



Archaeological fieldwork at Viidumäe cult site

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Archaeological fieldwork at Viidumäe sacrificial place in western Saaremaa started in 2014 (Mägi *et al.* 2015), and continued in 2015. The fieldwork helped to detect new aspects of the usage of the cult site in places that had not been investigated the previous year, e.g. in the wetland at the foot of the cliff. Wooden building remains were uncovered in this area, and a deposit of Late Iron Age artefacts was found in the northern periphery of the cult site. During two fieldwork sessions that both lasted for a couple of days, five trial excavations were opened. The work was supervised by Marika Mägi and partly by Riina Riitel-Mürk, then an archaeology MA-student at Tallinn University. Finds are stored in the Archaeological Research Collection of Tallinn University (AI 7281).

Trial excavation no. 2

Surface survey in 2014 had revealed a conspicuous stony elevation at the foot of the cliff, close to the area where human bones had been detected. The structure was investigated closer in 2015 by a trial excavation in its SW-part (excavation no. 2).¹ The elevated platform formed a 13 m long and in its broadest parts more than 5 m wide semicircle along the cliff-foot (Fig. 1). It was built of carefully chosen, similar round boulders with an average diameter of about 15 cm. The stones had, in several places, survived in two or three layers on top of each other. Some of the stones had come loose and moved downward to rest along the foot of the cliff and were found in an area up to 7 m from the platform itself.

The measurements of the excavation no. 2 were 1.5 × 1.5 m, but it was complicated to hold even lines because of the loose stones. The stones of the platform had been set directly on the sandy subsoil. There were no finds, neither charcoal nor any other material that could indicate human activity. The regularity of the structure, as well as the similar size of the stones indicates, nevertheless, that the elevation had once been a simple stone platform created by man. The vicinity of an area where scattered and partly piled up fragmentary human bones, together with a conspicuous number of arrow-heads had come to light in 2014, might suggest a ritual function of the platform as a kind of stage (for parallels, see e. g. Jørgensen 2014). However, the date of the platform remains uncertain.

¹ Excavation no. 1 was done in 2014.

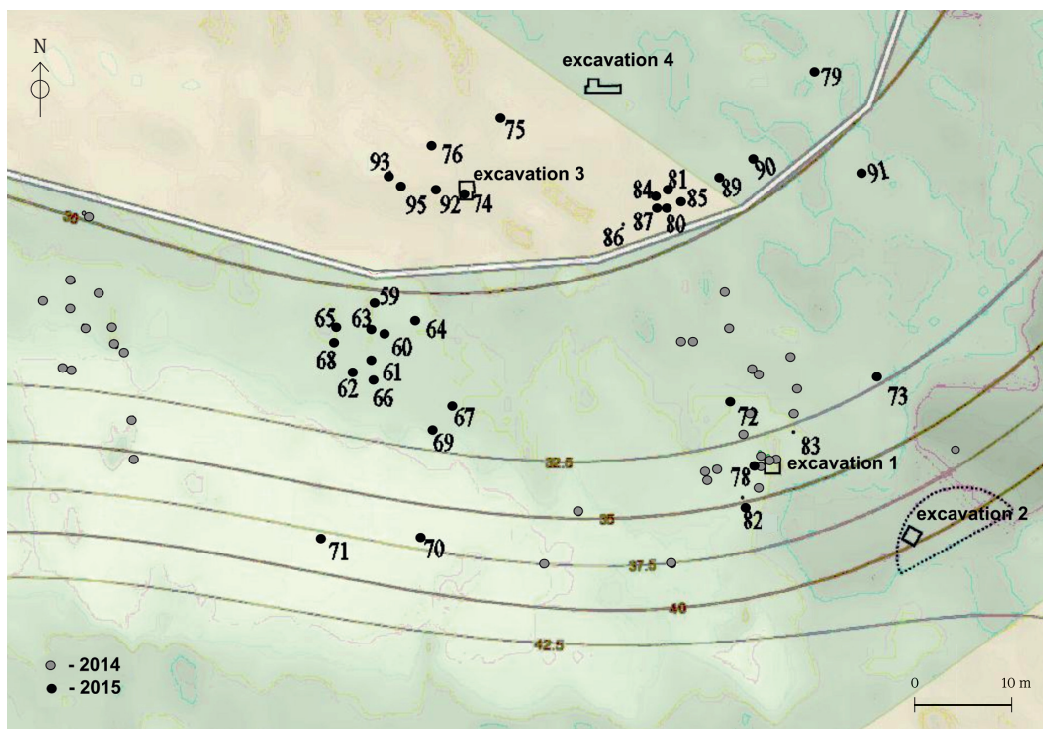


Fig. 1. Trial excavations and finds at Viidumäe.

