

Changing Connections, Changing Society

Burial Rites on Iron Age Saaremaa

Saaremaa is the second biggest island in the Baltic Sea. It actually consists of several islands and islets, and is normally considered together with the island of Muhu, as well as Vilsandi, Abruha and others; their total area is 2969 km². The landscape is flat and stony, in the eastern and northern part also sandy; the coast is heavily indented and the coastal waters shallow in most parts of the islands. The arable land is not particularly fertile, and cattle breeding has historically formed a great part of agriculture. Maritime activities have always played a notable role in the local economy. The speed of the land mass elevation is 2.5–3 m per thousand years; because of this, the archipelago in prehistoric periods consisted of several more islands, which have since merged with the main island (Fig. 1). Archaeologically, the district is one of the most abundant of sites in Estonia.

As with all islands, the material and mental culture of Saaremaa has developed independently throughout histo-

ry, and has invented impulses from nearly all neighbouring areas. The main similarities, however, are with the nearest coasts in the territory of present Estonia and Latvia, as well as with the island of Gotland, while the contacts with inland Estonia seem to have been marginal. Although being the meeting point of different culture spheres, the main influential centres have moved in the course of time, and the local culture has altered accordingly.

This article concentrates on the transformation that took place on Migration Period Saaremaa. Burial rites and graves, as the best represented and excavated archaeological monuments, have been chosen for the analysis. It was probably the development within ideology and family structure that led to the changes in the whole society, and left its imprint on the burial rites. In addition to this, re-orientation in culture contacts can be observed as a possible reason – or perhaps a consequence – of the changes.

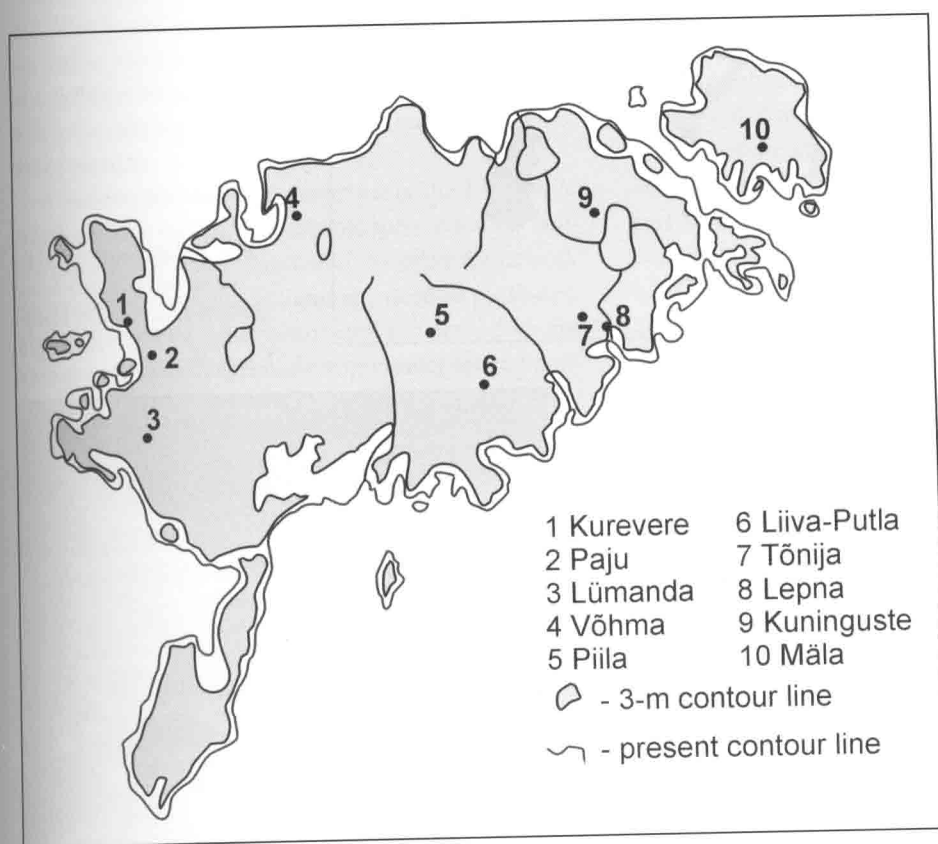


Fig. 1. Saaremaa and the sites mentioned in the article.

Fig. 2. Remains of the Lepna mortuary house. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 3. Collection of finds from the Lepna site.

Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the stone kerbs in early *tarand* grave at Poanse. After Mandel 2000: fig. 6.



Fig. 4. Possible ethnographic parallel to the Lepna mortuary house – archaic summer kitchen on Saaremaa.



1. Migration Period mortuary house at Lepna

In 2002 and 2003, archaeological excavations were carried out at Lepna, a burial ground situated in the deserted village of Lepna on southern Saaremaa, right on the seashore at its time of use. The site was completely excavated and proved to have been a building of stone and timber, which had probably dominated the coastal landscape of its time. The building had been used for storing uncremated human bones together with artifacts. It was apparently marking the entrance to a small fortified harbour site 1 km up a river nearby, where small-scale trial excavations were also carried out (Mägi 2004). Like the harbour, the mortuary house also acted as a symbol of overseas connections.

The central part of the construction consisted of a regularly rectangular pit, about 80 cm deep, dug into the ground. It was surrounded by a wall foundation of limestone slabs, with outer measurements of 8.8 x 5.3 m. The outer line of the wall had been kept straight, and the two well-preserved northern corners of the construction were regularly convex (Fig. 2).

No traces of a stone foundation were detected along a 3.5 m long line in the southern half of the south-western side of the pit; nor were collapsed stones uncovered here. If there originally was a wall here as well, it must have been built of wood. About 1.6 m wide gaps in the stone foundation were also found in the middle of both shorter walls of the construction, where they most likely indicated entrances. The bottom of the pit was covered with a fairly well preserved floor of limestone slabs. In one corner, close to the southern entrance, the remains of a fireplace were found. It was not used very often which, considering the function of the building, is quite understandable.

A building like the one unearthed at the Lepna site must have been roofed. The ethnographic parallels suggest that the roof was supported by a timber framework resting upon the ground, without any need of postholes. That kind of timber construction unfortunately does not leave any traces in the ground except under special conditions.

Human bones and artefacts were found predominantly inside the pit but also outside, especially north of the central construction. Some irregular lines of stones were detected there. Bones and artefacts had probably been buried in a box made of wood or other perishable material, partly surrounded by a wall of small limestone slabs, and covered by other smaller slabs.

These obscure lines of stones, as well as all artefact material found in the burial ground, resembled graves and artefacts from Curonia of the same period. Weapons and jewellery were more or less equally represented while the amount of ceramics was much smaller than

normally found in Estonian graves (Fig. 3). Many of the potsherds belonged to small bowls and cups, although the really tiny, miniature ceramic characteristic of Curonia has not been recorded in Saaremaa graves.

Some of the artefacts were intact, others represented only by pieces. From the jewellery, fragments of at least 10 different silver crossbow-brooches, 12 different bronze brooches and 6 silver neck-rings were counted, together with other, more or less intact silver and bronze items. All finds can be dated to the 5th–6th, perhaps the 7th century, and have clear parallels in Curonian graves of the same period.

