

Merike Kurisoo, Aivar Põldvee

**THE APPEARANCE OF HANS AND JAAN.
A 17TH CENTURY EPITAPH PAINTING
DONATED BY ESTONIAN PEASANTS**

In the autumn of 2017 an exhibition *Five Forgotten Paintings* opened at the Niguliste Museum, a branch of the Art Museum of Estonia. The exhibition brought to the viewer altar and epitaph paintings from early modern period that were unknown to both art historians and wider audience for almost a century.¹ Only scant information exists about the paintings that were forgotten and left to wait their discovery in the depository. And upon their discovery, their origins and initial locations were unknown. The goal of the exhibition was to bring these works before the public again, to explore their origins, fate and meaning, as well as the stories of the people connected to the pictures.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12697/BJAH.2017.14.05>

Translated by Juta Ristsoo, Marju Kubre.

This article was written under the auspices of the ESF grants IUT31-6 and IUT18-8.

1 Exhibition *Five Forgotten Paintings* (16 September 2017–26 August 2018), curator Merike Kurisoo, Niguliste Museum, branch of the Art Museum of Estonia. The exhibition includes an altar painting from the Vändra church (1653), epitaph painting from the Türi church (1692?), painting of the Last Supper from Toompea Hill (1693), Lääne-Nigula altarpiece (1764) and an 18th century painting of poor Lazarus and a rich man from the St John Almshouse in Tallinn.

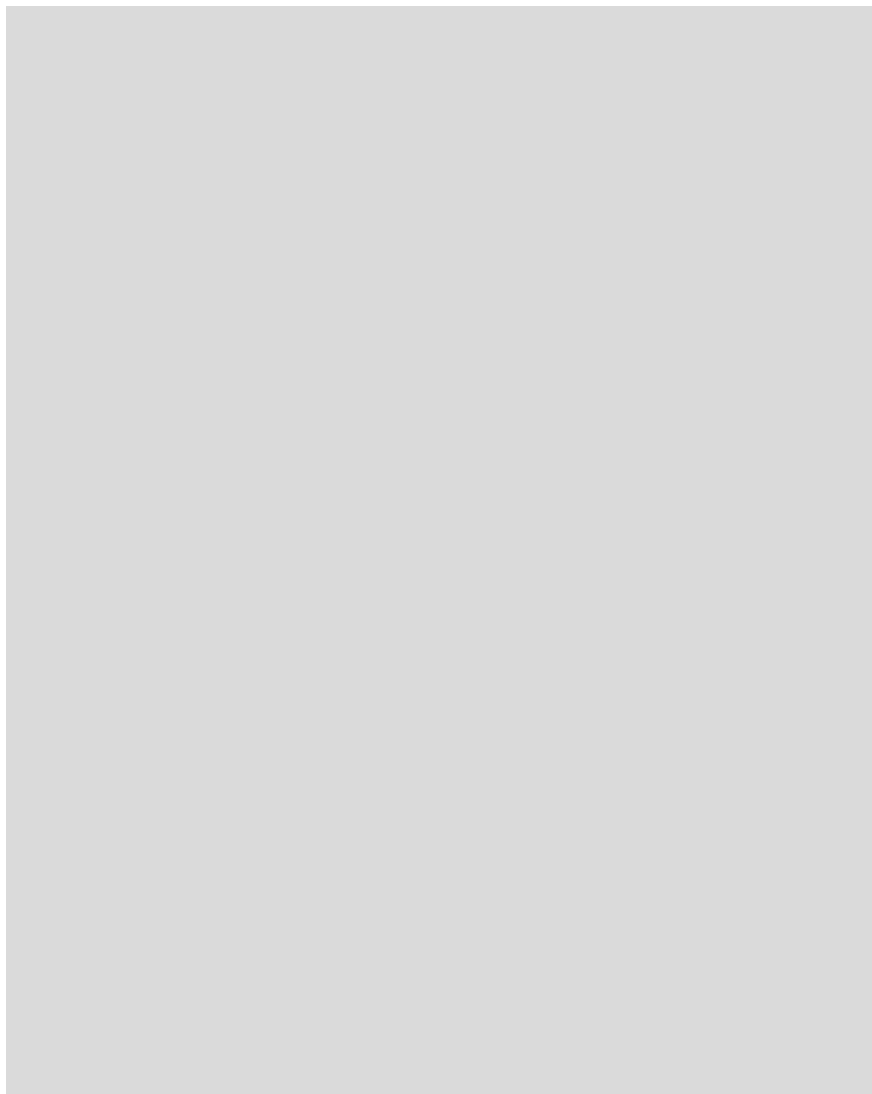


Fig. 1. *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Epitaph painting from the Türi church. 1692 [?]. Photo: Stanislav Stepaško, Art Museum of Estonia.

