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Marika Mägi

## CORPORATE POWER STRUCTURES AS INDICATED IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE: THE CASE OF ESTONIA IN THE MIDDLE IRON AGE AND VIKING AGE

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The interpretation of Estonian prehistoric society has been under discussion since the 1990s, when new political circumstances made it possible to get acquainted with archaeological thinking in the West, and, at the same time, demonstrated the backwardness of Estonian archaeological concepts of social development (for the earlier concepts see e.g. Moora 1926: 56–71; Moora et al. 1935: 197–200; Moora 1939; 1954; Vassar 1955; H. Ligi 1968; Jaanits et al. 1982; Tarvel 1992; for a complex overview of the earlier concepts see P. Ligi 1995).

The discussion was initiated by Priit Ligi and Valter Lang. The first one, in accordance with Lang's study of early agriculture, put forward a theory that a socially and economically stratified society was established in Estonia as early as the Late Bronze Age (900–500 BC). From the Roman Iron Age (AD 50–450) onwards they found it possible to speak of the first large landed estates and dependence based on private ownership of arable land, and accordingly also about well-developed social stratification (Lang & Ligi 1991; P. Ligi 1995; Lang 1996; 2007: 221–65).

Ligi (1995) suggested that Estonian prehistoric society was deeply hierarchical from as early as the Roman Iron Age, when it had already reached the pre-state phase. The following part of prehistory was envisioned through shifting periods of political instability and stability, which then left either some archaeological traces or none. Features that did not fit his new theory were either ignored or interpreted in a rather arbitrary way. Shortage of weapons in Estonian graves up to the 10th century, although in sharp contrast with the evidence in most neighbouring areas, was, for instance, explained as the result

of peaceful political circumstances. Lack of outstanding graves was, on the same lines, explained by a well-established political structure, or it was simply presumed that such graves would be found in future. A great amount of artefacts of Scandinavian origin in Estonia testified, according to Ligi, to 'peaceful' communication, but the Estonian role in trade during the first half of the Viking Age, as well as the 8th century, was estimated to have been modest.

Even if not always called 'chiefdom', Ligi's vision of Estonian prehistoric society has, with cosmetic corrections (e.g. Lang 1996: 462–82; 2007: 221–65; Mägi 2002a, 138–42), remained widespread in Estonian archaeology until very recent years, and has only lately been challenged (e.g. Mägi 2006; 2007a; 2009; 2011a). However, Andres Tvauri's description of prehistoric society in Estonia from the Migration Period to the Viking Age (AD 450–1050), published in 2012, relied, with certain additions, almost entirely on Ligi's basic interpretations.

The present article is inspired by the aforementioned, recently published syntheses of Estonian Middle Iron Age (AD 450–800) and Viking Age (AD 800–1050) (Tvauri 2012), still without any intention to discuss more precisely how correct or incorrect certain details were presented in this book. Several overall concepts in the book will however be counter-argued in the following pages. As an alternative, an interpretation of Estonian Middle Iron Age and Viking Age society in a broader sense, as the author of the present article sees it, will be discussed. Most of these ideas were simply neglected in Tvauri's interpretations, even though they had been published earlier in several articles, mainly outside Estonia.



## DISCUSSING PREHISTORIC SOCIETY

Up to the third quarter of the 20th century, the archaeological study of prehistoric societies rested predominantly upon written documents from later periods, which researchers then tried to reconcile with archaeological evidence (for Estonia, e.g. H. Ligi 1968: 5–52; Jaanits et al. 1982: 412–4; see also P. Ligi 1995). The modern theoretical way of thinking is sceptical about such attitudes, at least when interpreting societies that existed long before particular documents were written down. Instead, it has been more popular to use the evolutionary model of human society that assumes a linear development from primitive to more developed stages.

For a time starting in the 1960s, the most widespread schema used in Anglo-American, as well as Scandinavian archaeology, is the one created by American cultural anthropologists Elman Service and Marshall Sahlins (Sahlins & Service 1960; Service 1971). Their ideas were soon developed by other anthropologists, notably by Morton Fried (1967), who called the successive social and political organizations respectively: band, tribe (by later authors, also rank or segmentary society), chiefdom, and early state.

The scheme presented by Ligi (1995) classified Middle Iron Age and Viking Age Estonia as a chiefdom. Taking into account that chiefdoms in Estonia, according to him, got their start as early as in the Late Bronze Age, and were still not developed into a state by the conversion to Christianity, this freezes the social development for a very long period, from 1000 BC till the first half of the 13th century AD. Presumed periods of stability and instability were, according to Ligi's theories, connected mainly with the struggle for power between different families and individuals, which did not change the general structure of the society. The latter was constructed according to a kind of standard vision of chiefdom (e.g. Fried 1967: 185–226; Earl 1997), thus supporting the idea that all societies develop along similar lines, and resemble each other at certain stages.

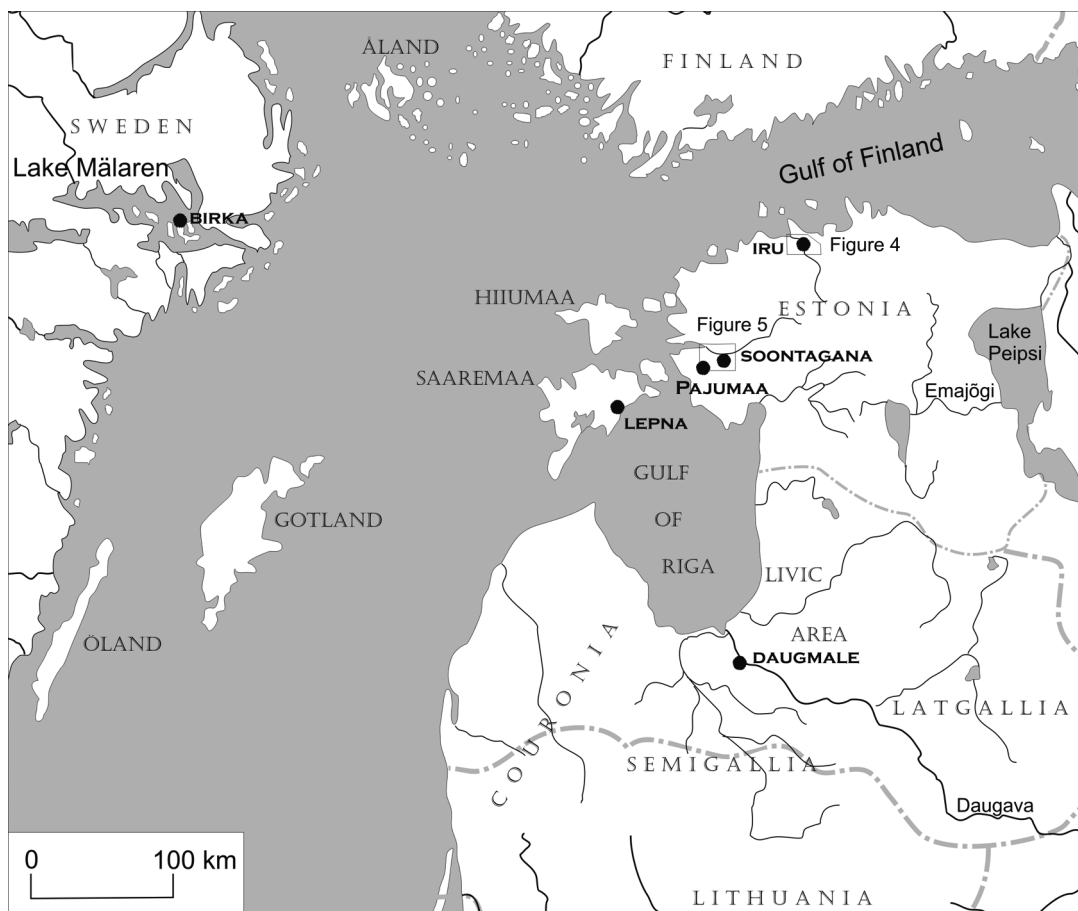
The latest political anthropology has more or less given up the fixed scheme of linear evolutionary social development, and this mainly because of the tremendous variability of societies under the same development stage label (e.g. Cheater 1989; Lewis 1990; Drennan et al. 2010). In archaeological discussion, the scheme is still widely

