Facing the sea

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A prehistoric harbour site in a ritualized landscape

Research into Estonian prehistoric and medieval maritime landscapes got wind in its sails from the second half of the 1990s, and particularly in the early 2000s. To a certain extent, there has always been some discussion of historical harbours, but it has remained on the level of romantic visions of prehistory. The actual localization of archaeological harbour sites has been generally considered more or less impossible until very recent times.

One of the main reasons why archaeologists did not deal with historical maritime landscapes in Estonia was the system of numerous restrictions connected to coastal areas in the Soviet Union. There was also the Iron Curtain in a broader sense, separating Estonian archaeologists from the western academic thought and publications. Free access to the sea turned into a beautiful dream, and people started to believe that sailing to other countries was risky and complicated. The prevailing political situation was unintentionally projected back into history.

Another important aspect was the scarcity of cartographic material. Maps that Soviet-time archaeologists could use were only for very general overviews and often deliberately misleading, while exact maps were concealed. Although the land mass rise in the western and northwestern parts of Estonia, and even the speed of it[1] was generally known, it remained impossible to evaluate the process on landscape – maps with contour lines belonged to special files. In the early 1990s when the maps on a scale of 1:10000 and with contour lines after every meter, originally meant for the use of Soviet military forces, became available for archaeologists, research on landscape archaeology changed remarkably. New general mapping of Estonia on a scale of 1:5000, which started in the 1990s, is still in process, and several areas are not yet covered. In addition, new perspectives opened to researchers in the early 1990s with the possibility of working in the archives of other countries – for instance, the greater part of late 17th-century land survey maps of Saaremaa are kept in the Swedish State Archive in Stockholm.

[1] The speed of the land mass elevation in Estonia is 2.5-3 m in 1000 years.

The research project "Maritime landscapes on late prehistoric and medieval Saaremaa," initiated in 2003, concentrated on coastal landscapes of Saaremaa, the biggest Estonian island.[2] On a smaller scale, the subject had been treated already in preliminary research in the second half of the 1990s. In the course of the study, methods and criteria have been worked out for the definition of ancient coastal landscapes, for the interpretation of littoral settlement pattern and the localization of harbour sites. Unfortunately, many places that could have served as prehistoric harbour sites by their topographical and cultural conditions proved to have been completely demolished by Soviet-time landscape development or military buildings.[3] Several prehistoric or medieval harbour sites have nevertheless been located, and archaeological excavations have been carried out at some of them (Fig. 1).[4] At present, the research is concentrated on selected areas with a well-preserved landscape. One of them is Viltina in the northeastern end of the Kõiguste peninsula on southern Saaremaa.

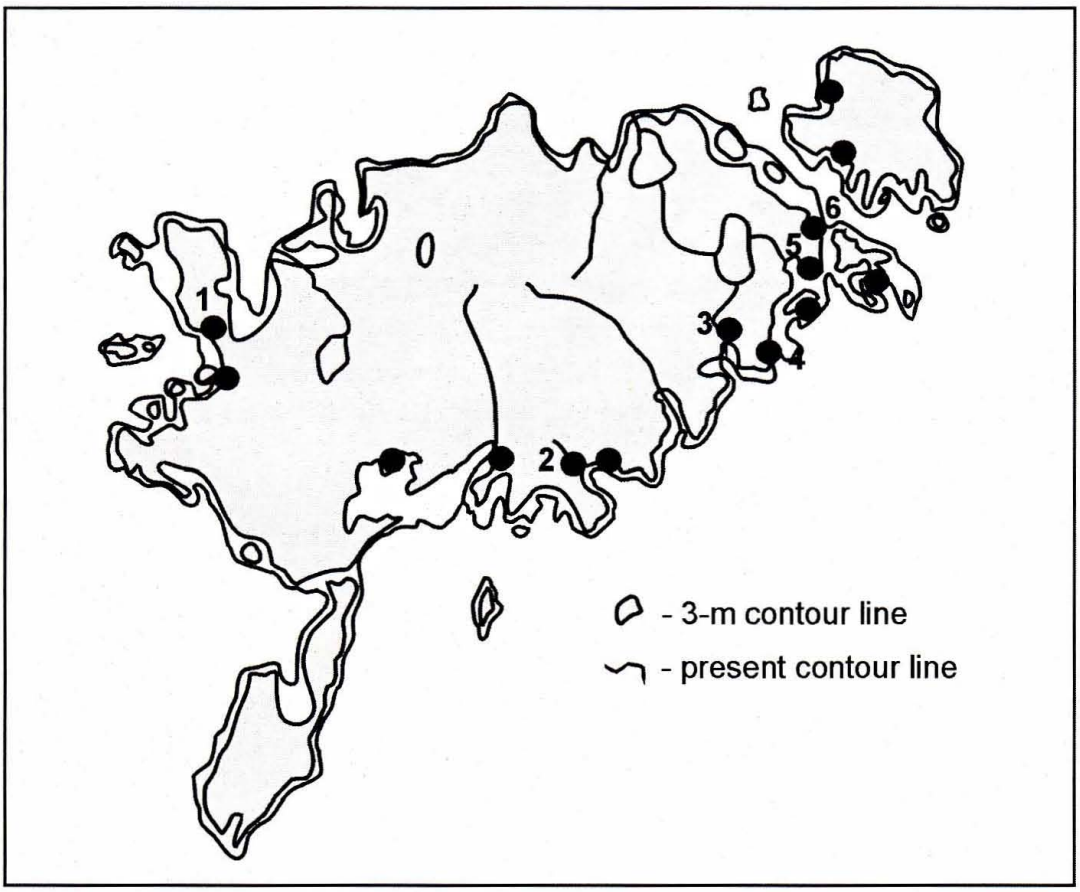

Figure 1. Prehistoric and medieval harbour sites investigated on Saaremaa so far. Sites mentioned in text: 1 Kurevere, 2 Pälla, 3 Rõõsa (Paemõis), 4 Viltina, 5 Neemi, 6 Tornimäe.

