided buildings and even more outbuildings that fit into an area of two hectares could during its high season, i. e. the winter-time, look similar to a small medieval town (Tamla and Tõnisson 1986; Tõnisson 1999). The establishment of the big hillforts at the end of the eleventh century and their connection with trade routes is also indicated by the wider distribution of the eleventh- to twelfth-century hoards in Estonia. When several hoards still marked the areas around hillforts that had existed since the Viking Age, or had a successive hillfort in the vicinity of the old centre, numerous hoards have now appeared around the hillforts close to the wetland zone (Map 2.2).

Most of these fortifications lacked adjacent settlements, as it had been common in the Viking Age. The concentration of all activities behind mighty fortifications can reflect increased interests in security, due to the political situation, or improved social and technological abilities. It was mainly in the twelfth century when some of the coastal Estonian hillforts were surrounded by massive walls built of limestone without the use of mortar.

Hillforts as political centres

For several other Estonian eleventh- to twelfth-century hillforts, the dominant factor defining their location was their function as a political centre. Most inland Estonian hillforts probably belonged to this group, where Tartu, Viljandi and Otepää stood out as the most prominent examples. A good example of such central hillforts in North Estonia is Rakvere, but probably also Lohu. All such hillforts were situated near arable lands, and were easily accessible from different directions. Although dominantly political midpoints, these hillforts presumably also functioned as trade and craft centres; the frequent presence of a political elite may have attracted traders and offered good possibilities for craftsmen both for obtaining raw material and for selling their finished products. In Tartu, for instance, craftsmen from Russian princedoms seem to have been present together with local artisans (Tvauri 2001: 99ff).



MAP 2.2 Varbola hillfort. The modern relief map reveals that there may have been more stone heaps indicating ovens than believed before. Based on Estonian Land Board Geoportal Map Server and Tönnisson et al. 2008, Fig. 81. Drawn by Marika Mägi.

Specifically, Tartu, Viljandi and Otepää, but also several others, were mentioned in early thirteenth-century chronicles as political centres that were frequently attacked both by the crusaders and by the Russian princes. The local rulers of these fortifications were, however, never mentioned, which suggests that the big central hillforts were corporately controlled by dominating elite families (see also Oad 2014; Valk 2014: 341–4; Mägi 2019b). The maintenance of these hillforts may have partly been financed from tolls collected from different visitors, but to a larger extent from taxes paid to the elite families from their dependants. Some representatives of the elite may also have resided in these hillforts, at least temporarily. As such, the central hillforts were playing a role in different sorts of networks, among which international trade was only one