used. However, several archaeologists have recently preferred to discuss the construction of power, the economic base, gender roles, and other social aspects, finding the schematic division into different development stages too simplified. More than before, attention has been paid to the internal dynamics of prehistoric societies, to a much larger extent than local power games within a particular chiefdom (Price & Feinman 2010).

There is not just one straight-line evolutionary pathway that all societies follow; rather that societies did more or less develop in different ways. Recent archaeological research has, therefore, started to stress the variety of forms that early non-egalitarian societies may take. Alison Rautman (1998) has stressed that it is misguided to pose the question of dichotomy – a choice between hierarchical and egalitarian – but even to attempt to position a society between these two extremes. In contrast to the more traditional, 'vertical' dimension, such an attitude has been called 'horizontal' variation. Horizontal characteristics are, for example, the degree to which leadership was 'individualizing', as opposed to 'group oriented'. Such approaches avoid implications of inferiority by ranking societies with a corporate mode of organization 'lower' than some others on a scale of hierarchy or complexity (Drennan et al. 2010).

Colin Renfrew (1974) has distinguished between individualizing and group oriented societies, others have brought into use the term heterarchy for characterizing the corporate mode of power (Rautman 1998; Thurston 2002; Bondarenko 2007; Drennan et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup> Heterarchy describes an alternative to a vertical, pyramid-like structure of power, proposing a form of organization in which there is a horizontal spreading of power across different but equal power institutions, each of which is internally hierarchic, but where none has precedence over others (Thurston 2010). Although just as hierarchical as other complex power structures, the corporate mode tends to leave much less conspicuous archaeological evidence. It is especially true for evidence that normally has been treated as a sign of 'hierarchical' society, e.g. abundantly equipped burials or elaborate residences for leaders (Drennan et al. 2010).

Heterarchic societies with corporate power structures could function successfully, and could from time to time cooperate with neighbouring



*Fig. 1. Map of Estonia and its neighbouring countries with the most important Viking Age centres and sites mentioned in the article.*

regions – certainly not less effectively than societies with individual-based hierarchical, but politically fragmented organizations. Neither was their technological or economic level necessarily lower than that in more individual-based hierarchical systems; these aspects were strongly dependent on other factors than power construction, even though the latter also played a role.

## **SOCIETY MIRRORED IN BURIAL CUSTOMS**

Interpretation of prehistoric societies is frequently based on burial analyses. Archaeological burial material in Estonia, as well as in most of its neighbouring countries (Fig. 1), has been traditionally treated by emphasizing either the lack or the abundance of cemeteries and grave goods found in them. Theoretical cognitive approaches discussing the ideology behind burial rites have

also attracted attention, mainly in Finland, which was characterized by similar burial customs during the period under question (Wessman 2010), but in Estonia as well (Konsa 2003; Jonuks 2009; Lang 2011).

Aspects of ritual practice within a religious context reflect existing power relationships between individuals and kin groups, and as these change, the specifics for the ritual itself may vary, or new meanings may appear based on these societal dynamics (Aldenderfer 2010). The challenge for archaeologists is to analyse the way it happens. In the following, I try to take under closer consideration other aspects in burials than merely the number of grave goods: the expression of either individual or collective attitudes, the representativeness of the population buried in detectable graves, the lack or presence of warrior symbols, or gender aspects.





### *Absence of burials or absence of grave goods?*

Talking about burial rites in the Middle Iron Age and Viking Age Estonia, the first characteristic striking the eye is the small number of burial sites until the middle, or even the end of the 10th century AD. It is not completely clear whether we are dealing here with a small number of burial sites, or with an ideological demand to put only a few or no artefacts at all in graves. Such a bias can easily lead to restricted prospects for locating burial places archaeologically. A possibility that a particular stone grave<sup>2</sup> without formal structure was brought into use already in the Middle Iron Age can be hidden behind the fact that no artefacts but only a few cremated bones were deposited there before the second half of the 10th century. Only a fraction of osteological material has been dated by scientific methods so far. However, other possible explanations for the modest number of Estonian burial grounds in the Middle Iron Age and earliest part of the Viking Age (Tvauri 2012: 305–12) will be discussed later in this text.

The so-called ‘wealth’ or ‘poverty’ of graves, that is, the abundance or lack of preserved grave goods, is not directly associated with the economic situation of the society, but rather with the prevailing ideology (e.g. Hodder 1982: 119–22). Ideology can hamper a social elite from demonstrating its position through grave forms or goods, as is remarkably demonstrated, for instance, by Medieval Christian burials. Still, it would also show a bias if we assume that the quantity and quality of grave goods inside one burial ground and during a particular period cannot reflect the social position of the dead at all. In societies where a part of the population has been buried with abundant or even luxurious artefacts, this phenomenon tends to indicate a certain social and economic power. Beside the ritual significance, artefacts as well as constructions have actual commercial value when deposited in a grave, and these have often not been affordable for most of the population. The conclusion is that the evidence of burials abundantly equipped with artefacts points to an one-time social elite, while the absence of conspicuous burials does not prove an egalitarian social system. Neither does the absence of archaeologically detectable graves necessarily point to a lack or a dramatic decrease of population.

When in Estonia artefacts were put into graves again after the second half of the 10th century, the changed ritual behaviour probably indicated altered images of the Beyond. Comparable processes took part in other areas inhabited, at least later in history, by some Finnic-speaking peoples. In Karelia, more artefacts are known from the 10th century onwards (Kochkurkina 1982: 11, 14–36), and burials suddenly became apparent in the Livic areas in the lower reaches of the Daugava River (e.g. Tõnisson 1974; Zariņa 2006; Spirģis 2008). A general increase of grave goods and the appearance of some specific, prestigious artefacts like scales or two-edged swords, especially since the second half of the 10th century, has also been reported in Latgallian burial grounds (Radiņš 1996; 1999: 131–53).