Human bones found in Lepna were not cremated. At the same time, all individuals were represented only by few parts of the skeleton, which were brought to the burial ground as bones; thus, the bodies had been defleshed elsewhere. This is the same custom of secondary burials that has recently been recorded in several Estonian stone graves (see topic 2. 3). Inside the pit, most of the burial remains were found on the floor along the walls, and among the debris of the collapsed stone foundation. The latter had probably been originally stored in containers on top of the stone wall. Ethnographic parallels in similar buildings demonstrate that stone walls form a shelf underneath the roof, widely used for storage.

Clear ethnographic parallels also exist for the house itself. On Saaremaa and in coastal Estonia, some household buildings were erected of stone without mortar even as late as the beginning of the 20th century (e.g. Ränk 1939; Tihase 1974; Fig. 4). Ethnographic parallels can also be found for houses partly dug into the ground (Tihase 1974: 167–171). Unfortunately, no dwellings of 5th–7th-century Estonia have been excavated, and it is therefore impossible to compare the mortuary house of Lepna with contemporary living houses.

A possible archaeological counterpart on Saaremaa is the Paju 5th–6th century burial ground in the western part of the island where remains of a rectangular timber construction were unearthed surrounding a layer of stones. Human bones and burial goods were found among these stones (Tamla, Jaanits 1977). It is likely that the construction was originally a timber building, a mortuary house without a stone foundation. A so-called one-*tarand* grave at Kuninguste, eastern Saaremaa, excavated in 1971, which was dated to the 1st–2nd century AD by Lõugas (Lõugas 1974), also seems to belong to the 5th–7th century, and was probably erected on top of an earlier grave. The site was partly demolished before the excavations but an original timber building on top of a stone foundation is a possible reconstruction. Similar buildings on stone foundations have been suggested previously also for the Tuulingumäe Roman Period *tarand*-grave and the Pre-Roman Iron Age platform of a cult site (Mägi-Lõugas 1997; Mägi 2001; see topic 2. 1). The possibility for wood to survive in Saaremaa

limestone graves is minimal, and the timber remains at Paju can be explained only by the sand that covered the site there.

In all probability, parallels to the Lepna mortuary house can be found in Migration Period single-*tarand* graves in North-West Estonia, especially the area around present Tallinn (e.g. Proosa, Lagedi XIVC ja XVB, Lehmja-Loo I; see also Spreckelsen 1927; Lang 1996: 322–323), perhaps also in some 5th–6th (7th?)-century graves consisting of several *tarands* in the same area (e.g. Viimsi I ja II; Lang 1993). The similarity is most remarkably demonstrated in rectangular pavements of limestone slabs, resembling the floor in the Lepna house, which were recorded in the Lagedi XIVC and XVB graves; these pavements were, however, not surrounded by stone foundations. The possibility of originally wooden buildings, as was presumed for the Paju grave, was particularly supported by the evidence of burnt and decayed wood remains on top of the pavement in the XVB grave, documented together with finds and bones in the same layer (Spreckelsen 1927). In addition, artefacts found in the North-West Estonian Migration Period stone graves, both in the single-*tarand* ones and others, indicate close contacts with Curonia and East-Prussia, thus also being similar to the find material of Saaremaa graves. Common features with Saaremaa burial customs can be pointed out as well; nevertheless, the percentage of cremations is definitely higher in the North-West Estonian graves.

2. The world before and after Lepna: burial customs on Saaremaa

Archaeologically known Iron Age graves on Saaremaa are almost entirely stone graves, inhumations in pit graves appeared only at the end of the 12th century. Some of the stone graves were heaps that once dominated the landscape; others were built of limestone slabs and were rather flat. Quite a few stone graves marked the former coastline and particularly places suitable for landing (Mägi 2004a), others were concentrated around the best arable lands (Mägi 2002b).

Since limestone dominates in most of the landscape on Saaremaa, the osteological material is normally very well preserved. Nevertheless, the human bones found in Estonian stone graves have only started to be analysed biologically since the second half of the 1990s. This work has changed our interpretation of Iron Age burial rites beyond recognition (e.g. Allmäe 1997; Kalman 1997; 1999; 2000a; 2000b). Among other aspects, it has become clear that only small groups of people, in most cases families, were buried in our stone graves. The comparatively small number of these graves, together with the fact that they were normally erected around

the best arable lands, suggest that predominantly elite families had the right and opportunity to bury their dead in the stone graves (Mägi 2002a; 2002b). Still, some sort of selection was apparently carried out within the families, too. It should also be noted that it has not so far been possible to afford DNA analysis of the uncovered human bones.

2. 1. Graves before the Migration Period

The earliest stone graves on Saaremaa belong to the Bronze Age. These were stone cist graves with a single or sometimes multiple round kerbs of stones around a stone cist or cists in the middle. Although skeletons have sometimes been reported in this type of graves during earlier excavations, unburned human bones scattered without any anatomic order over the grave seem to have been more common. This phenomenon has been formerly explained by supposing that later burials had disturbed the earlier ones; still, this suggestion did not explain properly the absence of the latest and more intact skeletons. Finds in this type of graves are rare, and the dating of them, therefore, often difficult. In the present time, the erection of stone cist graves in Estonia are dated up to the middle of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (e.g. Lang 1996: 290–298; earlier dates up to the 1st century AD see e.g. Jaanits *et al* 1982).

Graves similar to the stone cist graves were widespread in different regions around the Baltic Sea. In Estonia, they characterised predominantly the islands and coastal areas. Two main internal culture spheres, separated by an imaginary diagonal line running from the North-East to the South-West of the country, were thus already evident in Bronze Age Estonia. Throughout following millennia, the different spheres can be followed in archaeological as well as ethnographic, linguistic and anthropological data. The specific characteristics of the islands and coastal areas can be explained by different landscape, economy, and more intensive communication with overseas neighbours. At the same time, the district of Virumaa in the north-eastern corner of present Estonia has always formed some kind of transition zone between the two internal culture spheres.

It was in the same coastal areas where a new grave form – graves with rectangular kerbs – got its start in the late Bronze Age (Fig. 5). The majority of these graves belong, however, to the Pre-Roman Iron Age. Both Vello Lõugas and Valter Lang have considered this grave type as the early variant of *tarand* graves that became the most characteristic Estonian grave form by the Roman Iron Age (e.g. Lõugas 1977; Jaanits *et al* 1982: 207–112; Lang 1996: 281–335; Fig. 6). Nevertheless, the classical *tarand* graves were, according to the present interpretation, widespread mainly in Inland-Estonia and Virumaa, as well as in present northern Latvia, thus predominantly in areas where the early variant is not recorded. In the

coastal areas, in turn, only few and comparatively late “classical-looking” Roman or Migration Period *tarand* graves are known, predominantly in North-West Estonia and Saaremaa. Both types occur together only in the district of Virumaa in the north-eastern part of the country.

Pre-Roman Iron Age Saaremaa was characterised by a special variant of stone kerb graves: stone graves with irregular enclosures. The first grave of this sort was recorded by Lõugas at Kurevere in 1974, and interpreted as a transitional form between stone cist graves and *tarand* graves (Fig. 7). Lõugas considered the grave as another variant of grave complexes consisting of stone cist graves and early *tarand* graves next to each other, which had been earlier recorded in some excavations, for instance in Lümada on Saaremaa, Kõmsi in West-Estonia or Jäbara in Virumaa. All such “complex graves” were dated to the 1st–2nd century AD (Lõugas 1976; 1977; Jaanits et al 1982: 209–212).