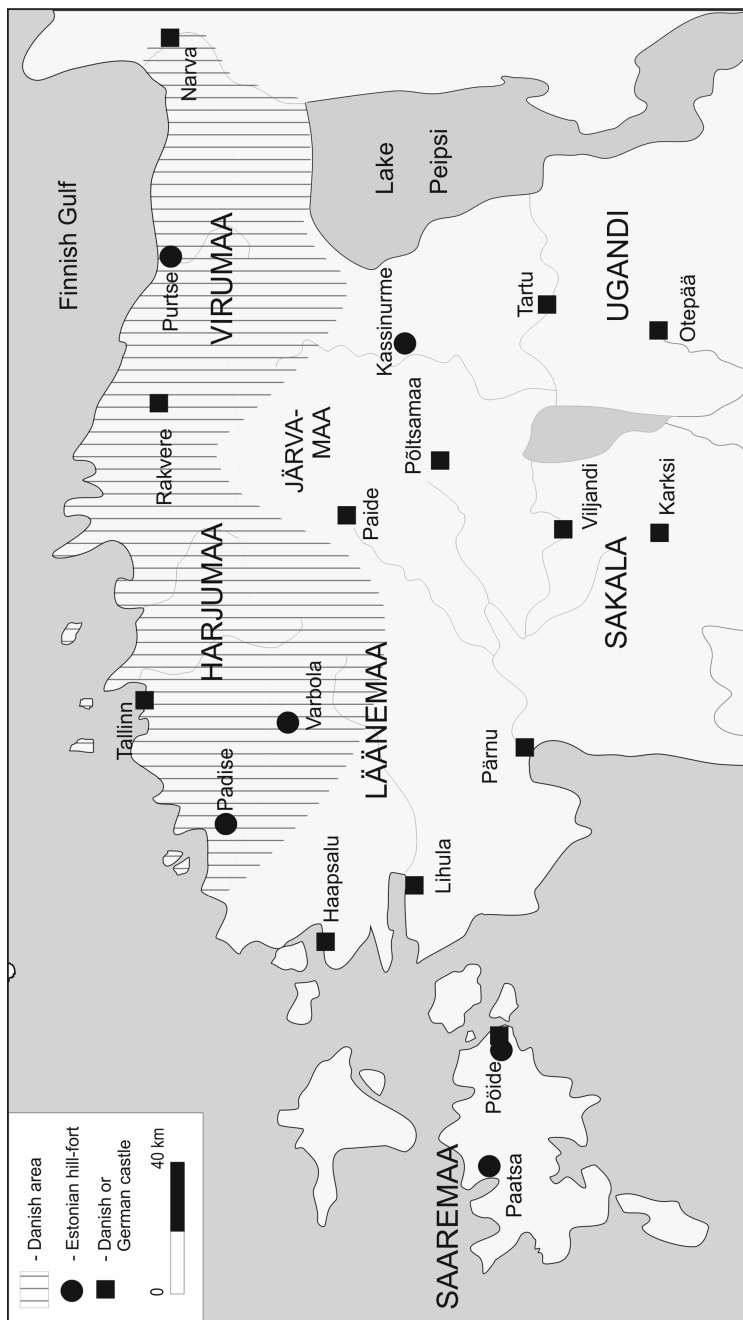
among several. The prevailing actors forming the networks behind such places were land-owning magnates, as well as small and medium-sized landowners in the surrounding areas. The networks were predominantly defined by political institutions. It is probably fully justified to call the hinterlands of this sort of hillforts 'hillfort districts'.

Hillforts that predominantly functioned as political centres varied considerably according to their size and location. Most of them were situated at the crossroads of regional routes, even though some of them (e.g., Valjala, Lohu and Saadjärve) were as big and as strongly fortified as the most prominent centres. A number of smaller hillforts belonged to the same group, but had a quite limited district under their control. In one case – Lõhavere – the head of the hillfort was mentioned in the early thirteenth-century chronicles. The smaller political centres were probably controlled by only one particular family, who may – as in Lõhavere – reside partly in the hillfort, partly in some open manor in the vicinity.

The fate of Estonian hillforts in the thirteenth century

The twelfth-century Estonian hillforts were far from being homogeneous, nor was their destiny after the early thirteenth-century crusades, when Estonia and its neighbouring areas were incorporated into the European political and economic systems. Quite a number of Estonian hillforts did not disappear after the conquest by German and Danish crusaders, but continued their existence, at least for some time. The exact time when some particular hillfort was abandoned is often unknown due to missing or insufficient archaeological excavations. Even when to suggest the crusades as the most likely reason why one or another hillfort ceased to exist, it is actually possible that the fortification stayed in use several decades after the conquest. Moreover, the hillfort may have been abandoned right before the early thirteenth-century wars.

The fate of Estonian hillforts after the crusades varied considerably in different parts of the country (Map 2.3). In southern and eastern Estonia, except in Virumaa, nearly all hillforts were abandoned soon after the first quarter of the thirteenth century.¹ Great exceptions were big central hillforts at the crossroads of trade routes – Tartu, Viljandi and Otepää. These fortifications and settlements adjacent to them were re-organised as strongholds of the new political institutions. In the flux of the following centuries, Viljandi and especially Tartu evolved into prominent Hanseatic towns. The role of international trade networks behind such development is difficult to overlook; however, the same factor also offers an explanation to the decreasing importance of medieval Otepää (Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 307–9). The strongholds of conquerors are frequently established in old centres, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the Bishop of Tartu built his stone castle in Otepää soon after the district was conquered. However, the place remained outside the internationally relevant trade routes and was presumably too close to another centre, Tartu, which had



MAP 2.3 Stone castles and Estonian hillforts in the second half of the thirteenth century. Drawn by Marika Mägi. Based on Mägi 2019a; Figs. 5.2 and 5.6.

a topographic position that was clearly more favourable. As a result, medieval Otepää quickly started to lose its relevance for not only trade-related, but also for political networks.