In the course of the 11th century the amount of grave goods increased, although in most parts of present-day Estonia it remained impossible to connect artefacts with individual burials. These modifications presumably indicated changes in the social system, like further stratification of the society, or pointed to changes in the way that power was arranged. It seems to indicate that the ideology became more similar to those among the southern and western neighbours of present-day Estonia, thus suggesting possible acculturation processes.

### *Who were buried in stone graves?*

Up to the 1990s, archaeologists interpreted Estonian, as well as Finnish stone graves as burial places of whole village communities. Later analyses have demonstrated that the ones whose remains were brought to stone graves only formed a fraction of the society, and this has probably been true for most of prehistory. Lang (2011) has recently suggested, though without clear argumentation, that the percentage of archaeologically visible burials in the later part of the Iron Age could have been 20% or slightly more. How the rest of population may have been buried is not known, but such a degree of postmortal treatment seems likely, and suggests quite a considerable social difference between the elite and everyone else. The location of these graves in the border areas of arable lands surrounding old villages or later manors, thus the most fertile soils, also indicates the higher status of the dead in agricultural society

(Mägi 2002a: 125–34; 2002b; for an overview of similar ideas in central Swedish archaeology, see e.g. Göthberg 2000: 213–4).

In places and times when the intermingled bones in stone graves were not cremated and therefore, up to a certain extent, biologically determinable, they proved to have belonged, in relatively equal shares, to men, women and children (e.g. Mägi-Lõugas 1996). These were most likely members of some dominant extended families, who were privileged to be buried in stone graves; whether it was true for all family members, or only part of them, is not clear. No DNA analyses have been conducted for such graves so far, but odontological features of skeletons at the 5th–7th-century Lepna mortuary house on Saaremaa, for instance (Fig. 2), proved that at least some of the individuals buried there were most likely related (pers.comm. J. Limbo-Simovart, 25 February 2013).

Finnish archaeologist Sirkku Pihlman (2003; 2004) has pondered a similar phenomenon in Finnish Late Iron Age (AD 800–1100) burial grounds. Her point was, too, that only members of upper stratum families were buried in stone graves, while the majority of the population were

buried in a way that did not leave archaeological traces. She believed, therefore, that the spread of population in Late Iron Age Finland was much broader than had been calculated to date, and stone graves only marked a sort of central point in a settlement. Only about one third of Viking Age villages could have possessed an archaeologically traceable burial ground. The society as such was hierarchical, but the top of the hierarchical structure was broad, consisting of selected households who exercised the power, both in a political and ritual way. Drawing parallels with Scandinavia, she suggested that the social network between elite families was arranged through military service, marriages, the institution of secondary wives (parallel to Scandinavian *frillalag*), and fostering each other's children.

Assuming that the period AD 450–950 was in Estonia characterized by a generally small number of burial places, and not simply a lack of artefacts in graves, only very few persons were presumably selected to be buried in a way that left any traces. Many of these burials have been found in even older stone graves. In at least parts of present-day Estonia there might have been mortuary houses used for collecting human



Fig. 2. Remains of a 5th–7th-century mortuary house at Lepna, Saaremaa. Photo: M. Mägi.



Fig. 3. Middle Iron Age and Viking Age stone grave without formal structure at Pajumaa, West-Estonia. 1 – stones, 2 – sooty soil, 3 – concentration of cremated bones, 4 – uncremated bones, 5 – ceramics, 6 – other finds. After Jaanits et al. 1982, fig. 230.

bones. Presuming that these were constructed, in their general lines, similarly to secular buildings, no traces of such places can be expected (see also Tvauri 2012: 277–80). Such a burial custom is normally only traceable when the bones of a dead individual were brought to already existing *tarand* graves or mortuary houses,<sup>3</sup> or when mortuary houses with stone foundations or other stone constructions were erected, as at Lepna in Saaremaa (Mägi 2005a). Graves containing wooden buildings that were burnt down and – perhaps after a certain period – covered with a barrow, can be treated on similar lines (Tvauri 2012: 273; Scandinavian parallels for earlier periods see e.g. Jensen 2001: 353–9). These were funerary constructions and rituals proceeding from earlier periods, which were in the 7th century, at the latest, replaced by other grave forms.

In other parts of present-day Estonia, most notably the western and north-western part of the country, stone graves without formal structures were in use as early as the 5th–6th century (Fig. 3). Mati Mandel (2003) has reported a number of burial complexes in grave pits, especially from the aforementioned centuries, with a superior number of weapon complexes. The latter are certainly inclined to be distinguished because of the size and recognizability of weapons, but can also point to a period of warrior superiority in the local society.

The 5th–7th centuries were characterized by a sudden increase of warrior ideology in most countries around the Baltic Sea (e.g. Mägi 2007a with references). This change in burial customs marked a rapid hierarchization of society towards individual-based lineages and strong male-dominance in most of these areas (e.g. Høilund Nielsen 2000; Žulkus 2000; Bitner-Wroblewska 2001: 121–7; for Finland see e.g. Pihlman 1990: 17–9; Schauman-Lönnqvist 1996; Raninen 2005). It formed a sharp contrast with Estonia and some other Finnic areas, where the old social systems, reflected in collective burial grounds, seemed to continue after the short period of warrior manifestation.

#### *Individual versus collectivist attitudes reflected in burials*

With the exception of a few periods and areas, Estonians were throughout prehistory characterized by strongly expressed collective burial customs, where the remains of the dead were intentionally mixed in one big grave. Similar attitudes in postmortal treatment of the deceased were also present in Finland, where it has been reported especially in cremation cemeteries in level ground (Fi. *polttokenttäkalmisto*), which became widespread from the 6th century onwards (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 279ff; Wessman 2010: 19–24). Nevertheless, collective attitudes in burial





rites were perhaps also widespread during earlier periods, but were difficult to detect because of extraordinarily poor preservation conditions for bones, especially non-cremated ones, in Finland. Stone graves with mixed cremations were also widespread at least in some parts of present-day Russia, those that once were inhabited by Finnic-speaking people (e.g. Kochkurkina 1981: 13ff; Uino 1997: 44–54).