Jn 1. Proovikaevandid ja leiud Viidumäelt.

Drawing / Joonis: Riina Riitel-Mürk, Marika Mägi

New finds on the cliff and at the foot of it

Since the Viidumäe site is continuously under threat by the illegal activity of metal-detectorists, we carried out additional investigation by metal detector on the cliff and its foot. It resulted in more than 20 new finds, including intact artefacts or fragments of five arrowheads, four knives, a battle knife and an iron shepherd's crook pin. All datable finds belonged to the 6th – 8th centuries. A bronze spiral finger ring and a fragment of an iron buckle near the finds of human bones in 2014 (excavation no. 1) deserve a special note (nos. 78 and 82 respectively). In the eastern, highest part of the cliff, the shaft of a ring-headed pin was uncovered (no. 88; remains outside the area on Fig. 1). As indicated by other finds in the eastern part of the cult site, it can be assumed that this section of the cliff was used for sacrifices earlier than the others. The latest finds came to light in the northern part of the cult site.

Wetland finds

The lowest northern part of the Viidumäe site is a wetland with approximate measurements 130 m (WNW–ESE) × 110 m (crosswise) (Fig. 2). Since parallels with other ritual deposits suggested that some sacrificed artefacts could also be found in the wetland, we had used a metal detector in this area already the year before, but in vain. A new, more sensitive detector used in 2015 indicated, however, that artefacts could also be found in

the lowest part of the wetland right next to the higher area at Viidumäe. The lower part of the wetland area was a swampy ground in May, partly still covered with open water. Its measurements are approximately 60 (E–W) × 20 m.

Finds in the wetland that were investigated by us in 2015 appeared in two clusters, separated by a low, 2 m wide stony ridge that stretched about 4 m northwards, i.e., from the bank towards the wetland. It remained unclear whether the ridge had been there as early as the time of sacrifices, or it consisted of stones collected in the course of hay cutting during the following centuries. Small later piles of thrown-away stones were detected in several other places at the Viidumäe site.

Only weapons have been found in the western, soggier part of the wetland so far, while several ornaments and some weapons came into light in the eastern part. The finds collected were intact items or fragments of seven spearheads, an angon, a two-edged sword, a crossbow-brooch and a ring-headed dress-pin, as well as several fragments of artefacts that could not be identified (Fig. 3). All finds can be dated to the 6th – 8th centuries, and most of them have parallels in Finnish material (Kivikoski 1973).

In the wetland, water appeared in all pits nearly immediately. Despite that, we could record that most artefacts lay in the depth of approximately 40 cm, on top of greyish bottom soil. All weapons seem to have been resting in a horizontal position, suggesting that the area probably was covered with open water in the time of sacrifices. Offerings thrown into water remained in the bottom. In two cases (nos. 74 and 75), several artefacts were found in the same spot. Find no. 75, for instance, consisted of a two-edged sword bent to U-shape, two smaller spearheads and a spearhead with a very long socket (Fig. 4).

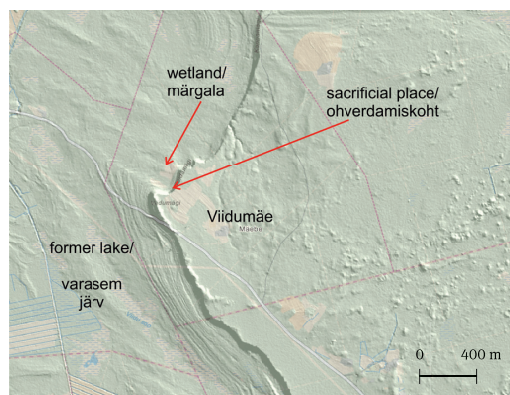


Fig. 2. Surroundings of the Viidumäe site.

Jn 2. Viidumäe leiukoha ümbrus.

Drawing / Joonis: Marika Mägi



Fig. 3. Some finds from Viidumäe. 5–8 – trial excavation no. 5.

Jn 3. Esemeid Viidumäelt. 5–8 – proovikaevand nr 5. (AI 7281: 85, 86, 78, 90, 113, 98, 104, 97.)