[2] The project is financed by Estonian Science Foundation, Grands No 5432 and 6998.
[3] Mägi 2004.
[4] See e g Mägi 2005.

Location in the cultural landscape

Present Viltina is a small dispersed village with seven farmsteads, which only come back to life during summer-season. The farms remain at a distance of 500-1500 m from the present sea-shore. Former single farmsteads were established as a village only during the 18th century, and at the end of the century, a hamlet called Filtin is marked on the map of Saaremaa .[5]

On late 17th-century land survey maps, the site of the later Viltina village is occupied by single farmsteads. The most prominent of them seems to have been Kofferra farm at the distance of about 600 m from the 17th-century coast. This and the other farms in the present Viltina area belonged to Audla (Haucül) manor 7.5 km away while all other farmsteads in the surroundings were subjects of local manors.[6] On the map from 1874-75, the site of the earlier big Kofferra farm is empty but a small farmstead next to the site is called Linna (Fort, in present language also Town; Fig. 2). A field next to the latter is marked as Linnamäe põld (Hill-Fort Field)[7].

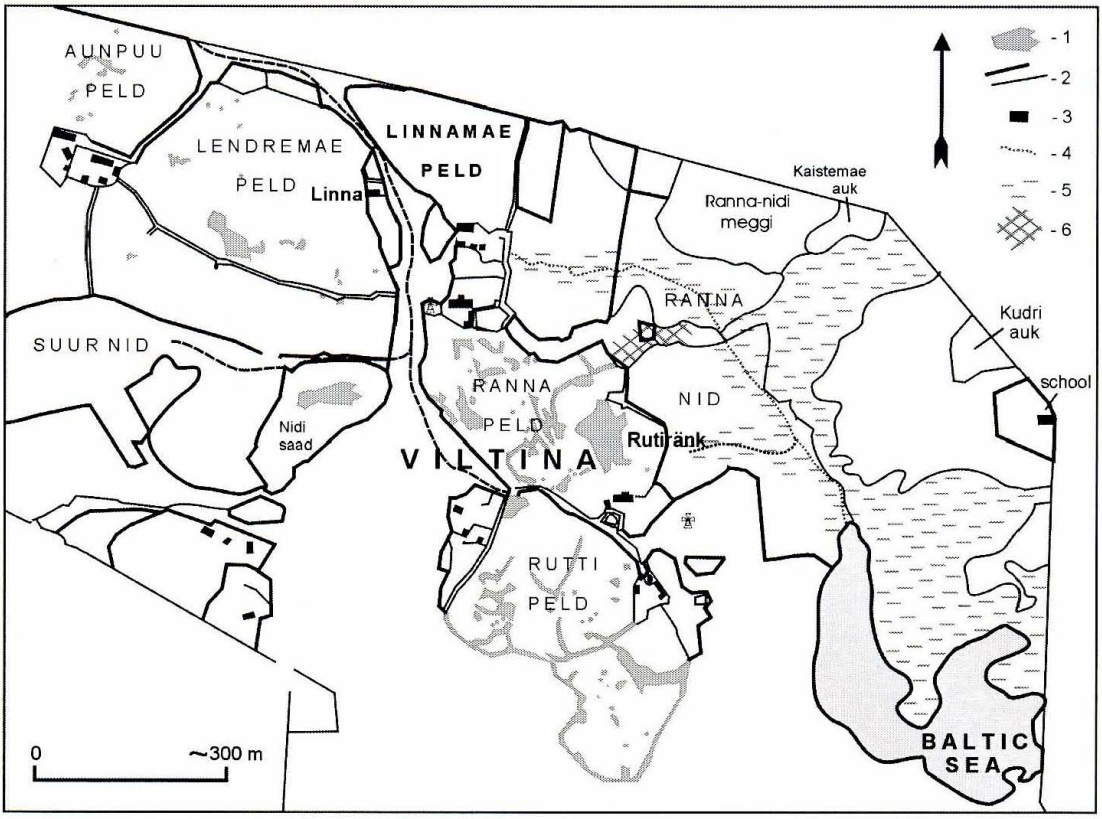

Figure 2. Viltina village and its surroundings. Re-drawn from a map from 1875 (EA* 3724-5-2946). 1 stony elevations, 2 borders, partly probably stone fences, 3 buildings, 4 brooks, 5 probable harbour site.

* EA - the Estonian Historical Archives, Tartu

[5] Mellin 1798.
[6] EA 308–2–64.
[7] EA 3724–5–2946.

Study of (micro)toponyms on the coastal areas of Saaremaa has demonstrated that place names connected to "hill-forts" or "towns" can be considered as indirect indicators of prehistoric harbour sites.[8] For instance the hill of the Viking Age Tornimäe harbour, which has been excavated several times, was known as Linnamägi (Hill-Fort) up to as late as the early 19th century.[9] Elevations in later wetlands, the earlier sea, known in local tradition as hill-forts, have been also recorded elsewhere, e. g. at Neemi in eastern Saaremaa, and at Kuru 5 km west of Viltina.[10] Surface surveys at the above-mentioned Linnamägi sites have indicated that they were definitely not used as fortifications, if used for human activities at all. In a few cases, prehistoric harbour sites were according to local tradition also believed to have been manors.