Burial customs where the remains of the deceased from some selected families were completely intermingled tend to mark societies that were neither democratic nor egalitarian, but where power structures were constructed in a corporate way. According to the political anthropological classification, such societies could frequently rather be called segmentary societies than chiefdoms, or could be defined as a kind of transformation form between these variants. Whatever the term used, these were mostly societies with clan-based collective ownership of land, where the clan-based origin was of major importance. Despite this, nuclear families and their normally rotating plots of land can be distinguished. However, in most cultural anthropologically known cases of such societies, a complete burial ritual was not made available to all individuals but only to a certain section of the population, for example only for the members of a single dominant family from every clan residence. The perceptions of death and the Beyond were different but as a rule the rituals used to emphasize the connection to ancestors had especially enormous significance in analogous societies (for cultural anthropological examples and analysis of rituals see e.g. Metcalf & Huntington 1991: 79–161; Fagan 1991: 305–426; Carr & Knüsel 1997: 167–9; Jensen 2001: 438–44; Andrews & Bello 2006; Drennan et al. 2010; Price & Bar-Yosef 2010).

Talking of the period AD 450–1050, the collective attitudes in the burial customs in the area of present-day Estonia seem to have been challenged by international trends in certain periods. Big social changes characterizing the 5th–7th centuries were mentioned above. In Estonia, this period of transformations was primarily marked by the appearance of individual graves. In the south-eastern part of the country it took the form of sand barrows where, at least in a part of cases, individual burials could be distinguished (Aun 1992: 78–113). Another district with individual

graves was Saaremaa, where stone circle graves, normally with only the cremated remains of one individual in each, appeared in the 7th century (Mägi 2002a: 125–32). Saaremaa's geographical position suggests that this new grave form, which must have indicated a considerable change in the visions of the Beyond, was introduced as a cultural impact from neighbouring areas. Most likely, it also reflected changes in social systems.

Most of present-day Estonia held on to very collective attitudes in burial rites during the whole period. On Saaremaa, as well, there seems to have been some social reversion to older collectivist attitudes, as far as one can judge from the new appearance of stone graves without formal structure in the second half of the 10th century (Mägi 2002a: 129–34; 2007a). Still, individual burials can sometimes be distinguished in the latter, unlike in most similar cemeteries on the Estonian mainland. More individual graves were also known in Finland, predominantly in the coastal zones where overseas contacts with Scandinavians had always been close (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 279ff).

The Scandinavian and Baltic neighbours of the Finnic-speaking peoples practised individual burials with abundantly equipped warrior graves from as early as the last part of the Stone Age (c 2800–2300 BC). Close mutual connection between individuality expressed in burial rites, warrior ideology, and stratification of social systems has been noticed in many countries (e.g. Bradley 1998; Kristiansen 1987; Andersen 2000; Guilaine & Zammit 2005: 158ff; Drennan et al. 2010). However, the transformation from collective burial rites to individual burials appeared in most European countries much earlier, normally in Late Stone Age. Estonia together with several other Balto-Finnic areas formed, in this respect, a kind of exception among their neighbours. This exceptional behaviour certainly does not indicate that the cultural development in Finnic areas had been frozen at the level of the Neolithic Period; to suggest something like that would follow blindly the evolutionary way of thinking. Since burial rites reflect social and ideological constructions, the collective attitudes in Estonian burial rites most likely mirrored corporate power structures that in some way might have recalled those in other areas during much earlier periods.



### *Weapons in graves – symbols of what?*

The lack of weapons in Estonian graves in the Middle Iron Age and early Viking Age, as well as in the Roman Iron Age preceding them, was in sharp contrast with abundant weapon finds in the graves of ethnic Balts during the same periods. However, in the individual graves that appeared during the 6th–7th centuries, weapons were sometimes also deposited with the dead, particularly in coastal Estonia. The weapons suggest that most of the individual burials, at least in the aforementioned centuries, belonged to males. In addition to individuality, these burials thus reflected the triumph of warrior attributes. The same situation has been noted in Finland, where these phenomena have been the basis for suggesting that a dual ideology dominated society. The stress on individuality and warrior attributes only affected a section of the male inhabitants, while the emphasizing of collective attitudes, which had already started during the previous period, involved the rest of the population. The latter, both women and non-warrior men, were indicated by ornaments that formed a large share of the grave goods (Purhonen 1996: 126–8; Wickholm & Raninen 2006).

As in Finland, the archaeological material from Estonian coastal areas bears witness to a kind of duality. On the one hand, the 5th–7th centuries were characterized by the appearance of rich and sometime individual burials of warriors (Tamla & Jaanits 1977; Mandel 2003; Mägi 2005a), while both the items in the burials and sometimes the burial custom itself demonstrated a sort of similarity with contemporary burials in eastern Sweden and Finnish coastal areas. It can be assumed that those buried in this way belonged to a military elite, which had recently increased its influence in society. The Scandinavian element present in their burials indicates the possibility that their contacts with the elites in Scandinavia, particularly in the developing Svea kingdoms, can be considered as one of the sources of their social prestige. It seems likely that these contacts in fact meant their military service for the leaderships of the nascent petty kingdoms in the region of present-day Sweden, or perhaps Denmark. On the other hand, it is not impossible that the appearance of individual weapon graves also marked some changes in coastal Estonian social systems that probably took shape under Scandinavian influence.

The period of individual weapon graves in Estonian coastal areas did not last longer than a few generations. The persistence of collective burials, where ornaments form the most dominant group of grave goods, can, on the other hand, be taken as an indication of the continuation of older social structures. There should be no great difference, in the ideological sense, whether the partial skeletons of the members of some kind of unit, probably an extended family, either cremated or not, have been brought to a common *tarand* grave, as was the case during the previous period, or the cremated remains of skeletons have been scattered between the stones of a grave without a formal structure. The persisting domination of that burial practice seems to point to the endurance of clan-based societies with a corporate power structure, although a new military elite was taking shape among them.

As mentioned earlier in this article, a new pivotal change in the archaeological material of Estonia can be seen at the end of the 10th century. From then on, and all over the country, considerably more graves contained weapons. The number of grave goods increased at the same time, although stone graves without formal structure and with indistinguishable cremation burials remained the dominant grave type. In correlation with the changing burial customs, new and stronger hillforts were erected, and an increased number of hoards consisting of silver coins indicated intensified participation in international trade. Without doubt, the society became more hierarchical, still never breaking out from the old, clan-based corporate power structures, at least not during the Viking Age. It can better be assumed that some modifications in social structure around the year 1000 reflected international trends, like the changes during the 6th–7th centuries.

### *Gender aspects in burial material*

Gender roles form an inseparable part of social organization, and are therefore essential for understanding and classifying any particular society. Aspects in burial rites like the division of burials inside a burial ground, gender or sex rates of burials, or the combination of artefacts deposited in graves of different genders can potentially provide valuable information. Still, interpreting these data tends to be complicated, as is also true for other aspects of social organizations. The approach frequently found in more traditional studies,



which presents the abundances of grave goods in female burials as a token of the considerable role that these women played in their society, can serve here as an example. Cultural anthropological parallels have notably pointed out that male status may, even in very male-dominated societies, be expressed through the jewellery of his wife or daughter.