Fig. 2. Hans from Nätsa farm in the village of Virika and Jaan from Reegla farm in the village of Pala. Detail of the epitaph painting.

Among the five paintings, there is one that could be called sensational. On the epitaph painting that came from the Türi church, we see shepherds bowing before the Christ child, and on the picture frame, we see two Estonian peasants looking back at us. The unknown artist has added their names and the date: *Wirrika Netze Hans Kirko Võrmünder. Wanna Palla Rekela Jahn Anno 1692 [?] den 4 April*. This is probably the oldest pictorial depiction of Estonians that includes their names.

The Livonian peasant Stephan Rabe (in Latvian Steppinsch Krauklis), who is familiar to us from prints that date back to the Great Northern War (1700–1721) and who has even been called an Estonian media star,² is perhaps more a creation of the propaganda of the day, which Estonian national romantic historical literature transformed into character called Ronga Tehvan.

FROM THE CHURCH TO THE MUSEUM

It is not known when exactly the epitaph painting depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds arrived at the Art Museum of Estonia.³ The museum archives were destroyed in 1944. The catalogue card describing the work was compiled in 1950, but the origin of the picture is not indicated. And it is not clear whether the work was bought for the museum or it ended up there in the course of the work carried out by the North-Estonia and South-Estonia Art Protection Committees

² Kalle Kroon, Ronga Tehvan, “Eestlasest meediastaar 18. sajandil”, *Horisont*, 4 (2011), 10–15.

³ Art Museum of Estonia, 1678, M 1747. Unknown artist, *Adoration of the Shepherds*. 17th century. Oil on wood. Dimensions with frame: width 108.5 cm, height 133.5 cm. The work was registered at the Art Museum of Estonia on 9 July 1945 (document no. 241).

or during later collecting work.⁴ A small label, with the notation *MPT korj. r. 1512 järjek. nr. 319 Jõulupilt (MPT collecting book 1512 registration no. 319 Christmas picture)* on the frame, alludes to the latter possibility. The abbreviation *MPT* probably applies to the Estonian Heritage Rescue Committee (*Eesti Muinasvara Päästetoimikond*), which was established in 1920 at the Heritage Board of the Ministry of Education and dealt with antiquities, including the collection of objects related to art and cultural history.

A small note with the text *Bagasi sedel Nr. 2689 Alliku jaamast Sadama jaama (Baggage ticket no. 2689 from Alliku station to Sadama station)* has been glued to the back of the painting. The note indicates that the work was sent to Sadama railway station in Tallinn from Alliku station in Järva County in central Estonia. The narrow-gauge Tallinn–Viljandi railway line was opened in 1900 and the Alliku station was located near the Türi church on land bought from the Alliku manorial estate. And the station bore that name until 1923. The use of the name “Alliku” indicates that the epitaph painting was brought to Tallinn before 1923.⁵ The baggage label allows one to assume that Hans and Jaan were peasants came from Türi (Germ. Turgel) parish.

ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

The painting depicts the birth of Jesus and the Adoration of the Shepherds from the Bible story of the Nativity (Luke 2:1–20).⁶ In the foreground of the painting, the Virgin Mary is sitting and

4 In 1919 during the War of Independence, the Art Protection Committees of North and South Estonia were founded in Estonia, which dealt with inventorying and evacuating art and cultural treasures. They focused mostly on compiling lists of the art and book collections in the manors as well as public and private collections, and organising their evacuation. Only some of the lists compiled by these committees have survived and ecclesiastical art is seldom mentioned. During the first years of its existence, the Art Museum of Estonia, which was founded in 1919 (until 1928, the Estonian Museum), had already begun collecting and buying antiquities. Although the emphasis was on art of historical and ethnographic importance, some information also exists about the collecting of ecclesiastical art. Unfortunately, the rare mentions of ecclesiastical art do not include information on the origins of the works.