Place names connected to power structures can be considered as symbols in the manifestation of authority over the landscape.[11] Harbour sites that once functioned as centres of sorts remained in local tradition as such, even though the memory of their original function was erased and replaced with other explanations. In a situation when the actual harbour sites were not conspicuous in the landscape, and had remained remote from the prevalent coast, the obscure memory of the significance of the place could easily have been attributed to some more dominant place in the terrain, e. g. to some hills or knolls that resembled prehistoric hill-forts.

Nevertheless, there actually was a hill-fort only 1400 m away from the Viltina site, associated with another field nearby called Linnamäe põld (Hill-Fort Field). The fortified settlement of Asva was first used at the end of the Bronze Age, when it probably functioned as a centre of bronze casting and international trade. The settlement was situated on an islet near the coast of those days, and the proposed landing place next to it can be considered a Bronze Age predecessor of the Viltina harbour. The fortified settlement has been the object of excavation several times.[12] 6th-9th-century finds on top of the Bronze Age layer indicate that the former site was taken into use again in the second half of the 1st millennium AD, when a small hill-fort was built on what was then a narrow cape on the coast.

The soil in the present Viltina village is particularly stony and unproductive. Arable lands of somewhat better quality can be found around Randvere and Asva villages, both at approximately the same distance, that is 1–2 km, from Viltina (Fig. 3). The settlement unit at the place of present Randvere village has been there since the first centuries AD at the latest, as is demonstrated by an excavated cairn in the middle of the village fields. In the Viking Age, a burial ground, consisting, on the one hand, of stone circle

[8] Mägi 2004, 145-146.
[9] EA, 2072-3-419; Luce 1811; Mägi 2005.
[10] Mägi 2004, 145-146.
[11] See also Westerdahl 2002.
[12] See e g Indreko 1939; Lõugas, Selirand 1989, 204-205.

graves, and, on the other, of a stone cemetery without any formal structure, has been established right next to the old grave.[13] The settlement unit of Asva is not marked by stone graves in the vicinity, but burial grounds from varying periods can be found on the fields of Kahtla and Laimjala settlements a bit further away from Asva and Randvere.

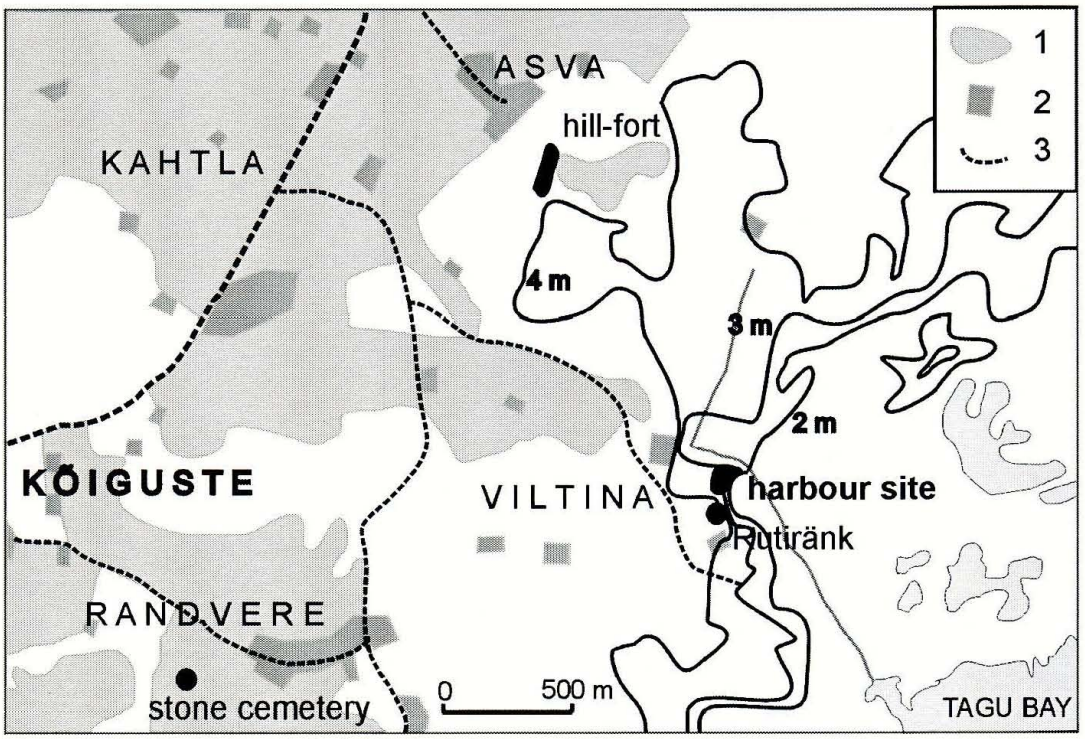

Figure 3. Viltina and surrounding cultural landscape. 1 present arable lands, 2 areas presently covered with buildings, 3 present roads.