The completely intermingled burials in Estonian, as well as other Baltic-Finnic Middle Iron Age and Viking Age stone graves do not in most cases enable us to differentiate individuals, neither can we define their gender. In the few cases when bones of these graves have been biologically determined – as at Lepna mortuary house on Saaremaa – men, women and children have been present in equal proportions and deposited in a common grave in an intermingled manner. Biological analyses for cremated remains in stone graves without structure are insufficient, but gender assessments based on artefacts seem not to indicate gender-biased spatial differentiation at these burial grounds either. A sort of exception was presented by weapon burial complexes in west Estonia, which were mentioned earlier, and characterised only a certain period during the 6th–7th centuries.

Gender aspects became more obvious in burial customs towards the end of the 10th century, when altogether much more burial evidence becomes apparent. Several features in Late Viking Age and 12th-century burials seem to indicate comparatively balanced gender roles in the area of present-day Estonia. First of all, a considerable amount of non-gendered artefacts should be mentioned here, as well as the phenomenon that some graves that were equipped with abundant grave goods associated with one gender, also contained single attributes of the other gender (like weapons among otherwise female grave goods; Mägi 2002a: 77–83; 2009). On the other hand, weapon symbolism and therefore warrior-dominated attitudes characterise the final prehistoric period as well, pointing to a combination of older and newer ideological biases.

Whether the same features also characterized the first part of the Viking Age and earlier periods is not certain. Still, the mixed burials in earlier periods also seem to suggest a social system where genders were not considered strictly different. Several researchers have emphasized that when the percentage of gender-specific artefacts among grave goods is high, it indicates the polarization of roles played

by men and women in the particular society, while a number of non-gendered artefacts seem to point to more balanced gender systems (e.g. Fagan 1991: 305–426; Kent 1999; Crass 2000).

Middle Iron Age and Viking Age burial customs in Estonia, as well as in parts of Finland and present-day north-west Russia, where bones of men and women were intermingled, and the percentage of gender-specified artefacts was comparatively low, are at variance with the evidence in several neighbouring areas. Prehistoric men in ethnic Baltic areas wore abundant jewellery that was seldom identical, however, with female ornaments. The number of non-gendered artefacts, if they occurred, was modest (e.g. Bliujienė 1999; Radiņš 1999; Šnē 2002). Gender polarization of grave goods, up to a complete lack of jewellery (except for buckles) in male graves and a lack of weapons in female graves, also characterized late prehistoric Scandinavians and several other Germanic societies (e.g. Jesch 1991: 10–4, 21; Härke 1992). Gender aspects in Finnic graves can, against this background, be considered as somewhat exceptional, and are in correlation with other data, presented in this article, concerning presumed social systems.

## SOCIETY REFLECTED IN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

As was demonstrated earlier, a remarkable turn, or at least change, took place in the burial rites of late 10th-century Estonia and its neighbouring areas, especially those that were probably inhabited by Finnic-speaking people. Tvauri has, in his recently published book, offered a potential explanation to this phenomenon: a climatic catastrophe in AD 536 caused dramatic depopulation in the North European agricultural zone, bringing about settlement shift, transformation of social structures and also, for one reason or another, of material culture. In the area of present-day Estonia the impact of the catastrophe was so long-lasting that population numbers did not reach the same level as before AD 536 until the end of the 10th century (Tvauri 2012: 305–12).

### *Demographic calculations*

The period in the 1970s and 80s was particularly characterized in archaeological research by a great faith in scientific methods, as well as the pos-



sibility of using demographic calculations based on archaeological evidence. Notions of a sudden decrease of populations, which was believed to have been reflected in the sudden disappearance or shortage of archaeological sites, were common in these times, as well as partly also in writings of the 1990s (e.g. Ambrosiani 1964; Sporrang 1971; Ringstedt 1992).

In recent research, prehistoric demographic analyses are frequently not considered completely trustworthy, and most authors writing in the 2000s and 2010s have simply avoided them. Those still mentioning them, like the Swedish archaeologist Stig Welinder (2009: 398), strongly underline the inaccuracy of these methods. Nils Ringstedt (1992: 42) has demonstrated how calculations typical of the 1980s varied very markedly, in Scandinavia from approximately 4.4 persons per prehistoric household, children included, up to over 10 adult persons per household. Welinder (2009: 398–9) has very cautiously estimated that a small, probably socially dependent farm in the 5th-century Sweden could have had from six to ten inhabitants, while bigger farms might have had 20–30 persons.

The general tendency at the present time seems to suggest that population sizes in prehistory were bigger than estimated previously, still without presenting new exact numbers. Several researchers have put forward theories about a much larger use of slave labour than believed earlier (e.g. Lindkvist 1998; Göthberg 2000: 124–7; Iversen 2011; Myrdal 2011). With references to Norwegian sources, according to which it can be calculated that one fifth up to one third of inhabitants in late prehistoric Norway were slaves, Sirkku Pihlman has suggested the same for late prehistoric Finland (Pihlman 2003; 2004 with references).

Against this background, one might take a sceptical view of the calculations of Middle Iron Age and Viking Age demographic numbers in Estonia, as they have been presented by Tvauri. He suggested that an Estonian farm in the second half of the 1st millennium AD can be compared with an historical farm in the same country, and would have consisted of six to eight persons, children included (Tvauri 2012: 306). Further description of these farms, as well as the reconstruction of patriarchal, possibly extended, families inhabiting them, is directly taken from the interpretations of 16th-century sources (Tvauri 2012: 313). In addition to certain methodologically questionable points for such comparison, such an attitude can

also be criticized because of its bias towards egalitarian society. Separating Late Medieval peasantry from the rest of social systems existing in this time would make it appear comparatively egalitarian.

As was demonstrated before in this article, burial rites in Estonia seem to indicate extended families rather than nuclear families of 6–8 persons, of whom about half were minors. Several features in Medieval legislation and folklore, when combined with archaeological and cultural anthropological sources, imply that these extended families might have been matrilineal and matrilocal (Mägi 2009). A particular inconsistency in Tvauri's ideas appears when looking closer at the settlement units suggested by him. If people really lived on small single farms, the arable lands that can be attributed to these individual families according to the location of graves in the cultural landscape turn out to be strangely large, certainly too large for cultivating by only three or four adults.

### *Settlement units*

Tvauri has made the assumption that people in Estonia lived generally on separate farms up to around the year AD 1000, with some settlements next to hillforts as exceptions. Although villages started to develop in the 7th–10th century, the majority of villages that are known in historical sources cannot, according to him, be traced back further than the 11th century. A prehistoric village, as defined by Tvauri, is a combination of two or more farms that constitute a community, with the occurrence of strip fields as a proof of its existence. The appearance of villages in the 11th century was made possible by population increase. He also believes that such development had parallels in Denmark, where villages emerged only in the 11th century (Tvauri 2012: 315).