The development of Estonian hillforts was different in northern and western Estonia. Not all fortifications in these areas have been archaeologically investigated; it is, however, obvious that at least two-thirds of the twelfth-century hillforts there continued their existence after the crusades. Nearly half of the late prehistoric fortifications stayed in some form until the fourteenth century or later (calculations based on Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 185ff). Three of them – Tallinn, Rakvere and Lihula – were re-arranged as medieval towns or castles. As in southern Estonia, the position at internationally relevant trade routes seems to have been the primary criterion for why exactly these centres kept their importance after the crusades.

Coastal Estonian hillforts that had functioned as old regional centres, but were situated on routes of mainly local importance, were abandoned in the flux of the thirteenth century. Kaarma, Äntu and Kullamaa, for instance, were, according to written sources, destroyed in the wars that characterised medieval Livonia through the whole thirteenth century (Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 219–20, 242–3, 263–4; Valk 2014: 353; Mägi 2019a: 182–5). Archaeological excavations have demonstrated that the same is probably true for Valjala that was burnt down in the middle of the thirteenth century (Kustin 1959). Muhu was destroyed in 1227, and Keava seems to have fallen out of use soon after the conquest as well (Lang 2012: 213). In several cases, e.g., in Kullamaa and Keava, the continuity as power centres can be seen in later manors or vassal castles, but these tend to have possessed quite local importance.

The hillforts in coastal Estonia that stayed in use after the crusades were typically situated on internationally relevant trade routes and were maintained with the help of finances provided by long-distance trade networks. Archaeological excavation at some of them has suggested that the thirteenth century was not the time of their decline, but rather the time of their prosperity. The gateway constructions at Varbola hillfort were, for instance, re-built to be much stronger in the middle of the thirteenth century (Tõnisson 1999; Valk 2014: 347), and the fortifications at Purtse Tarakallas were considerably improved at the same time (Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 230–2; Valk 2014: 51–2).

All hillforts that stayed in use, according to archaeological excavation, except the ones that developed into medieval towns, were characterised by local find material and only a few finds indicated further-reaching contacts. Most of the find material from these excavations has not been properly analysed yet, but a certain difference compared with thirteenth-century Estonian towns is obvious. In towns, local find material was mixed with strong influences from West European countries, while people using the hillforts seem to have been predominantly local, or foreigners who had adopted the local culture.

The commercial importance of the thirteenth-century hillforts in Danish Estonia is emphasised by the written sources that we have from that time. Nearly

all of them – Pada, Purtse and Lohu – may have directly belonged to the Danish king, at least the king owned lands in the villages with the same names (Johansen 1933: 487, 525, 555). The king's interest to keep the relevant hillforts is not surprising. The area with the mighty hillfort of Purtse Tarakallas was one of the best natural harbours in northern Estonia, and the king was obviously interested in the revenue provided by the hillfort controlling it (Fig. 2.1). Pada was situated nearly ten kilometres from the coast along the small Pada River, and connected with the obviously relevant harbour at Mahu near the estuary of the river. It was somewhere here, between the Pada hillfort and the Mahu harbour, where the powerful Lode family had a plan to establish a town in 1296 (Johansen 1933: 441). The mighty hillfort may have marked a trade place between the sea and the winter routes along the wetland 2–3 km south of it. Another similarly profitable place, Tallinn, became the Danish royal centre in Estonia as early as in course of the crusades. A stone castle was built and a medieval town established there in the first half of the thirteenth century.

In western Estonia and Saaremaa, the first medieval centres after the conquest were established at old central places. The stone castle at Lihula was built on top of the late prehistoric Estonian hillfort, in the vicinity of what must have been the best West Estonian harbour site in the middle of the thirteenth century (Tõnisson, Mäesalu and Valk 2008: 256–7) and at Pöide in eastern Saaremaa, close to the still existing Estonian hillfort, at the end of the century. Both building trials ended in fiasco, presumably because of changing topographical



FIGURE 2.1 Purtse Tarakallas hillfort. Archives of the National Heritage Board of Estonia. Photo by Ants Kraut and Tanel Moora (2013).

conditions. Land mass upheaval that escalated in the twelfth–thirteenth centuries and the appearance of new cargo ships with considerably larger draught made several twelfth-century central harbours unsuitable for the changing demands in the thirteenth century. The disadvantages of the location might have started to be apparent soon after the Bishop of Saaremaa had built Lihula castle and a medieval settlement had started to take shape beside it. Matsalu Bay near Lihula was too shallow for bigger ships and possessed, therefore, only limited prospects to evolve into a centre for international trade. The bishop's residence was, as a result of that, soon moved to Old Pärnu, and then to Haapsalu, while Lihula castle and settlement continued as central places at the district level.