In the following decades, several stone graves of the same sort as Kurevere have been excavated on Saaremaa, all by Lõugas. According to earlier and sometimes very rudimentary reports, similar burial grounds have been uncovered also in some coastal areas of Mainland Estonia, e.g. Rannamõisa (Fig. 8). Most of early *tarand* graves on Mainland Estonian coast seem to have been built following more regular pattern. Lang, who has studied the find material of these graves, has suggested late Bronze Age as the earliest time for their erection (Lang 1996: 298–304). Following Lõugas, he treats all stone graves with more or less rectangular kerbs under one grave type, and does not pay attention to considerable differences in the constructions of these sites.

Going through the existing reports, it has become clear that the round constructions that Lõugas defined as stone cist graves, together with which the presumed early *tarands* were built, never possessed a cist in the middle.¹ It should also be noted that no clear time difference was definable between the finds in the round and other constructions. The irregular “*tarands*” surrounding these round constructions were often ovals or even circles instead of rectangles, and the construction as a whole hardly resembled a classical *tarand* grave.² There were also considerable differences in internal constructions and the arrangement of burials, if to compare with the Roman Period *tarand* graves (see topic 2. 3). Consequently, the graves with irregular enclosures should better be interpreted as an individual grave form, which was widespread on Saaremaa but also on the coastal areas of Mainland Estonia. They were definitely carrying the same ideas as early *tarand* graves with more regular constructions, and very often it has proved to be impossible to distinguish between these grave forms, especially in cases when the graves have been partly destroyed or excavation reports incomplete. Anyhow, the peculiarities of the Pre-Roman Iron Age stone kerb

graves, compared to classical *tarand* graves, cannot be overlooked.

Recent excavations as well as some references in earlier reports have indicated that Pre-Roman Iron Age burial grounds with irregular stone enclosures on Saaremaa may have been accompanied by cult places. In 1995–2001, a complex consisting of graves and cult places was excavated at Tõnija Tuulingumäe on the southern coast of the island (Fig. 9).

The Tõnija Pre-Roman Iron Age stone grave with irregular enclosures was unfortunately partly destroyed by a later cellar, as well as by a “classical” *tarand* grave erected partly on top of it. Beside the earlier stone grave a building probably used for cultic purposes was detected. It consisted of a stone platform with measurements 4x7 m, and five pits lined with stones inside the platform. A thin layer with charcoal pieces above the platform stones indicates an originally timber building in horizontal log technique, the remains of which were destroyed by fire (Mägi–Lõugas 1996; 1997; Mägi 2001; Mägi, Mägi 2002). A regularly rectangular grave with four *tarands* was built on top of the earlier stone grave, partly using the stone walls of the earlier grave and even a large wooden pillar originally belonging among the constructions of the cult site.

Finds unearthed in the later building resembled the ones found in other parts of Saaremaa, and were first dated to the 4th–5th century AD (Fig. 10). Such late dating was due to the fact that some artefact types characteristic to the 2nd–3rd century *tarand* graves of Mainland Estonia – e.g. some particular types of brooches and closed finger-rings – were completely absent in the find material of the Saaremaa graves. Mainly because of this the 2nd–3rd centuries AD, the time when classical *tarand* graves were built in mainland Estonia, has for a long been pointed out as empty of finds on Saaremaa. In some more extreme theories, the islands were even believed to have remained uninhabited for these centuries (e.g. Lõugas 1996: 130–137). Nevertheless, pollen analyses have proved uninterrupted inhabitation and agriculture through the last 2500 years (Saarse, Königsson 1992).

The dating of Saaremaa *tarand* graves started to change when they were compared with Curonian graves and finds uncovered there. Curonia, a district partly situated in present Latvia, partly Lithuania, is, compared to Saaremaa, a sandy area with poor conditions for uncremated bones to survive. From the beginning of our era up to the 7th century AD, a grave form similar to the aforementioned graves with irregular stone enclosures, was used here in coastal areas – inhumation graves with stone kerbs (in English also cited as stone circle graves; e.g. Kurmaičiai, Rūdaičiai, Senkai, Lazdininkai, Tūbausiai, Baitai, Gintarai; e.g. Tautavičius et al 1968; Banytė-Rowell 2001; Michelbertas 2002). Earlier stone

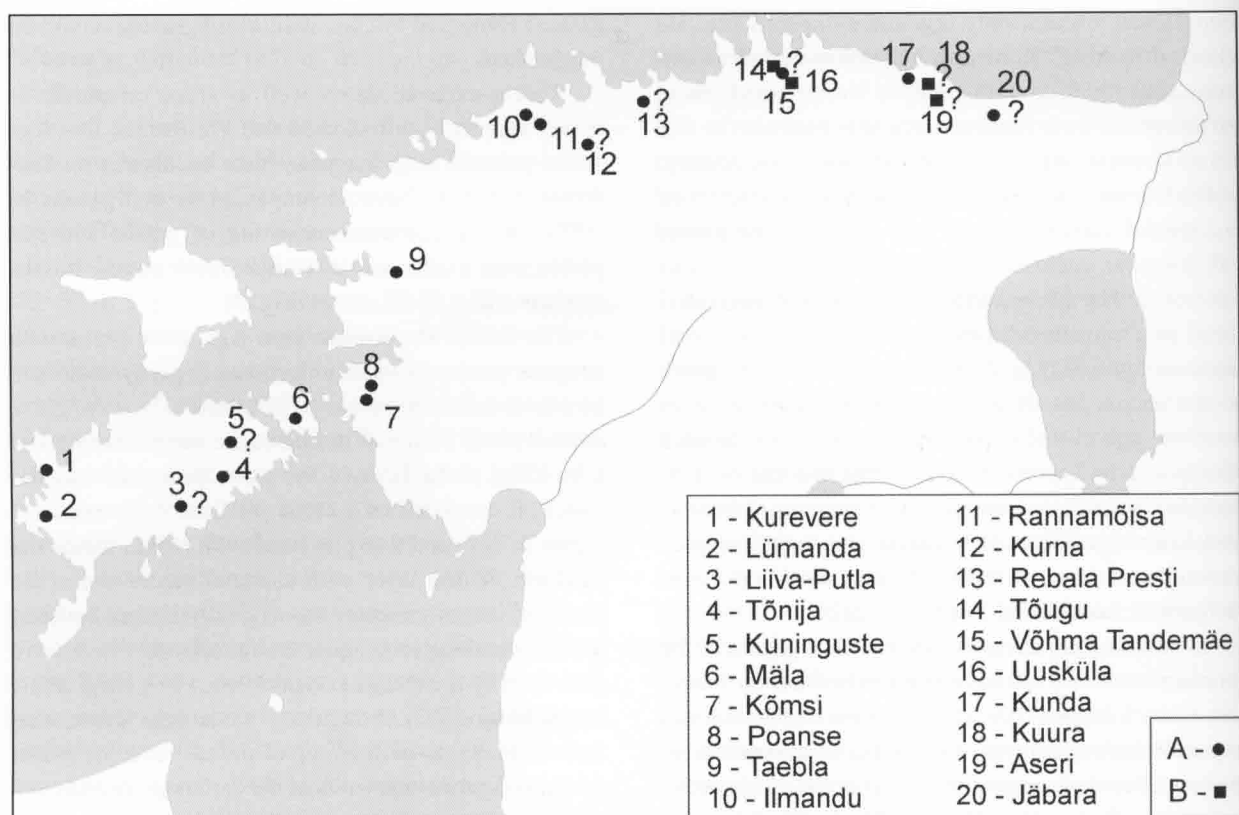


Fig. 6. Early *tarand* graves in Estonia. A stone graves with irregular enclosures, B graves with more regular pattern.