Similar theories – that people lived in single farms until the Migration Period – were current in Scandinavian archaeology from the 1960s to the 1990s. The latest general opinion is that a combination of different settlement forms, from single farms to villages, has characterized cultural landscapes in Scandinavia since the pre-Roman Iron Age (c 500–1 BC) at the latest (e.g. Solberg 2000: 151–4, 180–2; Ethelberg 2003: 131–; Welinder 2009: 395–8; overview of the development of ideas, see Göthberg 2000: 101–5). Also Katalin Schmidt Sabo, who has incorrectly been cited by Tvauri about the emergence of

Danish villages only in the 11th century, has actually talked of the emergence of a Medieval village network in southern Scandinavia, and not the emergence of villages as such. The origin of Medieval village networks can be connected with state-making, the start of urbanization, and Christianization (Schmidt Sabo 2004; 2005: 71–8). These are aspects that definitely do not characterize 11th-century Estonia, thus making the whole comparison improper.

As for Middle Iron Age and Viking Age Estonia, very little is known about settlement units, although some settlements have been partly excavated, and some theories put forward. Tvauri's suggestion that villages proper could have emerged only in the 11th century, when population increased, is a circular argument driven by

Tvauri's own theory, according to which a greater number of burial grounds and artefacts in them can be interpreted as a token of population growth. Why strip fields should act as the main indicator for a village, or how, in practice, one could define proper villages without excavating these fields to date them, is left without further explanation.

The definition of settlement units in Estonia has been traditionally based on stone graves, thus actually calculating units of burial grounds, without defining human-geographic links between settlement centres and graves (as an example, see Lang 1996: 337–513; 2000: 189–219; some criticism, Mägi 2002b). It should however be noted that the pattern of burial grounds in coastal Estonia, with which the author of this article is more familiar, appears very similar to that in central Sweden.

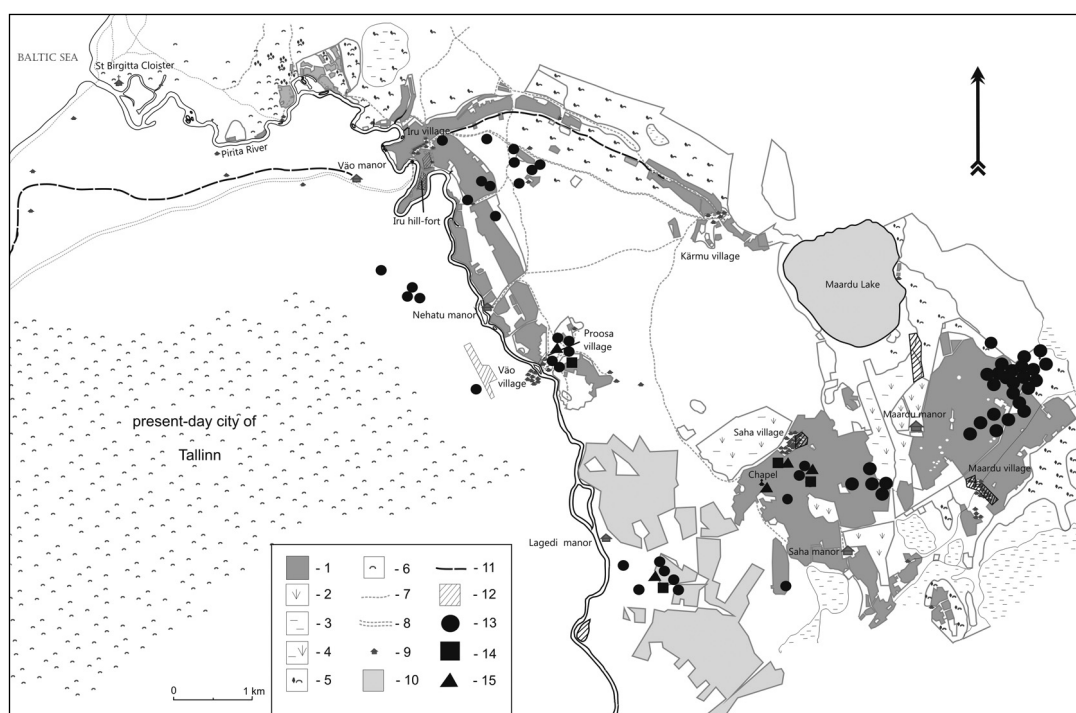


Fig. 4. The Iru hillfort and settlement clusters in the lower reaches of the Pirita River east from Tallinn. Stone graves from different periods (several of them not excavated though) seem to mark the same centres of settlement clusters, which are located, with the village of Iru as an exception, at the site of later manors. Drawn after 17th-century maps: 1 – arable land, 2 – paddock, 3 – wetland, 4 – low meadow, 5 – partly forested sandy area, 6 – sandy area, 7 – roads, 8 – the main road from Tallinn to Narva, 9 – buildings. Drawn after present-day map: 10 – arable land, 11 – bluff, 12 – archaeologically located settlement sites, predominantly in areas without present-day building constructions, 13 – stone graves from the period before the 5th century, 14 – stone graves from the 5th–10th centuries, 15 – stone graves from the 11th–early 13th centuries. Used 17th-century maps from Estonian Historical Archives: EAA 1. 2. C-III-2 (1689), EAA 1. 2. C-III-10 (1692), EAA 1. 2. C-III-11 (1692), EAA 1. 2. C-III-16 (1693), EAA 1. 2. C-III-18 (1692), EAA 1. 2. C-III-36 (1693).

Stone graves from different periods can normally be found in higher places probably marking the one-time border between arable lands and wilderness; other locations are possible, but less frequent. Settlement units marked by graves of different periods seem to have been approximately of the same size throughout the time, and coincide in most cases with old villages or manors known from written sources (Fig. 4). Manors have often been villages before, although some of them may have functioned as magnate farms even before the Middle Ages (c AD 1230) (Mägi 2002b).

The settlement pattern suggests, therefore, an Iron Age landscape similar to central Sweden, where there might have been (mainly smaller) villages, hamlets and single farms, some of the latter magnate farms, some others small households in borderlands. Stone graves, however, marked only the dominant families that could have lived inside the villages, in bigger farms right outside the villages, or perhaps in quite separate large estates. The absence of some graves around some historically known settlement sites can thus be explained by the lack of a dominant family there, and perhaps by the dependent status of these households.

Another phenomenon characteristic of Middle Iron Age and Viking Age Estonia should be mentioned in this connection: settlements next to hillforts, which appeared in the 6th, but to a greater extent in the 8th–9th centuries. Around the year 1000 these settlements normally, but not always, disappeared again, frequently being replaced by bigger hillforts somewhere in the vicinity. It has been a tradition in Estonian archaeology to consider these settlements, as well as the hillforts next to them, as permanent living places (e.g. Lang 1996; 2011; Tõnisson 2008; Tvauri 2012: 39–62). However, there is no real proof for such a statement, except the fact that cultural layers on hillforts can be quite intensive. Whether the layers indicate a numerous year-round population, or long-lasting seasonal intensive use and only a restricted habitation during the rest of the year, is actually not possible to estimate.