5 In a report related to the Türi church from 1926, there is a notation that a large picture, which was located in the church and depicted the Adoration of the Magi, had been given to a museum in Tallinn by pastor Speer. Viktor Woldemar Theodor Speer was the pastor in Türi from 1904 to 1922. National Archives of Estonia, Estonian Historical Archives [Eesti Ajalooarhiiv, EAA], 1237-60, 4. Report on ecclesiastical monuments, 1926.

6 When the angels went away from them into the sky, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem, now, and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” They came with haste, and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby was lying in the feeding trough. When they saw it, they publicised widely the saying which was spoken to them about this child. (Luke 2:15–18).

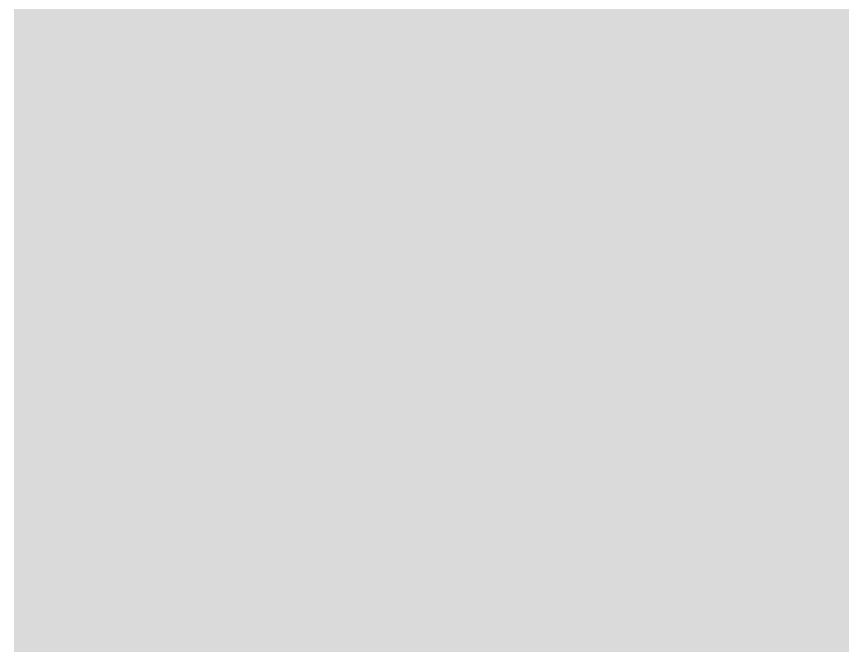


Fig. 3. Cornelis Bloemaert II (1603–1692), *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Copperplate engraving after the painting of Girolamo da Treviso the Younger (1479–1544). Photo: British Museum, London.

breastfeeding the newborn with Joseph on her left. They are surrounded by kneeling shepherds. Three angels are standing behind the Virgin Mary; one of whom is playing a lute. Two angels are flying above them, one is pointing towards Heaven, alluding to the divinity of the earthly scene. An engraving by Cornelis Bloemaert II (1603–1692) on the same topic served as a model for the painting. The engraving, in its turn, was inspired by a painting by Girolamo da Treviso the Younger (1479–1544), which had earlier been attributed to Raphael (1483–1520).⁷ The vertical Türi church epitaph painting is a compressed version of a scene from a horizontal engraving by Bloemaert. And the row of text on the bottom edge of the engraving and a medallion for coats of arms has been incorporated into design of the epitaph painting’s frame.

7 Also see British Museum, Museum number V,4.66; V&A Museum, Museum number DYCE.1995.

The picture frame includes the portraits of the peasants who donated the painting and the text mentions their names. The picture of the men's faces on the frame have been severely damaged, and the paint has disappeared from the lower part of the numbers denoting the years. The year indicated on the frame is either 1692 or 1693.

The names and portraits of the two men indicate that it is a Lutheran epitaph painting. An epitaph is a picture commemorating and preserving the memory of certain persons. Epitaphs usually present scenes from the Bible, such as the Crucifixion or Resurrection of Christ and the portraits of the people memorialised with texts. They were commissioned to commemorate the departed, or by the person or persons, themselves during their lifetimes.

The Adoration of the Shepherds as the theme for separate paintings is not a widespread phenomenon in Lutheran ecclesiastical art, and the individual examples that are known to exist are more of an exception and based on the donors' wishes.⁸ The theme of the painting donated by the Estonian peasants Hans and Jaan is not accidental. The Adoration of the Shepherds refers to the peasant background of the donors. The men have chosen a scene, where simple shepherds have come to honour and adore the newborn Jesus, that also commemorates them.