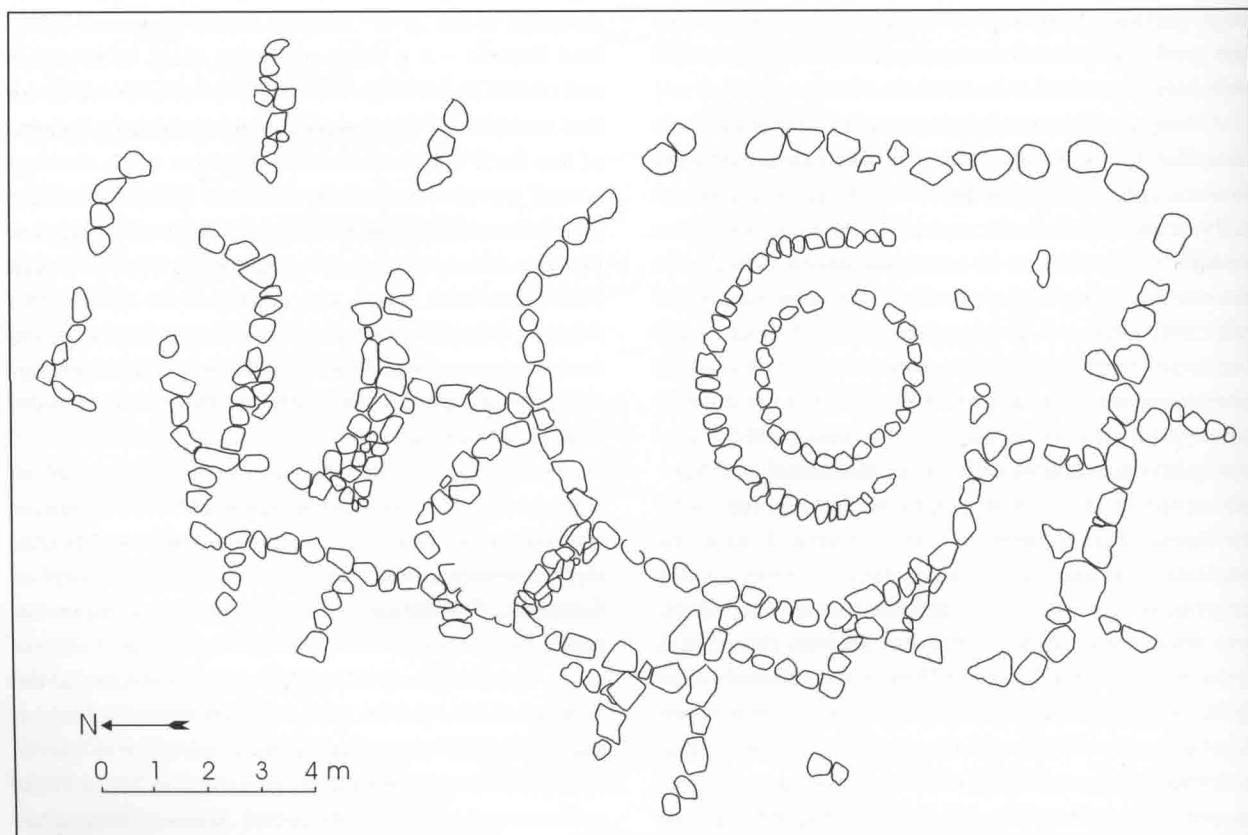


Fig. 7. The Kurevere grave with irregular enclosures.

kerbs in these graves were circular or oval. In course of time they became more irregular, and, since the 3rd century there also occurred rectangular stone enclosures (Žulkus 2000: 91–92). Artefact types found in these graves were for the most part the same as those that characterise the “classical” *tarand* graves on Saaremaa, which were earlier dated approximately to the 4th–5th centuries. Still, the Saaremaa graves with irregular stone enclosures are, according to the present data, dated to the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age, the 1st century BC – the 1st century AD, or even to earlier periods, while the similar graves in Curonia belong to the Roman Iron Age. On the other hand, since Curonian Pre-Roman Period find material is scanty, especially in comparison with the archaeological evidence from Saaremaa in the same period, may it perhaps be assumed that the first graves of the aforementioned type were erected in the end of the Pre-Roman Iron Age in Curonia as well, but that the grave form lasted there much longer than on Estonian islands?

It is beyond doubt, in any case, that Pre-Roman and Roman Period Saaremaa belonged to a common culture sphere with Curonia, as well as West- and North-West Estonian coastal areas, former East-Prussia and north-eastern coasts of present Poland. The parallels with Curonian and Polish find material suggest that the “classical” *tarand* graves of Saaremaa – e.g. Tõnija, Liiva-Putla, Mäla, Võhma – began to be built in the 2nd–3rd century, that is, in the same period as *tarand* graves in Mainland Estonia, and stayed in use mostly until the end of the Migration Period.

Certain peculiarities of Saaremaa *tarand* graves compared to the Virumaa and inland Estonian graves of the same time can in any case be pointed out. Saaremaa *tarand* graves are never large, and consist normally of only 3–4 enclosures. The excavations at Tõnija demonstrated that the *tarands* were not completely filled with stones or earth, the walls of them had often been more than 0.5 m high and laid with limestone slabs. There was an entrance into all enclosures, which in one case was even marked by two vertical limestone slabs and a threshold stone between them. Two *tarands* had been built at the same time, thus forming a complex construction, where one of the enclosures could be entered only through the other (Fig. 11). Parallels with ethnographic building style in Estonia suggest that at least some of the *tarand* graves may have originally been erected as timber buildings in horizontal log technique, on top of stone foundations (Mägi-Lõugas 1997).³

The majority of Estonian *tarand* graves have unfortunately been excavated in the first half or middle of the 20th century, or even earlier. Judged from the reports and maps of the earlier excavations, it would anyhow be difficult to define all *tarand* graves in Virumaa, East and

South Estonia as former timber buildings – in several cases, their construction seem to be more complicated than in the Saaremaa graves. On the other hand, no detailed study of the earlier reports, concentrating on these construction aspects, have been carried out at the Inland Estonian graves.

Mortuary houses similar to the Saaremaa ones can be however assumed for some northern and especially north-western Estonian *tarand* graves. After 1997, when the observation of *tarand* constructions as possible building foundations was first published, only one grave of this type has been excavated in North Estonia (Uusküla II). The walls of this grave also appeared to be laid of limestone slabs, and the two *tarands* of the construction were not completely filled with infill stones. Lang, who supervised the digs, supposed that additional stones were added into *tarands* with every burial, and the number of burials in the Uusküla II grave was simply insufficient for filling the *tarands* up (Lang 2000: 147–161). Still, it seems more likely to suppose that the aforementioned construction peculiarity simply had earlier not drawn the attention of archaeologists excavating the graves.⁴ It is also important to note that the Pre-Roman graves with irregular enclosures, although their low walls were often laid of limestone slabs, provide no grounds to believe that they originally had formed a part of a building.