In the 10th century, a stone cemetery was founded on top of a hill right on the contemporary coast at the present Viltina village. This cemetery – Viltina Rutiränk – was almost completely uncovered in 1940, and proved to be one of the largest late prehistoric burial grounds ever excavated in Estonia, with abundant find material.[14] It actually consisted not only of the cemetery on top of the hill, but of several additional small cairns on the surrounding fields. Most of them were probably individual graves, and some of these were also uncovered in 1940. Investigations of the area, which started anew in 1999, point to even more burial grounds in the vicinity.[15]

The unproductive arable lands of the Viltina village are in contradiction with the abundance of graves and the often luxurious or foreign artifacts in them. This suggests that the large cemetery was founded there and used due to some sort of ritual significance of the area, perhaps because of a (sacred) meeting place for rituals and negotiations in the vicinity. As in other littoral

[13] Mägi 2002, 47–51.
[14] Mägi 2002, 60–63.
[15] See e g the Käo-Matsi grave; Mägi 2000.

areas, such places were often marked by a concentration of burial grounds (e.g. Kurevere in western Saaremaa or Muuksi in North-Estonia), and were located close to suitable landing places – travel by seaways was presumably preferred.

The coastline of southern Saaremaa was and still is heavily indented, enabling the selection of quite a number of naturally suitable landing places. Nevertheless, in selecting a place for a prehistoric harbour, direct connection with agrarian hinterlands seems to have been a determinant factor. The investigation of maritime landscapes on Saaremaa has indicated that prehistoric harbour sites can only be found in the neighbourhood of truly arable lands.[16] It is essential to note here that the coastal area must be understood as not only the actual coast but a zone up to about 5 km inland from the sea. In all cases of located prehistoric harbours on Saaremaa, settlement units with truly arable lands, often medieval manors, have remained at a distance of 1-4 km from the harbour site.[17]

In the vicinity of Asva and Viltina, the comparatively deep sea water of a protected inlet reached close to arable lands, thus creating favourable conditions for harbour sites. It is likely that the actual harbour was situated in varying places during different periods of history; at the present time, there is still a small harbour in Ruhve, 2 km south of Viltina. The gradual "move" of the actual harbour closer to the open see can be followed at many prehistoric and later harbour places, and has been predominantly caused by the upheaval of the land mass.[18] As long as society was economically based on the same primary resources, i.e. agriculture, the harbour sites of local communities remained in the same area of cultural landscape.

The present Viltina village is situated at the southern end of the prehistoric Pöide district, in a periphery regarding the central hill-fort and later the church about 15 km away. Still, the abundance of various archaeological sites there suggests that, in prehistory, it might have been considered a sort of local level centre. The area seems to have lost its importance in the Middle Ages. From the 13th up to the 16th century it formed a border area of only marginal usage in the furthest end of the lands belonging to the Livonian Order, regarding the infertile arable land's probably poor and insignificant periphery. A manor economy was established in Kõiguste only in the 18th century.

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[16] For a similar connection in Sweden see Näsman 1991.
[17] Mägi 2004.
[18] Mägi 2004, 147–152; Scandinavian parallels see e g Lundström 1981; Carlsson 1999, 181–184.

Research history

The surroundings of the present Viltina village are one of the archaeologically best investigated areas on the island of Saaremaa. The excavations at Asva fortified settlement started as early as 1934, and continued, with several breaks, up to the year 1966. However, most of the sites in the Kõiguste peninsula were excavated in 1940 in connection with the annexation of the area by Soviet army bases. These were rescue excavations carried out in a hurry. The cemetery of Viltina Rutiränk, 3,236 m^2, was uncovered within a period of two months; at the same time, excavations took place at the Roman Period and Viking Age stone graves at Randvere. The archaeologists working at these sites also tried to conduct surface survey in the surroundings of the graves. In course of these trips, a third cemetery in the southern part of the Kõiguste peninsula was recorded but excavations there were already opposed by Soviet military authorities. The archaeologists Artur Vassar and Marta Schmiedehelm, who excavated the Viltina Rutiränk cemetery, were checking other possible stone graves around it, and reported that no more burial places were recorded in the area. Later investigation has showed that they were wrong.

However, buildings for the military bases demolished only some areas in the southern part of the Kõiguste peninsula. The plans were changed due to the 2nd World War, and the inhabitants could turn back to their homes in Viltina and in the surrounding villages. The area remained peripheral throughout the Soviet era. The infertile soils there were probably the main reason why land development works of the period, which wiped out several archaeological sites from Estonian landscape, hardly reached the Viltina surroundings. The number of local inhabitants remained comparatively small, and now most of the farms in Viltina, as well in the surrounding villages, are only used as summer houses.

Stone cemeteries

The Viltina Rutiränk cemetery, a hill covered with an abundance of stones and nowadays also trees, stands right on the seashore of late prehistory. Tillage of the land had probably destroyed a part of the cemetery, before it was uncovered for the most part in 1940. The site was known by the locals as an ancient burial ground even before the war, and various finds were obtained from there.[19]

The burials in the cemetery dated mostly to the 10th-12th centuries and were remarkable for the precious metal artefacts and luxury items they contained. A large portion of the grave goods was made up of weapons as well as horse gear: stirrups, bridles, and bits. Regarding the finds, the place had

[19] Saaremaa 1924, p 105; Vassar 1940, p 1.

been most intensively used during the 12th century. The latest burials in the cemetery were probably three inhumations, equipped with 13th–14th-century artifacts. Among other finds, much greater variety of ceramics than in other excavated cemeteries on Saaremaa can be pointed out, presumably reflecting the overseas connections of the local community.[20]

Research from the last few decades has made it reasonable to assume that Estonian prehistoric stone cemeteries were burial grounds only for select elite families while the rest of the population was buried in some way that did not leave archaeological traces. Burials were often mixed. To a certain extent more individual graves characterized mainly the Viking Age and later Saaremaa.[21] Calculations for estimating the number of burials in the Viltina burial ground have, however, remained very obscure. Vassar estimated that over 50 individuals had been buried in the eastern part of the cemetery, which he had excavated.[22] Adding the burials from the rest of the cemetery, the full number of the deceased from the preserved part of the Viltina cemetery could be about a hundred. The finds indicate that both males and females were buried in the graves. Accordingly, the burial ground might have been used by two or three families.