In 1693, the Türi church acquired a baroque altar wall that was made in the workshop of the famous Tallinn wood carver Christian Ackermann (active from 1670 to 1710).⁹ The artist that created the painting was probably one that collaborated with Ackermann's workshop. It seems probable that, simultaneously with the completion of the new and grand altar decoration for the church, the two peasants from the Türi congregation wanted to preserve their memory by gifting an epitaph to the church, thereby demonstrating their religious devotion.

⁸ The Adoration of the Shepherds is depicted as an individual scene on Caspar Niemeck's epitaph in the City Church of Wittenberg (workshop of Lucas Cranach the Younger, 1564), the chosen pictorial theme was wish of a childless couple. In Estonia, the Adoration of the Shepherds has been depicted as one of the scenes depicting the life of Jesus on altarpieces and pulpits from the early modern period, but not as individual pictures. For example, the altarpiece in Harju-Madise (Germ. St. Matthias, 1631) and the pulpits in the Church of the Holy Spirit (1597) and St Nicholas' Church (1624) in Tallinn. *Eesti kunsti ajalugu 2, 1520–1770*, ed. by Krista Kodres (Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005), 322, 347, 353.

⁹ Sten Karling, *Holzschnitzerei und Tischlerkunst der Renaissance und des Barocks in Estland*. Verhandlungen der Gelehrten Estnischen Gesellschaft XXXIV (Dorpat: K. Mattiesen, 1943), 295–296.