The assumption of permanent habitation in Estonian hillforts and settlements next to them ignores their location in the cultural landscape. These sites are often situated at the edges of settlement clusters, frequently next to some extensive wetland or wilderness, and seldom surrounded by arable lands (Fig. 5). In the latter case, the fields around



Fig. 5. The Soontagana hillfort is situated far from arable land and is, in this aspect, one of the most clearcut examples in Estonia. The hill-fort was established in the Viking Age, but was still in use in the beginning of the 13th century. Although the isolated location suggests only seasonal use of the site, the culture layer detected at the hillfort is quite as intensive as in other big hillforts in Estonia. 1 – elevated terrain, 2 – lower terrain, mainly drained wetland, 3 – wetland, 4 – present-day settlements, 5 – Middle Iron Age or Viking Age graves, 6 – approximate Viking Age coastline. Drawn after present-day map.



hillforts are never big enough to sustain a community much bigger than the contemporary average settlement unit. In a society as it probably existed in the Middle Iron Age and Viking Age Estonia, it would have been a nearly impossible task to provide the supposedly hundreds of inhabitants of these hillfort-settlement complexes with food and other provision. Such a well-arranged supply system would have required not only a more complex social organization, but also a clear demand.

It makes much more sense, therefore, to suggest that these settlement complexes, at least the bigger ones, were used only seasonally. More inhabitants resided there during some periods, perhaps some months of a year, and brought along most of their own provisions. The rest of the time the sites were occupied only by some selected families, e.g. watchmen or some craftsmen, if any. The appearance of such settlement centres coincided with the intensification of international trade through Estonia, and at least some of them can therefore be interpreted as seasonal trade centres (see also Mägi 2007b; 2011b).

### *Settlement movement in the 6th century*

The end of the Migration Period was characterized by a widespread movement of settlements recorded in many regions in the northern part of Europe. The beginning of these changes is normally dated to the 5th century, but the process gained momentum during the 6th–7th centuries. It is more or less certain that the whole transformation of society was triggered, or at least accelerated, by the climatically extraordinary years AD 536–7 and 540–2 (Gunn 2000; Gräslund & Price 2012). Some researchers combine the impact of these years with another catastrophe soon after the first one, notably the Plague of Justinian, which struck most of Europe during the years AD 541–61 (Solberg 2000: 201–2; Charpentier Ljungqvist 2009). To what extent the wave of pestilences in the 5th–7th centuries, with its peak in the 540s, affected northern Europe, is however unknown, and the estimations vary from the loss of 50% of population (in combination with famine) to populations having remained nearly untouched (Jones 2000; Solberg 2000: 201–2; Gräslund & Price 2012). The changes can also have been caused by general climatic deterioration that had already begun before the year 536, and were only

accelerated by the two summers without sunshine in 536–7 (Høilund Nielsen 2000).

Tvauri has tried to demonstrate that the years after AD 536 caused such serious famine and population decrease in the North European agricultural zone that it influenced societies over several centuries. He gives references to numerous researchers in different lands, for example about sudden disappearance or move of settlement, pollen analyses results, or material culture studies (Tvauri 2012: 305–12). However, none of these researchers consider the AD 536 event such a long-lasting demographic catastrophe, as Tvauri prefers to see it, even though the serious impact of these years has by now been generally accepted. Only in the most radical calculations, some researchers talk of maximum four to seven generations before the cultural landscape returned to its former dimensions, corresponding to 100–175 years (Gräslund & Price 2012 with references).

In many Scandinavian regions a decrease of archaeological evidence in the 6th century has been reported, but most researchers seem to believe that the change was primarily caused by economic and social developments (e.g. Carlsson 1979; 1983; Widgren 1983; Solberg 2000: 176–7). In central Sweden, as well as probably in several other areas, the most popular explanation of these processes seems to be the shift from the dominance of extensive farming to completely intensive agricultural practice (e.g. Göthberg 2000: 164–6). Several authors point to the variation of sites, which argues against a sudden decrease or impoverishment of population, including the appearance of trade places (e.g. Ethelberg 2003: 317–9; Jensen 2004: 30).

Based on recent studies of the Danish archaeological evidence, Danish archaeologists take the view that no decrease of population took place in the 6th century. Jørgen Jensen claimed that the pollen analyses demonstrated uninterrupted development of agriculture throughout the 5th–6th centuries. Taking the site of Vorbasse, one of the best investigated Danish prehistoric villages, as an example, he nevertheless points to a radical change in the village's location by the end of the 5th century at the latest. All, that is, at least 10 households were moved about 200 m northwards, thus remaining inside the same settlement unit (Jensen 2004: 30–3). In several districts in central and southern Scandinavia, it is possible to talk of an increase of archaeological evidence rather than



a decrease in the 6th century (Høilund Nielsen 2000), quite in the same way as characterizes the northern region (Tvauri 2012: 309–11 with references). The concrete impact of ‘the climatic catastrophe’ thus seems to be selective, and probably dependent on several other factors, like settlement pattern, trade routes, or communication (Gunn 2000; Jones 2000).

In the Middle Iron Age, households in Scandinavia still moved periodically, which was connected with extensive agriculture as the dominating practice. The movement normally happened inside a certain area with the most common diameter of 100–200 m. In about half of investigated cases, the shift thus remained inside one settlement unit, and accordingly demonstrated continuous settlement use from the Early Iron Age (c 500 BC) until the end of the Viking Age or later. On the other hand, such a shifting character makes it archaeologically much more complicated to locate these settlement sites (Göthberg 2000: 105, 150–66; Solberg 2000: 150–4; Jensen 2004; Welinder 2009: 395–8).

Everywhere in the North a settlement shift from directly on the coast towards locations a few kilometres inland have been recorded in the 6th century (e.g. Crumlin-Pedersen 1991; Näsman 1991; Christoffersen & Porsmose 1996; Welinder 2009: 395), which has normally been explained by times of unrest, the threat of pirates, and the generally increased belligerency of society. These ideas are supported by the reappearance of fishing villages only a few hundred metres from the actual coast in the 13th–14th century, when the centralized power succeeded in minimizing the danger of sudden attacks from the sea (Crumlin-Pedersen 1996).

### *Impact of the year AD 536 in Estonia*

Valter Lang has suggested a 6th–7th-century settlement shift in Estonia, too, using northern coastal districts of the country as an example. One of his main arguments is the decrease of graves in the region around present-day Tallinn (Fig. 4), which coincided with the emergence of a settlement complex at Iru hillfort in the lower reaches of the Pirita River (Lang 1996: 34–104, 476–7). Nevertheless, contemporary graves also seem to have been absent in the vicinity of the Iru hillfort, and the evidence or absence of archaeologically visible graves does not constitute sufficient grounds for suggesting a settlement

move. The whole hypothesis remains weakly grounded because Lang has not paid attention to the question of sustainability of this presumed sudden settlement concentration in the peripheral zone of an arable cluster.