The analyses of the Randvere cemetery, belonging to one of the settlement units that formed the hinterland of the Viltina harbour, have indicated that new burials there stopped nearly completely in the end of the 11th or in the 12th century. After that, the old grave remained a burial place mainly for children. It suggests that the members of Randvere elite family who had died as adults were now also buried in Viltina cemetery, together with people from Asva, and perhaps some other (elite) families.[23]

Such practice can reflect the increase of maritime activities and/or the increasing attraction of Viltina as a sacred place. When the subsistence strategies of a settlement unit are thoroughly agricultural, power is often demonstrated through stone graves on the outskirts of arable lands or inside fields. At Viltina, as probably in several other cases, maritime activities and seaborn connections might have played a notable role in the local economy, which resulted in the erection of stone graves near to a place that was the most essential for the community – the harbour.

Harbour site

Already Vassar noticed the location of the Viltina Rutiränk cemetery on the contemporary coast, at the end of a little bay protected from sea winds by small islets. He was the first scholar to link the cemetery with a possible

[20] Mägi 2002, 60–63; Tvauri 2005, 87–118.
[21] Mägi 2002, 125-137.
[22] Vassar 1940, 8.
[23] Mägi 2002, 47–49, 62.

harbour in the vicinity.[24] Clear correlation between stone graves on coast and prehistoric harbour sites on Gotland has been claimed by Dan Carlsson.[25] The investigation on the maritime landscapes of Saaremaa has demonstrated that the example from Gotland is appropriate there as well, although it seems not be true for some other areas in Scandinavia, e.g. Denmark.[26] On Saaremaa, where stone graves on higher sites have probably dominated the landscape during their time of use, all graves known so far, which have been situated on the earlier coastline, mark areas that could have been used for harbour sites on the basis of both natural and cultural evidence.[27]

Vassar also drew attention to the fact that in the eastern part of the Viltina Rutiränk cemetery there were two areas that contained considerable amounts of boat rivets spread in oval circles. At the same time, the place comprised very few stones and seemed to lack any cultural layer. The boat rivets had not been in a fire and probably originated from boats that had been dragged to the borders of the cemetery and left there to decay. These areas never contained any bones, though some find complexes had occurred there. Vassar believed that these complexes were cenotaphs or that the bones had completely disappeared.[28]

An alternative possibility is that the boats had been intentionally left to disintegrate on the margins of graves, precisely during the use of the cemetery or afterwards. The special treatment of old watercraft, burning the boats at Midsummer festivities or leaving them to decay on particular places, has been widespread on Estonian islands up to our days. The custom of letting old boats decay on stone cemeteries has also been in use in Karelia, and the archaeologist Nils Cleve has explained the frequent occurrence of boat rivets in Finnish stone graves by this custom.[29]

The probable prehistoric harbour place near the Rutiränk cemetery was indeed discovered in the spring of 1999.[30] Moving along the Late Iron Age coastline and taking soil samples for phosphate analyses (later analysed in the laboratory at the Institute of History of Tallinn University), 3-4 times higher content of phosphate was recorded in an area about 50 m northeastwards from the Rutiränk grave, and about 100 m further. The area was spread along a slope where the coastline must have been about 1,000 years ago. The ground at the foot of the slope is soggy even nowadays. Trial pits dug in the upper part of the slope revealed a layer of black soil, about 40 cm

[24] Vassar 1940.
[25] Carlsson 1992.
[26] Ulriksen 1998,113–142; Christoffersen 1996.
[27] Mägi 2004, 140-142, 147-152.
[28] Vassar 1940.
[29] Cleve 1978, pp 86–89 and references.
[30] Mägi 2000.

thick, which contained some burnt stones, uncremated bone fragments, and a few pieces of charcoal.[31]

Investigation of the area with a metal detector resulted in quite a number of metal finds: bronze belt buckles, belt fittings, an axe, silver and bronze ornaments, some Kufic coins, weights and several boat rivets (Fig. 4, 5). The most remarkable find was a deposit of different artefacts in a pile: a sword, a large spearhead, two javelin heads, a knife together with the bronze mounts of a man's knife sheath, a belt buckle of the Gotland-Baltic type, a smaller knife, two spiral finger rings with middle-plates, bits, iron bridle mountings, and a fragment of some bronze plating. The objects had deliberately been damaged and been in a fire. No bones were found in the immediate neighbourhood of the deposit, but a cluster of cremated bones, together with rectangular belt mountings, came to light about 30 cm from the weapons. The deposit was interpreted as a probable cenotaph.[32] All items belonging to it, as well as all other artefacts from the site, dated to the 11th, seldom to the 12th century.

Figure 4. Silver artifacts and weights found during surface survey trips to Viltina.

[31] Mägi 2000.
[32] Mägi 2000.