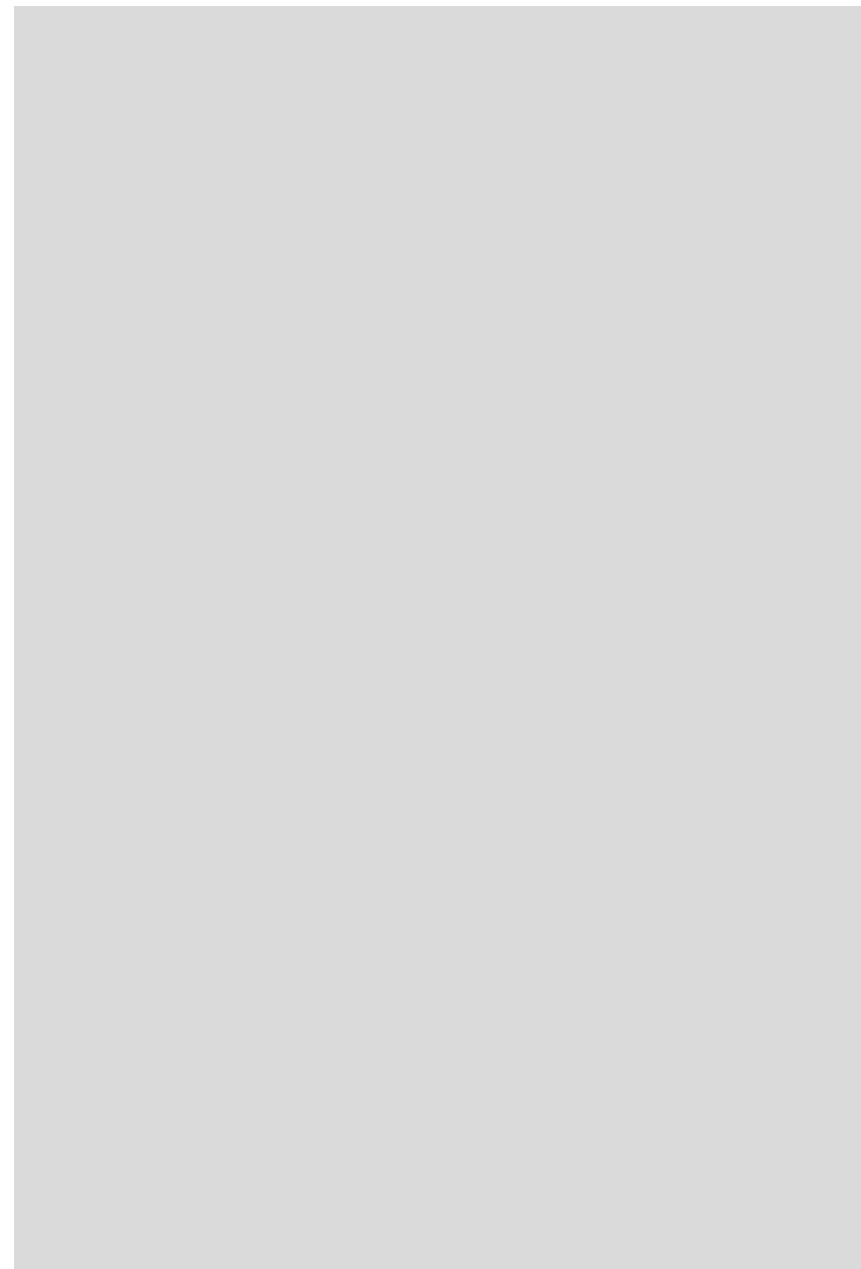


Fig. 4. Interior view of the Türi church before World War II. Photo: University of Tartu.

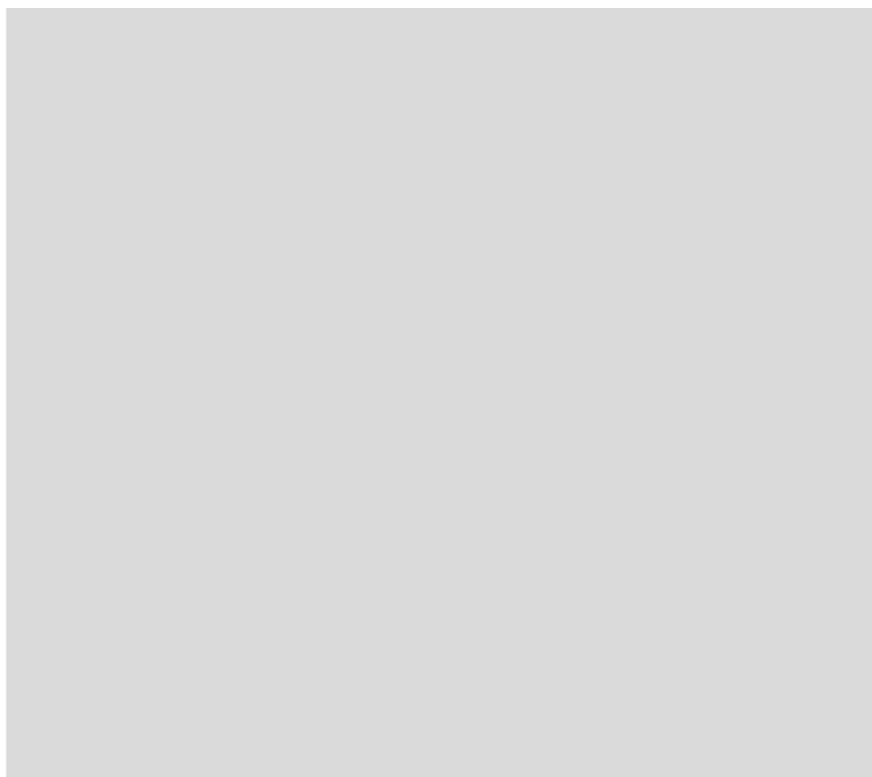


Fig. 5. The Türi church and parsonage, 1695. Map: National Archives of Estonia.

WHO WERE HANS AND JAAN?

The oldest metrics book in the Türi church date from 1712, although the materials related to the land revision and inventory of the manors conducted in 1686 during the period of the Great Reduction (*reduktion*) have also survived. During the *reduktion*, the Kirna Manor, which belonged to the Fersen family, was returned to the Swedish crown; and Hans and Jaan, who are both registered as heads of households in the *wacka*-book, were among the manor's peasants. *Wirrika Netze Hans* was recorded as *Nehetza Hans* from the village of Virika (*Wirricka*) and *Wanna Palla Rekela Jahn* was recorded as *Räkela Jahn* from the village of Pala (*Palla By*).¹⁰ The farm names of Nätša and Reegla still exist

¹⁰ EAA, 1-2-942, Järvamaa hide audit 1686–1689, fol. 1087–1108 (Kirna Manor inventory and register of socage holdings, 11.05.1686), citation fol. 1105v–1107.