2. 2. Graves after the Migration Period

Only single graves are known from 7th–8th centuries Saaremaa, but some 7th–8th century and early Viking Age burials have been recorded in earlier stone graves – both in *tarand*-graves and cairns. In all identified cases the burial custom has been cremation.

The earliest cairns with irregular and often incomplete circular stone kerbs on Saaremaa can be dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (e.g. Tansi-Jaani near Valjala) but the stone circle graves became the prevailing burial form of the islands only after the 7th century AD. The earliest stone circle graves at Mäla on the island of Muhu were excavated as early as the end of the 19th century, and dated to the 7th–8th century (Holzmayer 1880: 25–31).

All stone circle graves contain cremations, and in most cases the remains of only one individual can be found inside a stone kerb (Fig. 12). The average diameter was 2–4 m. Some kerbs have originally been low walls laid of limestone slabs; in these cases, the area inside the kerb was not completely filled by infill stones. Some stone circle graves had been covered by a heap of stones, and some were just cairns without any kerb. Cremation burials can also be found under large stones, between stone circle graves or for instance next to a big stone – the diversity of grave forms on Viking Age Saaremaa was large (Mägi 2002a: 125–129).



Fig. 9. Map of the Tõnija Tuulingumäe site. 1 cult site stone constructions, 2 post holes of the earliest cult site, 3 Pre-Roman Period grave constructions, 4 stone constructions added in the Roman Period.

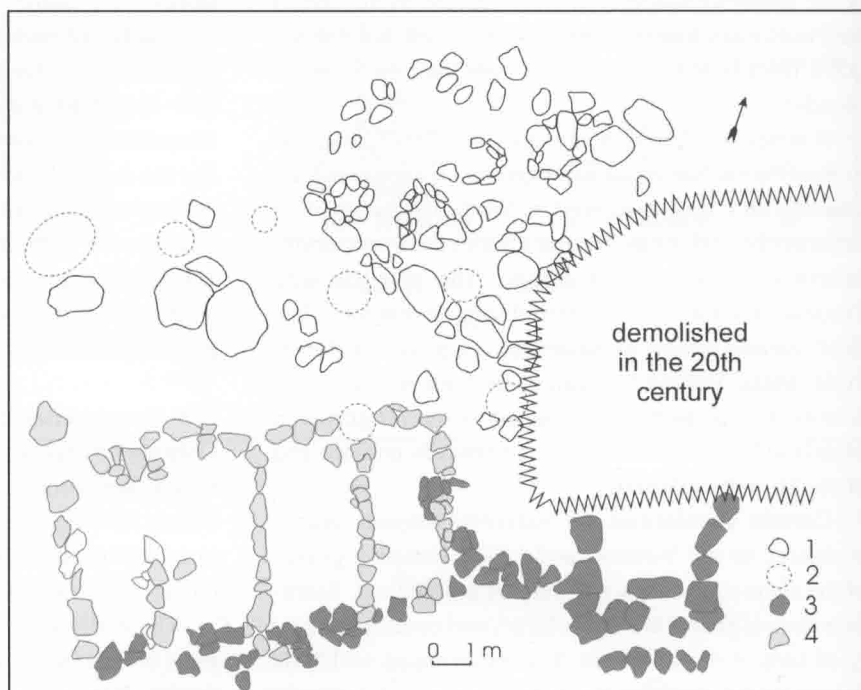


Fig. 8. The Randvere grave.

Starting from the 11th century, a new grave form appeared on Saaremaa – stone graves without internal constructions. In these cemeteries cremation burials were covered with a more or less similar layer of stones, and in several cases cremation deposits were overlapping or mixed. Still, individual burials were distinguishable from each other in more than half the cases. The cemeteries were normally erected on higher places, thus being clearly visible stone heaps probably dominating the landscape of their time.

Stone graves without internal constructions prevailed on Saaremaa throughout the 12th century. At the very end of the century, the first inhumation graves appeared. When Saaremaa was officially Christianised in 1227, the burial rites seem to have changed quite quickly. Stone graves with cremations disappeared and the local

elite was now buried in churchyards, as is also indicated by some early-Christian burials with jewellery next to the Valjala church. Village cemeteries outside churchyards were anyhow established in several places on the islands, and the deceased buried there were equipped with ornaments and smaller items at least during the 13th and 14th centuries.

2. 3. The development of burial customs

Particularly well preserved human bones on top of the limestone ground of coastal Estonia and the islands allow us, to some degree, to interpret prehistoric burial rites. The interpretation of how human remains were treated on Pre-Roman and Roman Period Saaremaa is based mainly on the evidence of the Tõnija grave, since the osteological material of other graves on the island

has not been studied. In the two graves at Tõnija, remains of about 40–50 individuals were detected, more or less equally men, women and children. The bones were predominantly unburnt; still, none of the skeletons was found in anatomic order. Only parts of skeletons were brought to the graves, and even these bones were usually smashed. Some of the human bones at Tõnija carried signs of having been left for a comparatively long time in the open air before they were brought to the stone grave. Only a small percentage of the human bones had been in the fire; in these cases, only the bones and not a complete corpse had been burnt, as was indicated, for instance, more obvious marks of being in the fire in the internal side of some fragments of skulls (Allmäe 1997; Kalman 1997; 2003).

The burial rites practised on Saaremaa since the Bronze Age were thus characterised by the custom of secondary burials. According to them, the body could be buried elsewhere first and the bones brought to the family grave only after excarnation; other ways to deflesh were also possible, for instance removing the flesh by boiling or scraping. This kind of burial rites have several ethnoarchaeological parallels (see e.g. Metcalf, Huntington 1999). Quite often, the rites of secondary burials can be practised only for elite families while the funeral rituals of other society members can be much simpler and shorter, and carried out in a way which does not leave clear archaeological traces. It is likely that burial customs similar to the aforementioned rituals were also widespread on prehistoric Saaremaa, as well as in North and West Estonia, and perhaps elsewhere, in areas where unburnt bones do not survive. At the same time, certain differences in the osteological material of North and West Estonian graves, in comparison to Saaremaa, can also be pointed out, at least according to present data. In North Estonian graves, for instance, skeletons in more or less anatomic order have also been recorded, sometimes mixed, probably for ritual reasons – e.g. some parts of the body have been moved, or skulls have been burned while other parts of skeletons were found unburnt (Kalman 1999; 2000a; 2000b).⁵ Similar evidence is also possible in other Saaremaa graves, whose material is yet not analysed biologically.

Both stone cist graves and graves with irregular stone enclosures on Saaremaa were constructions with low walls, where bones of different burials or burial layers were separated by pavements of limestone slabs. In the same area, together with the bones, occurred grave goods and broken ceramic pots. Together with the latter, animal bones were frequently found, indicating that the pots had probably been filled with food (and drink?) for the Other World. In the earlier grave at Tõnija, four or five burial layers separated by limestone pavements were recorded; the construction of the grave was slightly changed with different burial layers.

Burial customs in Roman Period *tarand* graves and/or mortuary houses of Saaremaa differed to a certain extent from that of the earlier stone graves. The custom of secondary and partial burials persisted but the bones were now found in more or less one layer among infill stones about the size of a man's head. Above and below the layer of infill stones were pavements of limestone slabs, probably forming something like a floor inside the *tarands*. For burying the bones, some infill stones of the *tarands* were removed, the bone fragments with grave goods were deposited in the hollow, and the infill and pavement stones put back in place. As in the earlier graves, potsherds and animal bones were frequent finds also in these *tarands*, probably evidence of food and drink as grave goods, or ritual feasts carried out on the site.