Photos / Fotod: Marika Mägi



Fig. 4. Weapons found as an assemblage in the wetland.

Jn 4. Märgalalt leitud relvakogum.

(AI 7281: 75.)

Photos / Fotod: Marika Mägi



Fig. 5. Log remains in excavation no. 3, view from the west.

Jn 5. Palgijäänused kaevandis nr 3, vaade läänest.

Photo / Foto: Marika Mägi

Trial excavations in the wetland (excavations no. 3 and 4)

We had planned to have small-scale trial excavations in the wetland in 2015, for detecting possible organic remains around the weapon finds. These works were stopped due to heavy and long-lasting rain that made it impossible to dig in the wetland without using pumps or caissons. Therefore, only two excavations were opened.

Excavation no. 3 was made around the weapon find no. 74 that consisted of a spearhead and a battle knife, both dated to the period 600–800 AD (Kivikoski 1973, nos. 527 and 536). At first the measurements of the excavation were 1 × 1 m. In the northern part, a layer of burnt and unburnt pieces of bone together with small charcoal pieces came into light. A flat wooden fragment was recorded on top of the greyish bottom soil, in the depth of 40 cm. Therefore, the excavation was widened northwards.

In the widened part of the excavation, several wooden artefacts, e.g. sharpened sticks, were found only 5 cm under the turf or deeper. At the depth of 33–35 cm, a construction consisting of bigger logs was uncovered. Two logs were placed crosswise right on top of the light bottom soil, while it seemed that there had been a special hollow in the lower log for fixing the upper, crossing log (Fig. 5). Soil between the logs in the northern half of the excavation was loamier and more solid than in other places. A great number of charcoal pieces were found in this area, suggesting that the upper parts of the wooden construction had burnt. The upper surface of the survived logs was also partly charred.

The site was preliminarily interpreted as remains of a square wooden caisson or construction in horizontal logs jointed with a notch, but later burnt, collapsed and decayed. Only the lower layer of logs was somewhat preserved. The loamy layer inside the

corner between the crossing logs may perhaps indicate a clay floor. Several granite boulders found in the same excavation probably belonged to the construction as well. Radiocarbon analysis from one of the log remains dated them to the period 420–565 cal. AD.²

Another trial excavation (excavation no. 4) was made at the distance of 14 m towards NE from excavation no. 3, presumably deeper in the wetland. It was a ditch with measurements 3 m (E–W) and 65 cm (N–S). We were surprised to find out, however, that a light loamy bottom soil was uncovered here in the depth of 25–30 cm already, that is, higher than in excavation no. 3. There were three bigger boulders in excavation no. 4, but no cultural layer was detected.

Deposit in excavation no. 5

Trial excavation no. 5 was made 120 m towards NE from excavation no. 3, outside the northern border of the Viidumäe cult site as defined in 2014, but still inside its protection zone. Generally, metal detector did not indicate any finds in this area. When suddenly quite a number of detector indications concentrated in an approximate area with the diameter of 1.5 m and the first finds appeared to be artefacts from the Late Iron Age, we decided to study the possible deposit with opening a trial excavation. The final measurements of it were 1.9×1 m.

Soil in this place, outside the wetland area, was sandy and somewhat loamy. 50 small metal artefacts were found here mainly in the depth of 10–15 cm, seldom 20 cm (Fig. 6). All artefacts were belt fittings or items that probably had been attached to belts. However, we dealt here most likely with two belts spread on ground, perhaps an ordinary belt and a sword belt together. There were darker areas next to some metal artefacts, suggesting organic parts (e.g. handles of knives) that were not preserved.

All the artefacts could be dated to the 11th – 12th centuries, that is, to a clearly later period than most other finds at Viidumäe. It should be noted that a few other later artefacts were also found in the northern periphery of the site, notably a Late Iron Age finger-ring (no. 94) and a 13th – 14th-century penannular brooch (no. 23). These finds right outside the core area of the cult site presumably indicate that the site was perceived sacred long after its active use.