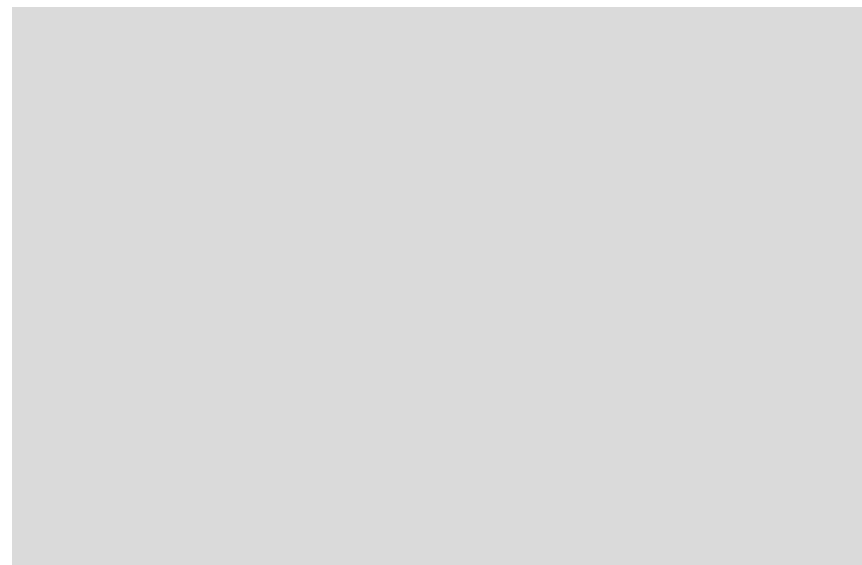


Fig. 6. The Türi church and parsonage in the 18th century. Map: National Archives of Estonia.

today. The text on the picture frame (*Kirko Vörmünder* i.e. Germ. *Kirchenvormünder*) indicates that Nätša Hans (*Netze Hans*) was an assistant church warden at the Türi church. Assistant church wardens from the peasantry were appointed as helpers for the pastor and parish clerk. Under the direction of the manor lords, who were the wardens of the church, the assistant wardens helped keep the church in good order, organise the necessary repairs and construction work, and safeguard church discipline and propriety in the congregation. During the church visitations they presented comments and observed the opening of the collection boxes. The assistant wardens were chosen from among the most honourable peasants, which, in a way, made them into elders of the congregation. As a sign of respect, they were given more prominent seats in the church and free burials after their death. Sometimes, they were even buried in the church. Such a social position may explain why Hans decided to donate such an expensive painting to the church. Such a clear reason does not exist for Reegla Jaan (*Rekela Jahn*), but he was apparently an older respected farmer. This is alluded to by the word *Wanna* (i.e. old) in his name, as well as the shiny bald head we see in the portrait.