Figure 5. Artifacts found during surface survey trips to Viltina.

While most of the finds were found near the slope, in a dark soil with only a few stones or without any stones at all, the 11th century deposit was uncovered in a stony area. It was the beginning of a ridge that ran parallel with the ancient coastline, at a distance of about 20-25 m from it. The ridge consisted of a tight bed of lime and granite stones, resembling the infill stones of Saaremaa graves. It was interpreted as a stone grave with cremation burials, typical of the Late Iron Age on Saaremaa.

Regarding the preliminary results, the site was assumed to have been a probable late Iron Age harbour place, with another stone cemetery – called Viltina Käo-Matsi, according to the nearest farm – right next to it. Archaeological excavations there were initiated in 2004.

Archaeological excavations 2004–2005

During two months in 2004 and 2005, 174 m^2 were uncovered at the Viltina site. The area was divided between four excavation plots in different parts of the area (Fig. 6).

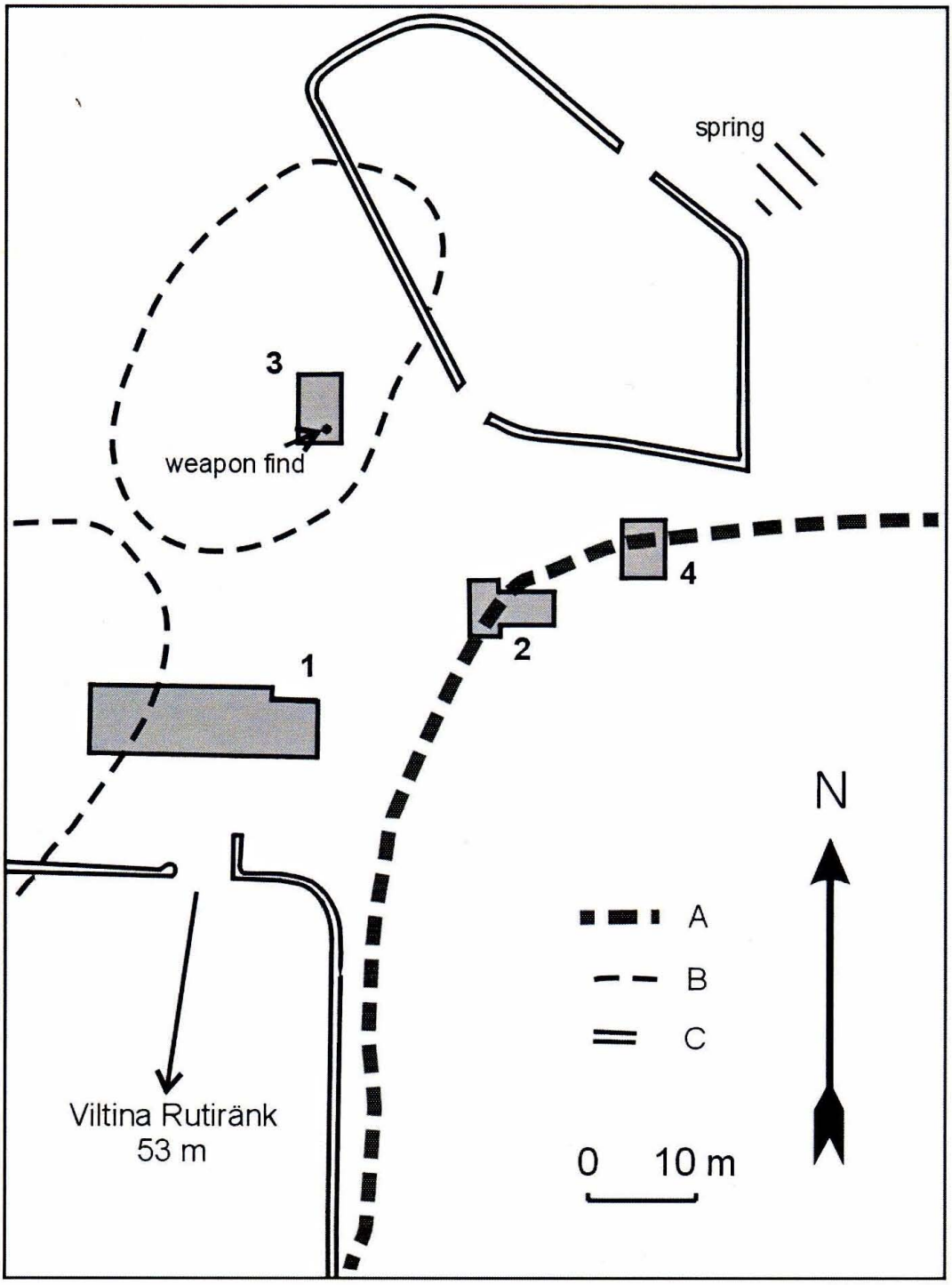

Figure 6. Map of the Viltina exacavations. 1–4 excavation plots, A the edge of the slope, B stony elevation, C stone fence.

The **excavation plot No 1** was the biggest of the four: the final area opened by 2005 was 116 m^2. In many parts of the plot, subsoil gravel came to light right underneath a thin layer of sod, while in some other places stone girdles were recorded (Fig. 7). In a few cases, the latter formed more regular stone structures, and sometimes contained stones placed regularly in circles, probably indicating places of posts.

Figure 7. Presumable building remains in the central and western part of the plot No 1 at Viltina. View from SE.