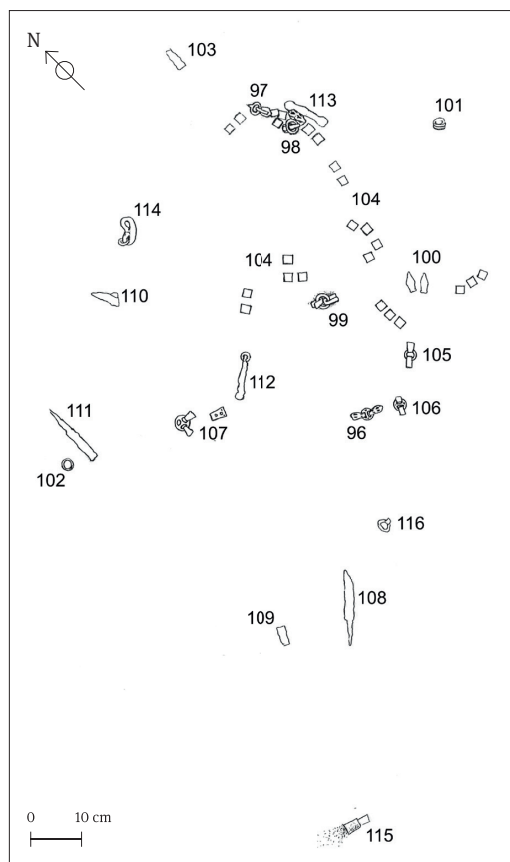


Fig. 6. Find collection in excavation no. 5.

Jn 6. *Leiud kaevandis nr 5.*

Drawing / Joonis: Indrek Jets

² Poz-75894, 1560 ± 30 BP, calibrated with 95.4% probability by OxCal v4.2 software (Bronk Ramsey 2009), using IntCal13 atmospheric curve (Reimer *et al.* 2013).

Discussion and preliminary conclusions

Weapon finds in the wetland at Viidumäe enable us to see the site in a broader context than before. Sacrificial places with offerings stuck to a cliff or spread at the foot of a cliff were not known in Estonia earlier. Ornaments and weapons deposited in wetland, on the other hand, is a much more widespread phenomenon.

Platforms built of stones have been recorded in several cult-places in Sweden, notably at Lilla Ullevi and at Helgö (Hållans Stenholm 2010; Zachrisson 2010; Bäck & Hållans Stenholm 2012). The latter was an open-air sacrificial place near a cliff, thus resembling Viidumäe in several aspects. An offering place on open landscape, where a stone construction had been covered with a layer of clay, has been excavated at Götavi (Svensson 2010). Connections between wetlands or bodies of water and offerings, including human sacrifices, have also been registered in several places in Scandinavia (Fredengren 2015).

A custom to make offerings of ornaments, particularly neck-rings and bracelets, was characteristic of the inland areas in the 5th – 6th-century Estonia. From Estonian coastal areas only one such site is registered so far, at Uuri in the northern coast of the country (Oras 2015, 344). At the same time, it is mainly in Coastal Estonia where quite a number of artefacts, including weapons, have been found in several graves dated from the 5th till the first half of the 7th century (Mandel 2003; Mägi 2006). In the second half of the 7th century both weapons and other grave goods disappeared – only a few graves dated to the period 650–950 are recorded in whole Estonia. This phenomenon can most probably be explained by a custom not to put artefacts into graves (for extended discussion, see Mägi 2013).

Shortly before the custom to place metal artefacts into graves ceased in Estonia in the 6th – 7th century, the custom to make offerings of weapons and sometimes ornaments in wetlands, springs or other bodies of water intensified in Estonia (Oras 2015, 117). Big collections of weapons have been found in such places in Virumaa (notably Alulinn, but also Kunda; see Oras 2014; 2015, 275–276, 305–306) and at Paluküla Kunilepa at the border of Coastal Estonia towards large wetlands (Oras 2015, 327–328). The find of Rikassaare in Inland Estonia (Oras 2015, 333–334) was somewhat different and probably an exception that represented rather a declaration of one-time treaty around 600 AD than a long-lasting sacrificial tradition. Smaller collections of weapons have also been found in other places in Inland Estonia, notably at Igavere, Kaaba and Valgjärve (Oras 2015, 286–287, 303).

The evidence suggests that weapons did not lose their significance in the late 7th – mid-10th-century Estonia, but the ritual spheres where they were symbolically utilized changed. Now weapons, sometimes together with other artefacts, were deposited in wetlands. The next change probably took place by the end of the 9th century, when such sites of sacrifices and offerings were abandoned or their usages slowly faded. Instead, weapons were put in graves again from the mid-10th century.