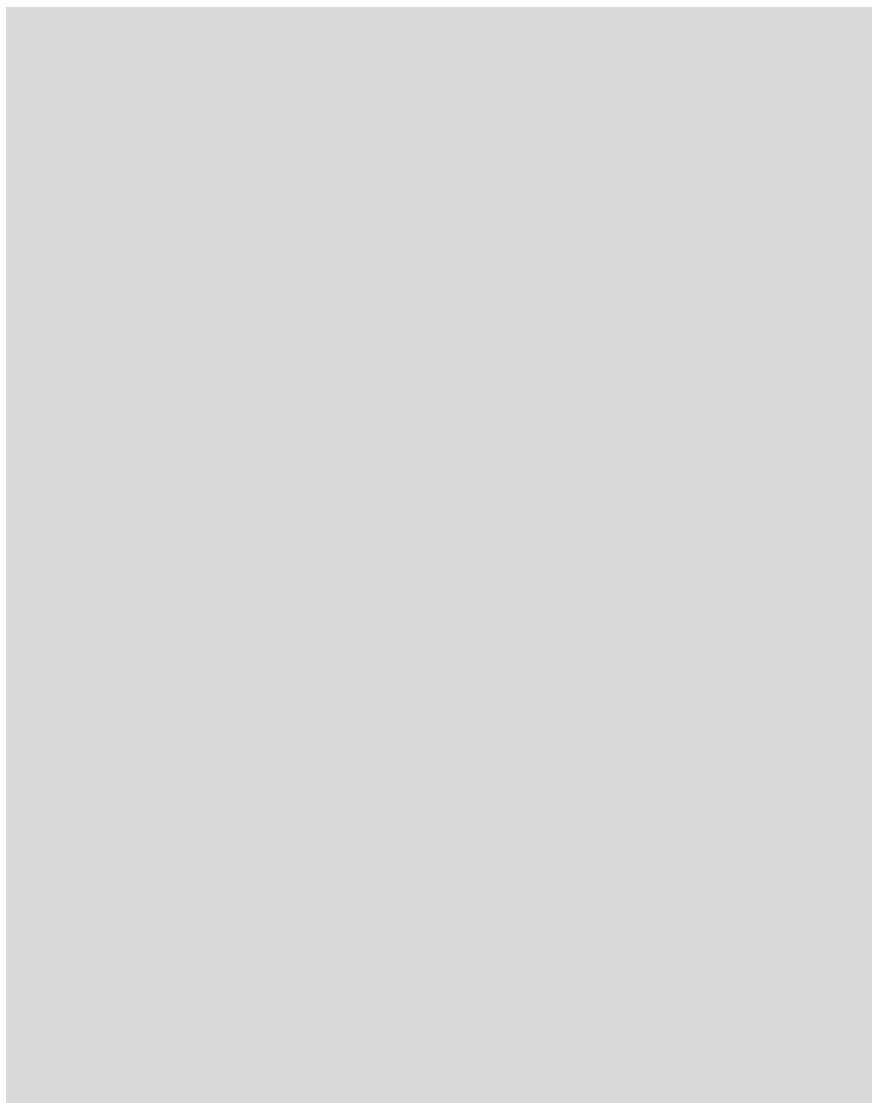


Fig. 7. Map of Kirna Manor from the late 17th century. Map: National Archives of Estonia.

When Johan Hindrich von Elswijk, in the name of the *reduktion* committee, clarified the disputed borders of the Kirna Manor in May of 1686, Reegla Jaan (*Reckla Johan*) was called to testify.¹¹ In the papers related to the land revision forty years later (1725–

11 EAA, 1-2-942, fol. 1104v.

1726), we see that his son or grandson of the same name (*Rekla Jahn*) had become the overseer (Est. *kubjas*) of Kirna Manor.¹²

Commissioning a large-scale epitaph painting was quite expensive, but at least according to the *wacka*-book of 1686, neither Hans or Jaan stood seemed to be very wealthy compared to the other farmers in Virika and Pala. The entry for Nätša Hans's farm lists two sons, two horses, a foal, four oxen, an ox calf, four cows, a heifer, two calves, five sheep, three rams, two goats and seven pigs. Reegla Jaan's entry lists three sons, three horses, a foal, four oxen, two ox calves, four cows, a calf, seven sheep, two rams, three goats and seven pigs. Both had farms with one hide (Germ. *Haken*), which meant that they had to send a workman with a harness to work at the manor six days a week, in addition to other obligations and taxes.

SUMMARY

The epitaph donated by Hans and Jaan, two peasants from Türi parish, is evidence of the acceptance of ecclesiastic values and religious devotion among the Estonian peasantry. Other examples of this tendency from the Swedish era also exist. For instance, the grand wheel crosses, typical for North Estonia, that were once located in the Türi churchyard; and a chandelier (1659) donated by a peasant in the Keila church, the size of which exceeds those gifted by manor lords. From a later period, the stained-glass coats of arms of the peasantry in the Ilumäe chapel (1729) are also an example of this heightened sense of self-awareness and its display in houses of worships.

Along with the hundreds and hundreds of works donated to churches by nobles, the epitaph painting depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds is a rare example of a painting gifted to a church by farmers, which also commemorates them. Hans and Jaan have now earned a place in Estonian (art) history: the pictures of the two simple men are the first known portraits of peasants whose names we know.

12 *Eestimaa 1725.–1726. a. adramaarevisjon. Järvamaa*. Allikpublikatsioon (Tallinn: Riiklik Ajaloo Keskarhiiv, 1989), 29, 136–137.

MERIKE KURISOO, AIVAR PÕLDVEE: THE APPEARANCE OF HANS AND JAAN. A 17TH CENTURY EPITAPH PAINTING DONATED BY ESTONIAN PEASANTS

KEYWORDS: 17TH CENTURY; ESTONIAN PEASANTS; LUTHERAN ART; EPITAPHS; CHURCH ART

CV

Merike Kurisoo is a doctoral candidate at the Tallinn University and a curator of the Art Museum of Estonia. She is also editor-in-chief of the *Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia*. Her main research areas include late medieval and early modern church art. She has curated several exhibitions and published various articles and books about church art.

Aivar Põldvee, PhD, is a senior researcher at Tallinn University, School of Humanities, Institute of History, Archaeology and Art History. His main research interests are history of culture, education, language and literature in early modern period. He is one of the authors of the *History of Estonia III (Eesti ajalugu III, 2013)*.