The fate of the Order's castle at Pöide was more tragic. The location for it was presumably chosen due to the significance of the place as an old centre. The Estonian hillfort remained only two kilometres, i.e. within eyeshot, of the place where the castle was built next to the already existing stone church. A small river beside the church connected the place with one of the best landing places of the district; however, the river might have been too shallow for guaranteeing proper supply for the new castle from the sea, especially in case of emergency. It led to defeat in the middle of the fourteenth century, when the castle was under siege by local Estonian troops. Pöide castle was thereafter abandoned and a new one established in Maasilinn, in one of the best harbours of eastern Saaremaa.

From late prehistoric centres to medieval strongholds

Baltic German and Estonian historians have traditionally seen the incorporation of Estonia into West European political and cultural systems as a comparatively abrupt process happening mainly during the first half of the thirteenth century. Archaeological evidence gained during the last decades has not succeeded in changing such an interpretation, although a certain influence of archaeological studies is obvious in the latest overviews of the period (Selart 2012: 63–80). However, when taking into account the archaeological material, quite different interpretations of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century processes become available. Several features, including the hillforts treated in this chapter, can be interpreted as a sign of gradual development that reached over several generations. The change of power structures was presumably not so sudden as believed before, and actors in the networks that had an impact on the local development through trade or other parts of economy did not lose their positions immediately after the conquest (see Selart 2019). It is also relevant to remember that social and political development patterns varied in different parts of present-day Estonia. The northern part of the country belonged to Denmark until the mid-fourteenth century, while the rest of the country was divided between the Teutonic Order and different bishoprics.

The last decades' research has suggested that the role of the old Estonian elite in the formation of new, West European power structures may have been more crucial than believed by the Baltic German scholars (Mägi 2003; Valk 2014:

360–2). The fate of some particular hillfort after the crusades may have been dependant on the destiny of the elite family or families that possessed or controlled the fortification. The possibility that a hillfort continued to exist after the conquest increased when the family's social position and incomes sources remained at the same level as before, and decreased when the heads of the family were killed or excluded from power institutions. The same may be true for several hillforts that were burnt down in course of the endless military conflicts in the thirteenth century.

The abandonment or continuance of Estonian hillforts was recently thoroughly treated by Heiki Valk, who predominantly analysed the social factors behind these processes (Valk 2014). His approach was based on the Central Place Theory and the idea of hillfort districts, which he believes to be valid for more or less all Estonian fortifications. The theory supported by Valk presumed that hillforts were political centres maintained with the help of taxes, sometimes in form of labour, collected from the dependant areas around them, that is, from the hillfort districts. Valk reconstructed the districts for some coastal Estonian hillforts, especially the ones next to the wetland zone, as very big ones, consisting of several hundreds of ploughlands or medium-sized farms. He suggests a certain central power inside such hillfort districts in the twelfth century, which disappeared after the conquest when the district was enfeoffed to several vassals by the new landlords. The fortification was thereafter connected to only one enfeoffment that was considerably smaller than the hillfort district before. The vassals possessing the hillfort enfeoffment may well have been from some old Estonian elite family, but the resources available from the restricted area were not sufficient for maintaining the bigger Estonian hillforts. As a result, the fortifications and buildings started to fall apart and the hillforts were finally abandoned.

This scenario does neither explain sufficiently why the process of abandoning these hillforts took several generations, nor why hillforts directly belonging to the Danish king were abandoned by the mid-fourteenth century. Valk suggests that the latter may have been due to the cessation of social networks that earlier had related the hillforts with their hinterlands (Valk 2014: 364ff). He also seems to be confused about the purpose of these thirteenth- and fourteenth-century hillforts, discussing whether they may have been military posts of the king, or power centres at the local level. Other possible functions of the sites were neither taken into consideration, nor does he discuss their location in the cultural landscape. Valk supports the idea of the presumably larger percentage of the old Estonian elite among the new vassals than was believed before, which causes the explanation of ceasing social networks in the thirteenth century to remain insufficiently grounded. As indicated by medieval legislation, the landed estates were owned collectively by families in thirteenth-century Estonia and Denmark (Bunge 1879: 55–70; Tamm and Vogt 2016: 18–22), as well as in several other countries. Why the situation in medieval northern Estonia should have been much different from the situation in the twelfth century was not convincingly argued.