I prefer to consider the emergence of settlement complexes like Iru, which was supplemented with an open settlement in the 7th century, as a parallel process with the development everywhere in the North, where seasonal trade centres become archaeologically detectable starting from the 6th century (Mägi 2004 with references). Hillforts connected with merchandise nodal points were a widespread phenomenon especially in the eastern and southern coast of the Baltic Sea (e.g. Bogucki 2004), and the East–West international trade routes through Estonia started to take shape in the same, pre-Viking Period (Callmer 2000; Mägi 2011b). As was pointed out before, the population in nodal points like Iru could vary remarkably by season. People resided most of their time on their ordinary farms in the vicinity of the arable lands, where the lack of graves probably requires other, more ideological explanations (Mägi 2007b).

My research on Estonian coastal areas has not indicated a coherent settlement shift in the Middle Iron Age. Such ideas seem to be greatly based on the change in the location of graves – the 5th–6th century is notably a period when *tarand* graves and mortuary houses fell out of use (see also Lang 1996: 270). Their successors, stone graves without formal structure, were in most cases located at a different spot from the earlier grave constructions, but they still mark, almost without exceptions, the same settlements – known as villages or manors in historical sources. Examples where graves altogether disappear from a settlement unit occur, but are quite exceptional (e.g. Väkra in central Saaremaa). However, not all prehistoric periods are always covered by these stone graves; any gaps could be the result either of the lack of grave goods or the insufficient extent of excavations (see above; Mägi 2002b).

Trying to demonstrate a remarkable population decrease after the year AD 536, Tvauri has presented a whole line of pollen analysis results. They point to different centuries during the Middle Iron Age and Viking Age, which Tvauri explains by the inaccuracy of the method, claiming that the real cause might anyhow have been the climatically disastrous year 536 (Tvauri 2012: 307). This approach is not completely convinc-





ing, considering that the whole period from the 5th to the mid-9th century was characterized by cooling weather, ending with extraordinary cold winters in the beginning of the 9th century (Gunn 2000: Fig. 1.1).

It is impossible to overlook the global climatic catastrophe in the years 536–37 and in the beginning of the 540s, which absolutely certainly also impacted on the inhabitants of the area of present-day Estonia. Two summers with dry fog and no sunshine, as written sources from southern countries described it, must have completely spoiled the harvest, causing serious famine and social disturbance. Some weapon graves reported in west Estonia can indirectly reflect the times of unrest that followed. It is not known whether the depopulation caused by famine was made worse by the Plague of Justinian – there are no written sources of such an early plague wave in northern Europe. In any case, human loss might have been considerable.

However, as was demonstrated before, the conspicuous decrease in archaeological material does not characterize all areas in the North, while settlement even seems to have widened in Finland and northern Scandinavia (Tvauri 2012: 309–11 with references). Explanations involving big agricultural differences between these areas and Estonia are not convincing. Neither has the decrease in archaeological material in neighbouring countries reached further than the 6th century – the 7th century can be considered in Scandinavia as the time of increasing archaeological evidence again (e.g. Näsman 2000: 60–2; Solberg 2000: 203; Skre 2008: 353). No decrease of archaeological evidence has been reported in the other Baltic countries either. Archaeological evidence in Estonia, as well as in most parts of Finland and in the Livic area in Latvia, on the other hand, remained scarce until the end part of the 10th century (Mägi 2005b).

I would like to conclude that Tvauri's vision of an extraordinarily strong impact of the year AD 536 event on Estonia is exaggerated, even though some influence certainly took place. The shortage of burial places during quite a long period is presumably connected with an ideology that might have been different from that of the most neighbouring areas. This view is in correlation with ideological differences expressed in the burials known from this period, as well as from periods before and after.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Estonian Middle Iron Age and Viking Age society was essentially hierarchical and non-egalitarian, as suggested otherwise by scholars in the first half of the 20th century. Power organization can be described as corporate, and the society as a whole probably labelled as heterarchy. In this society, members of dominant families were elected as representatives of their clan, chieftains in peaceful times as well as warlords. Some of the dominant families were probably more influential than others, but this authority rested upon collective, or family-based, property and power, and was not directly associable with particular individuals. Prominent families lived in large landed estates, which were made possible by the use of slave power. The cultural landscape probably consisted of different units, among them hamlets and villages proper. Hillforts and settlements next to them can be interpreted as settlements with strongly varying seasonal populations.

Institutions of power in societies as they might have been in Estonia normally formed a kind of council, frequently duplicated each other and were based on different social arenas, for instance military affairs or clan structures. Women might have had access to some of them – e.g. to some kind of councils for clan representatives. Executive power was certainly practised by chieftains whose mandates were, however, limited, especially if compared with potentates in societies based on individual hierarchy. Especially in more important questions, these chieftains were completely dependent on councils or regular assemblies (for cultural anthropological parallels see e.g. Keesing 1981: 221–300; Fagan 1991: 419–26; Williams 1997).

The aforementioned individual-collectivist differences, as well as the weapon symbolism appearing in burial rites, seem to indicate that the concrete way in which warriors could exercise their power within the framework of such corporate organizations was somewhat limited, but increased considerably towards the end of the 10th century. Although kings, princes and chieftains in deeply hierarchical pre-state or early state societies always had to count with magnates as well, their personal influence in decision making was presumably many times bigger than that of the potentates in even Late Viking Age Estonia, let alone the centuries preceding this period.

Essential aspects of Estonian society, such as features in the settlement pattern or warrior-associated Viking Age artefactual culture, possessed strong similarities with eastern Scandinavia (e.g. Jets 2012). Although we can thus speak of a common culture sphere, the social organization as such could presumably not be directly compared with the central Swedish or Gotlandic one, although it has been a long-lasting tradition in Estonian archaeology. Especially burial rites suggest differently organized communities, with much stronger corporate attitudes than among western or southern neighbours. We can only speculate that this organization was probably also supported by a different ideology and mythological world view.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars, notably Tina Thurston, have nevertheless equalized heterarchy more or less with decentralized hierarchical organizations, like chiefdoms in pre-state Scandinavia, or early kingdoms in western Europe (Thurston 2002; 2010). In her study, the term heterarchy thus becomes another ambivalent label covering a huge range of different societies.

<sup>2</sup> Majority of Estonian prehistoric burial grounds, especially in coastal Estonia, are stone graves, that is, the remains of dead, cremated or not, were laid above ground and covered with stones, or scattered between stones later. Stone constructions above the burials vary in different periods. They can take a proper form (e.g. stone cist graves, tarand graves, stone circle graves), or just be some stones without formal structure.

<sup>3</sup> Tarand grave in its classic form is a stone grave type in Estonia during the first half of the 1st millennium AD, characterised by rectangular enclosures of stones, and resembling house foundations. The author of this article has, therefore, earlier put forward a theory that these burial places originally were wooden mortuary houses on top of stone foundations (Mägi 2005a).

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Jaana Limbo-Simovart, biological anthropologist, 25 February 2013.

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