The latest graves with that kind of burial customs are Paju and Lepna on Saaremaa, both dated to the 5th–6th century. In the Migration Period graves of Mainland Estonia, cremations seemed to occur together with unburnt bones, and sometimes even prevailed over the latter (e.g. Deemant 1977; Mandel 2003: 27–64, 125–129). After the 7th–8th century, cremation became the only burial custom on Saaremaa, too.

The biological investigation of cremated bones is more complicated; still, it can be assumed that, from the Merovingian Period onwards, burials on Saaremaa became predominantly individual. Similarly to central Sweden (see e.g. Sigvallius 1994), only a few grammes of human bones can sometimes be found in the Late Iron Age graves, indicating the persistence of the old custom, according to which only a part of the remains of the deceased, as well as of the grave goods placed on the pyre, was brought to the grave. Recent analyses of the osteological material of Late Iron Age graves in West Estonia have showed that, in some cases, not a complete human body but simply the bones might have been burnt on the pyre.⁶ A reference to the possibility that similar customs were also valid for Saaremaa can for instance be found in two Viking Age stone cist graves at Piila, where in both several hundred grammes of dog's bones and only 2–3 g of human bones were unearthed (Mägi, Allmäe, Maldre 1997).

3. Lepna mortuary house as the symbol of changes

Turning back to the mortuary house at Lepna, similarities with both the earlier and the later burial customs can be traced. The burial custom is primarily characterised by inhumations, still without any anatomic order of the bones. Comparing the burials of Lepna with the Tõnija grave only 1.2 km away, where most probably the ancestors of the Lepna people were buried, some differ-



Fig. 10. Collection of Roman Period finds from Tõnija.



Fig. 12. Map of the Kāku stone cist graves, Viking Age



Fig. 11. Reconstruction of the Tõnija Roman period grave or mortuary house.

ences cannot be overlooked. In the osteological material, the development of burial customs is indicated by the arrangement of human remains – the bones in the Lepna house formed distinguishable clusters. This gives grounds for believing that the remains of each person were stored in containers of some perishable material, which became displaced and were broken when the building collapsed. In comparison to the Tõnija *tarand* grave or house, where bones of different persons were, probably deliberately, mingled, the phenomenon can be considered as a step towards individuality. The 7th–8th century dead already rest in stone circle graves, one person in each (Mägi 2002a: 125–128).

Intermingled burials presumably reflect a society that was predominately determined by families or clans, and where individuals were not very significant. The prehistoric cemeteries of Saaremaa stayed as family burial grounds later as well but, from the 7th or, at the latest, the 8th century, the graves of family members in common cemeteries became individually marked. Transformation of burial customs as radical as that must indicate ideological development, and most likely also a change in the family system.

Examining the relationship between collectivity and individuality in burial customs in the areas surrounding Saaremaa, it is important to note that sufficient biological analyses of bones are available only in Estonian mainland, Gotland, Öland, and some areas in mainland Scandinavia as well as the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, that is, in areas, where unburnt bones can survive. Burials with intermingled bones were in the northern part of Europe particularly widespread in the Megaliths that belong to the Neolithics. On Gotland, the burial rites of the 5th–6th century, as well as of the earlier periods, can indisputably be characterized by individual burials (e.g. Nerman 1935: 121–129), the same is true for the islands of Öland and Zealand (e.g. Rasch 1994; Sellevold 1995). Single burials, more exactly find complexes, also characterise Iron Age Curonian graves (e.g. Tautavičius et al 1968; Banytė-Rowell 2001; Michelbertas 2002). On the other hand, in most parts of Mainland Estonia and Finland the 5th–7th century did not bring along any particular individualization of burial rites; in these areas, stone graves without internal structure and with hardly distinguishable cremation burials dominated throughout the second half of the Iron Age (e.g. Selirand 1974; Pihlman 1990; Purhonen et al 1996).

Another important change appearing in the Lepna grave is the choice and treatment of the grave goods. A new phenomenon in Estonian burial customs was the appearance of artefacts associated with riding – e.g. bits and bridle plaques. Never before in Estonia had so many weapons been placed in graves; from the 5th–6th century onward, until the very end of prehistory, weapons became an important attribute of burial customs. In earlier

periods, single weapons occurred in Estonian graves in the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age, but they were completely absent in Roman Period graves. The frequent appearance of weapons in the Migration Period burials, not only in Lepna but elsewhere, can be considered as a clear sign of changed social attitudes. Starting from the 5th–6th century, the society of prehistoric Estonia and especially Saaremaa can be depicted as warrior-oriented. Strong emphasis on warrior attributes, together with other archaeological evidence characterising the Late Iron Age, suggest deepening social stratification and society in transformation in general.

The appearance of abundant weapon graves especially in the 6th century is characteristic to several other areas around the Baltic Sea; still, in the neighbourhood of Estonia, the contrast compared to the earlier burial customs is not so drastic. Graves with luxurious weapons are in Scandinavia normally associated with the rise of warrior aristocracy, but also for instance with the influence of Merovingian Continental Europe (e.g. Jørgensen 1990: 87–94). Anna Bitner-Wróblewska has reported of similar development in the coastal areas inhabited by the Balts. Starting from the 6th century, power was there clearly demonstrated through the deposition of prestige grave goods, luxury items and weapons in some outstanding graves. Bitner-Wróblewska suggests that these burials symbolized the existence of strong central authority, which was manifested according to the Scandinavian trend, still being modified to suit the local tradition (Bitner-Wróblewska 2001: 121–127).

The 6th-century transformation processes in the Baltic Rim were not limited to abundant and luxurious weapons and riding gear in some graves but reach into all spheres of society. Changes and rapid development can be considered in settlement patterns and burial rites in the broader sense, as well as in for instance ship-building, iron-making, artefact types and many other spheres (e.g. Ambrosiani 1964: 210; Carlsson 1979: 146–147; Jørgensen 1990: 71–80; Pihlman 1990: 17–19, 267–272; Solberg 1998; Žulkus 2000). In some areas, settlement moved and new cemeteries were brought into use. Lithuanian archaeologist Vladas Žulkus has suggested that in Curonia the 5th–7th-century cultural changes led to the formation of tribal territories, which he connects to the ethnic group of the Curonians (Žulkus 2000).

On Saaremaa, the transformation was clearly synchronized with changes in communication. The 5th–6th/7th century was the last period when the archaeological evidence of Saaremaa predominantly resembled Curonia. Mutual connections between these areas also persisted later, but, after the 7th–8th century, communication with Scandinavia and especially Gotland became dominant. Even though the intensification of contacts between Saaremaa and Scandinavia was yet not evident in the Lepna mortuary house, it was even more conspicuous

in other Estonian graves of the 5th–6th century. Primarily, several luxury items decorated in the style of Salin I, unearthed in the Proosa grave near present-day Tallinn should be mentioned (Selirand, Deemant 1985). The other excavated Migration Period grave and probable mortuary house at Paju, West Saaremaa also contained several grave goods that were apparently imported from Scandinavia (Tamla, Jaanits 1977).