The confusion about the purpose of the hillforts in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century context can be caused by the too one-sided interpretation of the Estonian hillforts as results of social development, as it is characterised by Valk and several other researchers (e.g., Lang 2002; Siig 2014). The impact of politics and social relations can definitely not be ignored, and for some hillforts it presumably was the dominant factor, while the extent of the social influence for the development of some other hillforts is perhaps somewhat exaggerated. For places like Varbola, where the number of inhabitants has been calculated between eight hundred and one thousand, we can presume that they formed one-quarter to one-third of the total population that, along with these ideas, were economically supporting the maintenance of the fortification. Arable lands in the vicinity of Varbola were limited, and the supply for the inhabitants of the fortification must then be obtained from villages that often were situated more than ten kilometres away, behind vast forests and wetlands. It might have been very complicated for the people in these villages to reach the stronghold in case of emergency, especially in spring and autumn. In wintertime, the possible plunderers probably approached along the winter routes and from the wetland side, and then reached the hillfort before they could start to raid the villages on the other side of it. It is, therefore, difficult to see the clear military benefit of the fortification for the villages in its supposed hillfort district. Even theoretically, it is hard to believe that the twelfth-century elite families in Estonia possessed power consolidated enough for forcing hundreds of households in these villages to maintain and supply such a strong hillfort with so many inhabitants.

Other possible explanations were demonstrated before in this chapter and were derived mainly from ANT approaches. There is hardly any doubt that social relations formed networks that influenced the development of Estonian hillforts. However, other sorts of networks can help to explain the situation – first of all, the mercantile ones. As was argued above, trade networks presumably had a prevailing impact on the development of some Estonian hillforts. This impact was first obvious in the appearance of coastal hillforts in the last centuries before the Viking Age, and can be followed in the later development through the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and was certainly there in the thirteenth century.

However, ANT also calls for critical approaches, among other issues in what concerns the ‘flattened landscapes’ created by the concept (Latour 2005: 174) that potentially favours external networks and actors, leaving much less space to their weaker and local counterparts. For the Estonian material, the danger to overlook the less powerful, in a thirteenth-century context, local Estonian institutions or actors, as well as, networks formed by these actors, is very likely. It can easily explain why the Estonian hillforts continuously used in the thirteenth and fourteenth century have been largely ignored in history research, even though they have been discussed, to some extent, in archaeological studies. The discussion of trade networks in these centuries have focussed on the medieval towns and merchants residing in them (e.g., Selart 2019), mainly due to the biased ideas, according to which the old Estonian elite was soon after the conquest excluded from the new power institutions.

The end of the Estonian hillforts

The abandonment or continuance of the Estonian hillforts seems to depend on their function before the crusades. Central places that were controlled by one or another family, e.g., Lõhavere, disappeared or continued along the same lines as the status of the family changed. If the family was destroyed in the course of the thirteenth-century wars, the hillfort was often abandoned as well. It can also be presumed that the new landlords were not interested in such vassal hillforts, normally at some distance from the main trade routes. As indicated, for instance, by the hillfort of Lohu in North Estonia, the old political centre was first taken over by the Danish king, but, since its location was not particularly favourable for trade, was soon abandoned anyway.

It was different with the hillforts that, as was suggested before, were predominantly financed by taxes paid by both local and foreign visitors. Such hillforts, especially when they already had been established, were primarily sources of income and not expenses. It was in the interests of the new landlords to ensure the continuous use of such places, since the taxes collected from them were profitable. The position argued earlier in this chapter that the most essential factor behind the existence of hillforts as, for instance, Varbola and Lihula, was their location at the crossroads of winter routes and water-bound transport. That kind of long-distance trade did not disappear during the thirteenth century, and it is probably the main reason why these hillforts flourished in this time.