The prevailing technique for building houses in Estonia, as well as in most part of Eastern Europe, has been the horizontal log technique since the Bronze Age at the latest.[33] It complicates the ascertainment of prehistoric building remains: timber constructions do not preserve and there was no reason for digging post-holes in the stony ground. Post-holes rarely occur also at archaeological settlement sites[34] and in ethnographic architecture, especially in Coastal Estonia.[35] Parallels with the above-mentioned evidence, as well as with similar-looking stone structures, excavated at Finnish and Scandinavian sites,[36] suggest that the stone girdles at the Viltina site were remains of timber buildings. The idea is supported by dozens of iron nails and rivets found in this area. Drawing parallels with ethnographic buildings, the stones might have been stuck underneath the walls of timber houses.

Regarding the girdles of limestones, the houses might not have been very big. About 4x5 m houses have also been recorded in other excavations in Estonia;[37] these small houses seem to have been especially common on hill-forts where the space between the walls was limited. No traces of ovens, characteristic of Estonian dwelling houses, were found at Viltina, but quite a large sooty area – probably a spread fireplace – was uncovered in the middle

[33] Lang 1996, 38–40.
[34] See e.g. Lavi 2005.
[35] Ränk 1939; Tihase 1974.
[36] See e g Westerdahl 1989, 101-104.
[37] See e g Lavi 2005.

of the excavation plot. It all suggests light, probably temporary buildings, which were built close to each other.

Small pieces of charcoal were found in different parts of the excavated area. More charcoal surrounded by stones came to light in the southwestern corner of the plot, probably indicating a fireplace. Most of these remains were left outside of the excavations of 2005.

The clearest lines of stones – a nearly complete circle of granite stones, with a diameter of 2.8 m, which, after a narrow gap, was surrounded by a presumably quadrangular zone of limestone slabs – was found in the eastern part of the excavated area, a bit more than 10 m from the beginning of the slope (Fig. 8). The circular construction, however, resembled a stone circle grave, a grave form characteristic to Viking Age Saaremaa. Still, it lacked proper infill stones, surrounding deposit of stones or cremation deposit inside the circle, which all characterized the stone circle graves. Similar temporarily buildings on stone foundations, e.g. conical summer kitchens, are common in Estonian ethnographic architecture. Constructions resembling the circle at Viltina have been recorded in some other archaeologically excavated settlement sites in Estonia, and interpreted as some kind of storage buildings.[38] Limestone slabs forming a clear semicircle with a diameter of 2-2.75 m also came to light in another Viking Age harbour site on Saaremaa – Tornimäe.[39]

Figure 8. Circular stone structure in the eastern part of the plot No 1 at Viltina after the remove of the sod. View from SW.

[38] Deemant 1986.
[39] Mägi 2005.

The circle at Viltina was open in the northern part; in this gap, an axe and some boat rivets were found during a surface survey trip in 1999 (Fig. 9). The rest of the finds inside the circle consisted mainly of potsherds, cremated and unburnt bone fragments.

Figure 9. Axe and boat rivets found from Viltina.

The western part of **excavation plot No. 1** was stony, and was partly reached on the ridge that in surface survey trips was interpreted as a stone cemetery. There, between and next to bigger stone boulders, at least one probable cremation burial was indeed recorded. A great number of small bronze rings were found together with the cremated bones, suggesting that the bones were originally wrapped in some sort of bronze-decorated garment. No other finds could be connected with the burial.

The area of **excavation plot No. 2** was 30 m^2, and it was situated on a slope between the area with culture layer, and the wetland, former sea. On the slope natural gravelly ground without any kind of finds was found right underneath the sod. The horizontal part of the plot was characterized by stones that formed girdles similar to these in plot No. 1. The most interesting find was a cremation burial next to a bigger granite stone right at the edge of the slope. The bones had been in an earthen vessel, and covered with a flat stone. Although the pot represented common local late Iron Age ceramic, urn burials were generally unknown on Viking Age Saaremaa. It gives a

reason to believe that the dead buried in this ceramic vessel at Viltina were not local either.

Burial customs different from the local ones have been recorded in the vicinity of several prehistoric harbour sites. It is predominantly characteristic to trade ports, and usually explained by the possibility that tradesmen and other visitors who had happened to die during their stay in the harbour or market place were buried there as well. On Saaremaa, some data also refer to unusual burials in the vicinity of some harbour sites, especially the ones that were important at the district level. For instance, uncremated human bones and some swords were found by grave digging in the later Orthodox cemetery near the Tornimäe harbour site.[40] In 1866, an inhumation burial of a man with a Viking Age Baltic-type scabbard and a one-edged sword was found in Laadjala, 1–1.5 km away from the probable main harbour of Kaarma district.[41] Inhumations did normally not occur on Viking Age or 12th-century Saaremaa, and both above-mentioned burials can, therefore, be considered exceptional.

The small **excavation plot No. 3** at Viltina was opened on an elevated stony ridge, probable cemetery, where a deposit of weapons and other artifacts had been found in 1999. As estimated, the area contained many more stones than other excavation plots of Viltina. Though some semi-circular lines of stones could be observed, no real constructions were possible to distinguish – maybe because of the limited size of the area excavated. Next to a big rock, which partly remained in the excavation plot, another deposit of 11th-century artifacts came into light – this time consisting of ornaments typical of Saaremaa women (Fig. 10). All artifacts were intact and had not been in fire. No bones could be associated with this find complex but cremated bones were uncovered in other places at excavation plot No 3, suggesting that the stony ridge really was a cemetery. Several smaller metal finds as well as ceramics were also recorded outside the two deposits.