Sudden intensification of Scandinavian contacts in the Migration Period has been also reported by several other archaeologists of the eastern coast of the Baltic. According to Žulkus, Scandinavian and European import items appeared in Curonia as early as in the 5th century, and the activity of Scandinavians increased during the 6th–7th century. He points out that the phenomenon is characteristic of present Coastal Lithuania, and does not occur in the same extent in the rest of the country (Žulkus 2000). Bitner-Wróblewska refers to the strengthening of Scandinavian influences in the coast between the Vistula River and Curonia from the 6th century onwards (2001: 121–127). Karen Høilund Nielsen has drawn attention to close contacts between Gotland and East Baltic areas, especially present-day Latvia, in the 7th century, as indicated by artefact typology. It was a period when Gotland's connections with the Mälars area and South Scandinavia seemed to have been interrupted; Høilund Nielsen explains it by the political situation of the time, for example with the conquest of Öland by Denmark (Høilund Nielsen 2000).

4. Summary

Considering the Iron Age burial customs on the Estonian islands, their singularity compared to the mainland, and especially the inland parts of the country, cannot be overlooked. The local culture was strongly oriented to maritime activities, and connections with overseas neighbours always played a remarkable role in it.

The splendid conditions for bones to survive in the soil of Saaremaa has made it possible to analyse the hu-

man remains in prehistoric graves, and to suggest quite new interpretations of one-time burial rites and attitudes to the Other World. Burials with intermingled bones indicate strong collectivistic feelings, in that case probably the family as the most essential category of identity in the minds of prehistoric people. Elsewhere in northern Europe, intermingled burials characterised firstly the Neolithic. Does the same phenomenon in Iron Age graves of Saaremaa suggest that concepts one-time widespread in western Europe were followed thousands of years later in peripheral Estonia? Does it indicate society strongly different from its contemporary neighbours?

The recent excavations on Saaremaa have drawn attention to the importance of cult buildings in the local burial customs from as early as the Pre-Roman Iron Age. The earlier suggestion that the cult platform of Tõnija and *tarand* graves with a regular pattern might originally have been wooden buildings in horizontal log technique, the Houses of the Dead, was, to a certain extent, supported by the excavations at the Lepna mortuary house. The bones of deceased ancestors were collected into particular sacred houses at least on the Migration Period Saaremaa. Drawing parallels with much later ethnographic material, these houses might have resembled everyday buildings of the prehistoric people.

The archaeological evidence of Saaremaa points to the 5th–6th century as the period of transformation of the whole society. In many aspects, the change led to a greater similarity with the overseas neighbours. In these processes, the mortuary house at Lepna can be considered as a symbol of old attitudes where, however, the first signs of a new era were already evident. The change in burial customs towards strongly emphasized warrior-attributes and individuality probably indicates crucial changes in the family structure and the power systems of the society, as well as in the interpretation of the Great Beyond. As a reason or a consequence of this development, culture spheres in the Baltic Rim moved. Saaremaa, which had earlier been clearly oriented to the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea, from now on rather belonged to a common sphere with eastern Scandinavia.

References

- ¹ The determination is complicated by the fact that Saaremaa stone graves were normally used during a long time, and new stone structures were often built on top of the earlier ones for several times. For instance, there is a stone cist grave (with a cist in the middle) in the Võhma grave complex; still, it is not directly connected to the early *tarand* grave in the same complex since the latter was later erected on top of it and not built together with it like in the graves with irregular enclosures.
- ² Since several reports are missing, the construction of some graves uncovered by Lõugas can be assumed according to the reconstruction of the grave. At the same time, the reconstruction of graves is often based only on the subjective interpretation of the excavator (e.g. Mäla on the island of Muhu). Later investigation has demonstrated that stone constructions in such type of graves may have been changed with new layers added to the grave (see topic 1. 3).
- ³ Some kind of parallel can be drawn with Roman Period West-Lithuania, where archaeologist Rasa Banytė-Rowell has reported of remains of clay and wood in grave constructions at Baitai cemetery (2001).
- ⁴ In summer 2004, archaeological excavations were carried out at Kunda, North Estonia (Marge Kõnsa, Tõnno Jonuks). Although only a small part of otherwise destroyed grave was uncovered, the site proved to be an early *tarand* grave with walls laid of limestone slabs. The slabs were slipped into both sides of the wall, indicating that the enclosures had not been completely filled (verbal information from Marge Kõnsa, 03.12.2004).
- ⁵ Similar phenomenon in the burial customs of the Masłomęcz group in the territory of present Poland see e.g. Kokowski 1992, on Roman Period Öland e.g. Rasch 1994, in Roman Iron Age Denmark e.g. Sellevold 1995.
- ⁶ Verbal communication with biological anthropologist Railis Allmäe, 03.01.2005.

Bibliography

Archives

Allmäe, R. 1997. *Tõnija kalme osteoloogilise materjali analüüs*. Manuscript in the archives of the Institute of History, Tallinn.

Kalman, J. 1997. *Tõnija grave – Skeletal report*, I. Manuscript in the archives of the Institute of History, Tallinn.

Kalman, J. 2003. *Tõnija grave – Skeletal report*, II. Manuscript in the archives of the Institute of History, Tallinn.

Literature

Ambrosiani, B. 1964. *Fornlänningar och bebyggelse. Studier i Atundalands och Södertörns förhistoria*. Stockholm.

Banytė-Rowell, R. 2001. Vakarų Lietuvos kapinynų laidosenos ypatumai vėlyvuojų romėniškuoju laikotarpiu. *Archaeologia Lituanica*, 2, Vilnius, 29–47.

Bitner-Bróblewska, A. 2001. *From Samland to Rogaland. East-West Connections in the Baltic Basin During the Early Migration Period*. Warszawa.

Carlsson, D. 1979. *Kulturlandskapets utveckling på Gotland: en studie i jordbruks- och bebyggelseförändringar under järnåldern*. Visby.

Deemant, K. 1977. Neue Funde aus dem Steingraberfeld von Proosa. *TATÜ* 1977, 26, 1, 62–63.

Høiland Nielsen, K. 2000. The political geography of sixth- and seventh-century southern and eastern Scandinavia on the basis of material culture. *Archaeologia Baltica* 4, Vilnius, 161–172.

Holzmayer, J. B. 1880. *Osliana III*. Dorpat.

Jaanis, L., Laul, S., Lõugas, V., Tõnisson, E. 1982. *Eesti esiajalugu*. Tallinn.

Jørgensen, L. 1990. *Bækkegård og Glasergård. Two Cemeteries from the Late Iron Age on Bornholm*. (=Arkæologiske Studier, VIII), Copenhagen.

Kalman, J. 1999. Human remains from the stone-cist graves of Rebala Lastekangrud, North Estonia. *Journal of Estonian Archaeology*, 3: 1, 19–34.

Kalman, J. 2000a. Skeletal analysis of the graves of Kaseküla, Poanse I and Panse II. *Eesti Ajaloomuuseum. Tõid ajaloo alalt, II*, Tallinn, 17–40.

Kalman, J. 2000b. Stone grave II of Tõugu – skeletal report. In: V.Lang (ed.), *Keskusest ääremaaks. Muinasaja teadus*, 7, Tallinn, 387–407.

Kokowski, A. 1992. Das Problem der Wiederöffnung der Gräber in den Friedhöfen der Masłomęcz-Gruppe (aus den Studien über die Kulturveränderungen bei den Goten Während ihrer Wanderung). *Peregrinatio Gothica III. Fredrikstad, Norway, 1991. Universitets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter*, 14, Oslo, 115–132.

Lang, V. 1993. *Kaks tarandkalmet Viimsis, Jõelähtme kihelkonnas*. Tallinn.