However, another late prehistoric Estonian hillfort of the same type, Soontagana, was abandoned soon after the conquest. It can be explained by the establishment of a new centre in the estuary of the River Pärnu, where winter routes along frozen rivers crossed with sea routes. The very limited amount of arable lands around the estuary of the river had effectively hindered the appearance of a trade centre there before the first state formations in medieval Livonia. The two medieval towns of Pärnu were not political centres, but rather centres for trade and crafts, although other functions followed in time. Soontagana, the old Estonian hillfort covering mainly the same functions, was situated too close to both Lihula and Pärnu, and the outlet from there to the open sea had presumably become topographically complicated as early as the very beginning of the thirteenth century. The point for maintaining the trade centre in Soontagana lost its purpose and it faded quickly.

Other Estonian trade centres continued their existence. The prosperity of Varbola in the thirteenth century can still be explained by its location at the crossroads of winter routes and the route along the River Kasari that was especially sailable during the flood seasons. The change of political powers and networks did not bring along immediate changes in trade routes, including the long-distance trade with Russian princedoms. The agents active in trade networks were apparently still comparatively independent of the new landlords and their political networks. In the island of Saaremaa, the Pöide hillfort stayed, as did some other fortifications with non-political functions, e.g., Lihulinn

and Paatsa. The latter secured the biggest iron production centre in northwest Saaremaa (Peets 1996).

It seems that only the relevant old Estonian trade centres in the most favourable topographic position survived throughout the thirteenth century. The network of trade-related Estonian hillforts contracted, and the activities were concentrated in only a selected number of sites. It is, however, not known in the present stage of the study whether the Estonian medieval hillforts should be considered as forming a network parallel to that of the earliest towns, or whether these two intermingled with each other. Local archaeological material in all Estonian thirteenth-century towns, where it was mixed with the evidence of foreign influences, seems to support the last suggestion.

The second quarter of the fourteenth century was turbulent everywhere in Europe, a period characterised with great social and economic changes. The areas in the eastern coast of the Baltic did not remain outside these processes. In course of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, the Hanseatic trade network took shape, in the Baltic Rim as well as in Livonia and in Danish Estonia, and the medieval towns played the most crucial role in it (Leimus and Mänd 2017). The international trade was increasingly regulated with legislation that favoured special mercantile unions and particular towns, while hindering the actions from outside institutions. The medieval towns increasingly succeeded in controlling the majority of international and regional trade, and the old local trade centres were gradually pushed aside. The last of them, e.g., Varbola and Purtse, but also Paatsa, Lihulinn and perhaps Toolse, started to stagnate and were finally abandoned by the middle of the fourteenth century.

Conclusions

Estonian Viking Age and late prehistoric hillforts have traditionally been treated as military bases or fortifications defined by some development in social relations. In this chapter, another perspective was put forward in interpreting these sites. Several hillforts were situated along topographically identifiable trade routes, and their appearance right before the Viking Age coincided with the intensification of eastbound long-distance trade. Another big change in the trade routes via Estonia took place over the course of the eleventh century and brought along intensified use of winter routes. The appearance of several big hillforts close to Estonian wetlands can be connected with this change. Several of these hillforts, as well as others that were situated in good harbour areas along the Estonian coast, survived after the crusades at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Archaeological evidence suggests that the people who predominantly used these sites were Estonians, or persons who had adopted Estonian material culture.

The thirteenth century in Estonia was a most complicated period. As the reflection of political changes, some earlier fortifications were immediately abandoned after the wars in the first decades of the century, others flourished and

stayed in use until the second half of the fourteenth century. Some hillforts stayed as political centres and were re-developed as medieval towns. Several possibilities for explaining these phenomena have been pointed out, most of them connected with changes in social systems. The position taken in the chapter suggests, however, that the destiny of Estonian hillforts was greatly defined by their prevailing function in the twelfth century, and the ones still functioning into the fourteenth century were the ones functioning as actors in the networks of international trade.

Note

- 1 Heiki Valk has suggested that many of the smaller hillforts in southern Estonia actually lacked permanent inhabitation in the thirteenth century and were taken into use only in case of emergency, as, for example, during the offensive in 1223. Some indications of thirteenth-century inhabitation have also been found in Kassinurme (Valk 2014: 357–8).

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