[40] SMM 1924, 102; Mägi 2005.
[41] SMM 1924, 24; Mägi 2004, 142.

Figure 10. Collection of 11th-century female ornaments found in the plot No 3 at Viltina.

The most interesting construction was found in **excavation plot No. 4**. Measuring heights on the one-time coast, the slope towards the present wetland proved to be much steeper than normal in an about 20-m-long sector, suggesting that it had intentionally been dug steeper. 20 m^2 was opened in the beginning of the steeper part of the slope. On the horizontal part of the plot, gravelly soil occurred right underneath the sod, together with a clear straight line of stones along the beginning of the slope. The stones had been laid there in the Viking Age, as indicated by some potsherds between them. The construction of stones continued on the slope, where two places of posts lined with stones were uncovered, both 1.6 m from the straight line of stones along the edge of the slope (Fig. 11). The lower part of the slope was covered with 30–40-cm-thick layer of wetland soil without any sort of finds. The construction can be interpreted as the remains of a wooden platform built on the slope. Taking into consideration that the slope had been the sea coast, the platform should be interpreted as a wharf.

Figure 11. Remains of probable jetty in the plot No 4 at Viltina. View from SW.

Remains of wooden wharves or jetties in archaeological harbour sites are quite rare. On Saaremaa, obscure data of wooden constructions have been also collected from Tornimäe in the eastern part of the island. Writings from the beginning of the 19th century mention that local peasants found the remains of a "wooden palisade" while ploughing on the slope of the hill that has later been excavated and proved to have been a Viking Age harbour site.[42] Although the exact location and character of these finds remains obscure, it is likely to suggest that the "palisade" originally formed a part of the harbour construction, or perhaps indicated a wooden jetty.

War harbour, meeting place, or cult site?

Viltina remains quite remote – at a distance of about 15 km – from centres of its time, in a periphery where surrounding big wetlands made the overland communication with other districts of Saaremaa complicated. It must have been much easier to access Viltina by sea. However, the culture layer at Viltina is too thin to indicate frequent use of the place, and differs clearly from that at e.g. Tornimäe, another harbour site from almost the same time. The finds of Tornimäe consisted mainly of potsherds as well as of a great number of animal and fish bones, but smaller bronze items, glass beads, and even intact weapons have come to light there as well in the course of time.[43]

[42] Luce 1811; Mägi 2005.
[43] Mägi 2005.

Finds of ceramics, as well as bones, were much rarer at Viltina; intact bronze, iron and even silver items, however, were more frequent. Many artifacts found in the area with the remains of buildings at Viltina were fittings of bridles or belts that may have been lost accidentally; other artifacts, especially the deposits of weapons and ornaments can be considered offerings. A fragment of a broken silver pin with two silver coins and weights, found during surface survey, were perhaps the contents of a purse. The unifying feature of the Viltina and Tornimäe sites, however, is the comparatively large number of boat rivets and nails in both of these places.

The archaeological material at Tornimäe was similar to that of other dwelling places – the similarity to ordinary settlements has nevertheless been also reported at harbour sites from neighboring countries. Regarding the bone material, such maritime activities as fishing and seal hunting were repeatedly undertaken from there, while some bones with cutting marks, a few pieces of iron slag, and fragments of burned glass indicated handicraft. During the excavations in 2004, the remains of at least one building that used a horizontal log technique were uncovered. The location and intensive culture layer, as well as the find material similar to the district hill-fort 7 km away suggest that Tornimäe was a central harbour of the prehistoric Pöide district.[44]

Trial excavations at Pälla in the neighborhood of Püha parish church on southern Saaremaa in 2004 and 2005 have already resulted in a culture layer similar to Tornimäe, which made it possible to interpret the site as a late prehistoric central harbour of another district on the island. At Pälla, a probable vassal castle had been built on top of the abandoned place in the 16th century, thus demonstrating the continuity of the cultural landscape. Tornimäe had been in use as a harbour for a medieval tax-collecting centre as well.

Nothing like that ever happened at Viltina. The site was in use during the 11^{th}-12^{th} centuries and then abandoned – because of the land rise or, what is more likely, because of changed society. It is difficult to interpret the site, however. Its location and the probable remains of seasonally used buildings indicate harbour site. This interpretation is supported by the traces of a plausible wharf. Single burials have also been found in Scandinavian and Finnish prehistoric harbour places,[45] and the same is true for the deposits of artifacts as well as for individual offerings.

The thin culture layer and the remains of light buildings at Viltina suggest that people only gathered there occasionally. Cemeteries and single burials in the vicinity, as well as several deposits of artifacts – cenotaphs or offerings – suggest the sacral character of the site. Perhaps it was a place for conducting common rituals and/or negotiations. My earlier writings presented

[44] Mägi 2005.
[45] See e g Lundström 1981, 117–120; Carlsson 1999.

idea that the Viltina site might have functioned as a war harbour, and this can not be excluded either – the meeting place might have been used for gathering war ships as well. All conclusions at the present stage of investigation are preliminary, however, and can be changed when excavations at the site continue in the summer of 2006.

Abbreviations

EA - the Estonian Historical Archives, Tartu

Leva vid Östersjöns kust

Living by the Baltic Sea

En antologi om naturförutsättningar och resursutnyttjande på båda sidor av Östersjön ca 800–1800

Red. Sven Lilja

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