Lang, V. 1996. *Muistne Rõvala. Muistised, kronoloogia ja maaviljelusliku asustuse kujunemine Loode-Eestis, eriti Pirita jõe alamjooksu piirkonnas. 1–2*. (=Muinasaja teadus, 4), Tallinn.

Lang, V. 2000. *Keskusest ääremaaks. Viljelusmajandusliku asustuse kujunemine ja areng Vihasoo-Palmse piirkonnas Virumaal*. (=Muinasaja teadus, 7), Tallinn.

Lõugas, V. 1974. Die Bodendenkmäler in dem Umgebung Kuninguste und Tagavere auf der Insel Saaremaa. *Eesti NSV TA Toimetised, Ühiskonnateaduste seeria*, 1, 79–84.

Lõugas, V. 1976. Neues zu den vorgeschichtlichen Bodendenkmälern von Saaremaa (Ösel). *Eesti NSV TA Toimetised, Ühiskonnateaduste seeria*, 25, 1, 53–55.

Lõugas, V. 1977. Ausgrabungsergebnisse eines Steingraberfeldes von Kurevere. *Eesti NSV TA Toimetised, Ühiskonnateaduste seeria*, 26, 1, 48–51.

Lõugas, V. 1996. *Kaali kraatriväljal Phaetonit otsimas*. Tallinn.

Mägi, M. 2001. Probable cult site beside the Tõnija tarand-grave on the Island of Saaremaa. *Arheoloogilised välitööd Eestis 2000*. Tallinn, 48–55.

Mägi, M. 2002a. *At the Crossroads of Space and Time. Graves, Changing Society and Ideology on Saaremaa (Ösel), 9th–13th centuries AD*. (=CCC papers: 6), Tallinn.

Mägi, M. 2002b. Piirkonnad ja keskused. Asustus muinasaja lõpu ja varakeskaegsel Saaremaal arheoloogiliste, inimeograafiliste ning ajalooliste allikate andmeil. *Keskus – tagamaa – ääreala. Uurimusi asustushierahia ja võimukeskuste kujunemisest Eestis*. (=Muinasaja teadus, 11), Tallinn – Tartu, 169–232.

Mägi, M. 2004a. "...Ships are their main strength." Harbour sites, arable lands and chieftains on Saaremaa. *Estonian Journal of Archaeology*, 8: 2. *Special issue on maritime landscapes*, 128–162.

Mägi, M. 2004b. The mortuary house at Lepna on southern Saaremaa. *Archaeological Fieldwork in Estonia 2003*, Tallinn, 45–60.

Mägi, M., Mägi, T. 2002. Archaeological fieldwork around Tõnija and Rõdsa on southern Saaremaa. *Arheoloogilised välitööd Eestis 2001*, 56–64.

Mägi, M., Allmäe, R., Maldre, L. 1997. Viking Age graveyard at Piila, Saaremaa. *Archaeological Field Works in Estonia 1997*, Tallinn, 99–116.

Mägi-Lõugas, M. 1996. Archaeological excavations at Tõnija Tuulingumäe, Saaremaa. *Eesti NSV TA Toimetised, Ühiskonnateaduste seeria*, 4, 427–433.

Mägi-Lõugas, M. 1997. Archaeological excavations at Tõnija Tuulingumäe tarand-grave, Saaremaa. *Arheoloogilised välitööd Eestis 1996. Stilus* 7, Tallinn, 29–39.

Mandel, M. 2000. Poanse tarandkalmed. *Eesti Ajaloomuuseum. Tõid ajaloo alalt, II*, Tallinn, 89–111.

Mandel, M. 2003. *Läänemaa 5.–13. sajandi kalmed. Eesti Ajaloomuuseum. Tõid ajaloo alalt*, 5, Tallinn.

Metcalf, P. Huntington, R. 1999. *Celebrations of Death. The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*. Second edition. Cambridge.

Michelbertas, M. 2002. Gintarų kapinynas. *Archaeologia Lituanica*, 3, Vilnius, 34–74.

Nerman, B. 1935. *Die Völkerwanderungszeit Gotland. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien*. Stockholm.

Pihlman, S. 1990. *Varhaismerovinkiajan aseet Suomessa. Typologia, kronologia ja aseet ryhmästrategioissa*. (=Iskos, 10), Helsinki.

Purhonen, P. (ed.) 1996. *Vainionmäki – a Merovingian Period Cemetery in Laitila, Finland*. Helsinki.

Ränk, G. 1939. *Saaremaa taluehitised. Etnograafiline uurimus, I. Ehitiste üksikosad, elamu ja kõrvalhooned, mis osalt täidavad elamu ülesandeid*. Tartu.

Rasch, M. 1994. Burial practices – grave furniture and burial methods during the Roman Iron Age. *Prehistoric Graves as a Source of Information. Symposium at Kastlösa, Öland, May 21–23, 1992*. (=Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Konferencer, 29), Uppsala, 181–200.

Saarse, L., Königsson, L.-K. 1992. Holocene Environmental Changes on the Island of Saaremaa, Estonia. *Estonia: Nature, Man and Cultural Heritage. PACT*, 37, Rixensart, 97–131.

Selirand, J. 1974. *Eestlaste matmiskombed varafeodaalsete suhete tärkamise perioodil (11.–13. sajand)*. Tallinn.

Selirand, J., Deemant, K. 1985. Völkerwanderungszeitliche Gegenstände mit ostskandinavischen Ornamenten von Proosa (Nordstland). *Fornvännen*, 80, 243–253.

Sellevoid, B. J. 1995. The human remains from the Himlingöje graves. In: U.Lund Hansen (ed.), *Himlingöje – Seeland – Europa. Ein Gräberfeld der jüngeren römischen Kaiserzeit auf Seeland, seine Bedeutung und internationalen Beziehungen*, København, 249–266.

Sigvallius, B. 1994. *Funeral pyres. Iron Age cremations in North Spanga*. (=Theses and papers in osteology, 1), Stockholm.

Solberg, B. 1998. Settlement and social structure in Norway in the Migration Period (AD 400–550). *Archaeologia Baltica* 3, Vilnius, 235–250.

- Spreckelsen, A. 1927. *Das Gräberfeld Laakt (Lagedi), Kirchspiel St. Jürgens, Harrien, Estland*. (=Verhandlungen der gelehrten estn. Gesellschaft, XXIV), Dorpat.
- Tamla, T. Jaanits, K. 1977. Das Gräberfeld und der Spätneolithische Siedlungsplatz von Paju. *Eesti NSV TA Toimetised, Ühiskonnateaduste seeria*, 1, 64–71.

- Tautavičius, A. (ed.). 1968. *Lietuvos archeologiniai paminklai. Lietuvos pajūrio I–VII a. kapinynai*. Vilnius.
- Tihase, K. 1974. *Eesti talurahvaarhitektuur*. Tallinn.
- Žulkus, V. 2000. Die völkerwanderung und die Westbalten die entstehung der Kuren. *Archaeologia Baltica* 4, Vilnius, 89–108.

Marika MÄGI

Ajaloo Instituut (Institute of History), Rütli 6, 10130 Tallinn,
Eesti (Estonia)

E-mail: marika.magi@mail.ee

Transformatio mundi

The Transition from the Late Migration Period
to the Early Viking Age in the East Baltic

Edited by Mindaugas Bertašius