The sacrificial place at Viidumäe seems to have been primarily connected with warriors and especially the shared cultural sphere of warriors that took its shape during the same time as the site was used. Only a few artefacts found so far may be associated with women. Most ornaments at Viidumäe, e.g. numerous dress-pins and some brooches, could easily have belonged to warriors (Jets & Mägi 2015). All weapons at Viidumäe are similar to the ones in eastern Scandinavia or belong to the same types as weapons in Finland (see e.g. Kivikoski 1973, plate 58, 60–62).

Fieldwork at Viidumäe in 2015 demonstrated that beside the fact that the place was very striking by nature, some man-made structures and buildings had been added as well. How they looked and whether they were connected with special functions on the site is left for further fieldwork.

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ARHEOLOOGILISED VÄLITÖÖD VIIDUMÄE OHVERDUSKOHAL

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2015. aastal jätkusid aasta varem alanud uurimistööd Viidumäe ohverduskohal. Jätku-uuringutel avati neli väikest proovikaevandit (jn 1).

Proovikaevandi nr 2 tegime inimluude leiukoha lähedusse järsaku jalamile kivise poolkaarekulise platvormi edelaossa. Leide või muud kultuurkihi viitavat ei saadud, kuid platvormi korrapärasus ning koostamine ühesuurustest valitud kividest viitab sellele, et platvorm on inimkättega rajatud. Selle dateering on paraku ebaselge. Paarkümmend leidu tuli välja järsakul ja selle jalamil metallidetektoriga otsides.

Tundlikuma metallidetektoriga kasutamisel selgus, et ohverdatus on ikkagi ka ohverduskoha põhjapoolses osas olevale märgalale, kus ka tänapäeval on kevadel-varasuvel kohati lahtist vett (jn 2). Leidsime terveid esemeid või katkeid seitsmest odaotsast, angoost (pika kaelaosaga odaots), kaheteralisest mõõgast, ambsõlest ja rõngaspeanõelast. Leiud võib dateerida umbkaudu 6.–8. sajandisse (jn 3). Kuigi soisele alale kaevatud aukudesse tuli kohe sisse vesi, õnnestus tuvastada, et relvad paiknesid enamikul juhtudel horisontaalselt hallika põhjakihi peal, arvatavalt kunagise lahtise veega veekogu põhjas (jn 4).

Relvaleiu nr 74 (odaots ja võitlusnuga) ümbrusesse tehti proovikaevand nr 3. Asjade leiukohast umbes 1 m põhja pool sattusime kohe kamarakihi all rohketele töödeldud puidu jäänustele. Heleda põhjakihi peale oli laotud palkidest ehituskonstruktsioon, mille pealmine kiht oli põlenud (jn 5). Kõikjal leidsus söetükikesi, põlenud ja põletamata luukilde. Puidust võetud radiosüsiniku analüüs dateeris selle perioodi 420–565 pKr. Teisest märgalale rajatud proovikaevandist (kaevand nr 4) kultuurkihti ei leitud.

11.–12. sajandi vööosadest ja arvatavalt vöö küljes ripunud esemetest koosnev leid saadi sadakond meetrit märgalast kirde poolt, alalt, kus metall-leiud muidu puudusid (proovikaevand nr 5; jn 6). Praegused leiud Viidumäel osutavad seega, et kõige varasemad ohverdused on tehtud ala idapoolsemasse ossa, kus järsak on kõige kõrgem, ülejäänud leiuainest hilisemaid leide on saadud aga ohverduskoha põhjalast väljaspool põhjapiiril.

Kividest ehitatud platvorme ja vahel ka savikihiga kaetud alasid on viimaste aastakümnete uurimistöö andmetel tuvastatud mitmel pool Rootsis, kus neid on interpreteeritud kui kultuslikke rajatisi. Mitmed Skandinaavia kultuskohad on paiknenud kas klindi või mäe jalamil või olnud seotud soode ja veekogudega. Tervel real juhtudel on neist kohtadest saadud muuhulgas katkendlikke inimluid, mida on sarnaselt muudele leidudele tõlgendatud ohverdustena. 2014.–2015. aastal toimunud kaevamiste leiud võimaldavad vaadelda Viidumäe muistist seoses teiste Põhjamaadest ja ka Eestist teada olevate eseme- ja eriti relvaohverdustega märgalale. Teatud paralleele võiks näha näiteks Alulinna ja Kunilepa leiuga. Relvaohverdused sohu näivad iseloomustavat eeskätt 6.–9. sajandit, seega perioodi, mil kalmetesse polnud kombeks relvi või muid esemeid kaasa panna.