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RESCUE EXCAVATIONS ON ALT-LAARI SETTLEMENT SITE, TARTUMAA

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In July 2008, Konguta municipality in Tartumaa (Nõo parish), south-east Estonia started to build a new road and a parking lot in the village of Vahesaare, on the Alt-Laari settlement site, related to the Alt-Laari hill fort west of it. The road constructions in the area, where the humus layer had been removed, revealed a natural light yellow clayish sand layer with hearth-places and some sherds of striated pottery were collected from the hearths. The University of Tartu carried out rescue excavations that were financed by the National Heritage Board.¹

Alt-Laari settlement site lies on a flat plateau and its territory is assumed to be about 4500 m² (Aun 1992, 23), although it may be larger. The small (about 1200 m²) hill fort close to it that has no remarkable defence structures dates mainly from the Viking Age (Tõnisson 2008, 297) and it was probably abandoned at the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD like many other hill forts in south-eastern Estonia. Probably in the middle of the 12th century it was replaced by a larger hill fort Erumäe (*Erumäe kants*), also located in the distance of ca. 300 m (see Valk, Juurik & Rannamäe, this volume). Including the low intensive periphery in the eastern part of the settlement site, about 2300 m² had been destroyed (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1. The destroyed part
of the settlement site.
View from the east.

Jn 1. Asulakoha lõhutud osa.
Vaade idast.

Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak

¹ Finds: TÜ 1695.

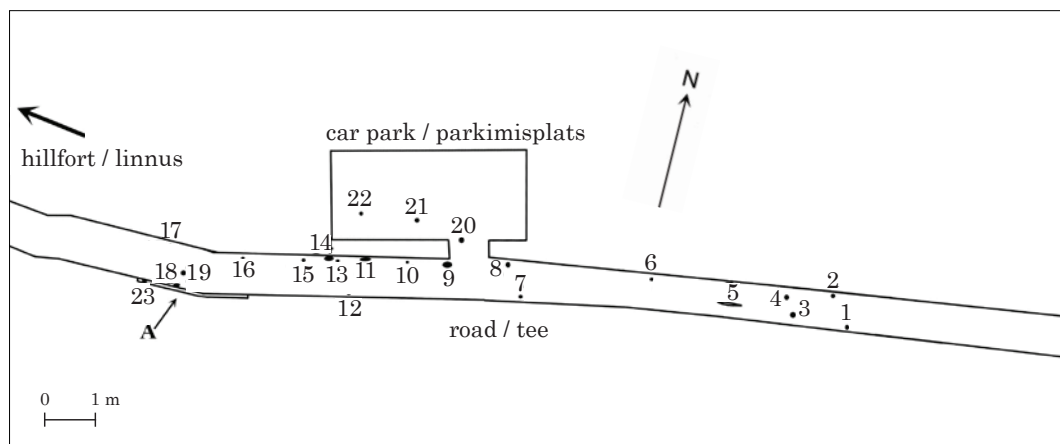


Fig. 2. The general plan of the settlement site of Alt-Laari. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23 – remains of the hearths. 5, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20 – remains of cultural layers. A – excavation plot in the western part of the settlement site.

Jn 2. Alt-Laari asulakoha üldplaan. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23 – koldekohad. 5, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20 – kultuurkihilaigud. A – kaevand asulakoha lääneosas.

Drawing / Joonis: Anti Lillak

and a few deeper parts of the cultural layer, for example, bottoms of the hearths, had remained undisturbed. In addition, a 23 m long and 0.5 m wide zone south of the road (Fig. 2: A) had to be excavated, because otherwise further road building would have been destroyed it as well.

In total, 23 dark spots were registered in the destroyed part of the settlement site. About 17 of them (Fig. 2) could be interpreted as remains of the hearths; the rest were either pits of unknown function or simply a lower part of the cultural layer. The majority of the hearths (9) and other dark spots (5) acuminated in the centre of the settlement site, in the vicinity of the entrance of the car park, as well as on the western slope of the plateau up to about 60 m west from it. It is noteworthy that many of them (hearths 8, 9, 11, 13, 14 and other spots 10, 15, 16) formed a straight line from east to west. This enables to suggest that the village road may

have existed in its present location already in the time when the settlement still functioned. It may have been in use already in the Early Metal Age, as indicated by the hearths 11, 14 and 17, where striated ceramics were found. Some of the hearths and other constructions may have been destroyed already earlier by the old road between Alt-Laari farmstead and the historical centre of Uueküla village.

East of the entrance of the car park the periphery of the settlement site began; remains of the hearths were quite rare there (in total, 7 hearths in a ca. 80 m long and 8 m wide area) and the cultural layer was not so intensive as on the western slope, being only about 10 cm thick. The precise borders of the settlement site were mostly not possible to observe, except in the southern profile of the road near the entrance of the car park, where

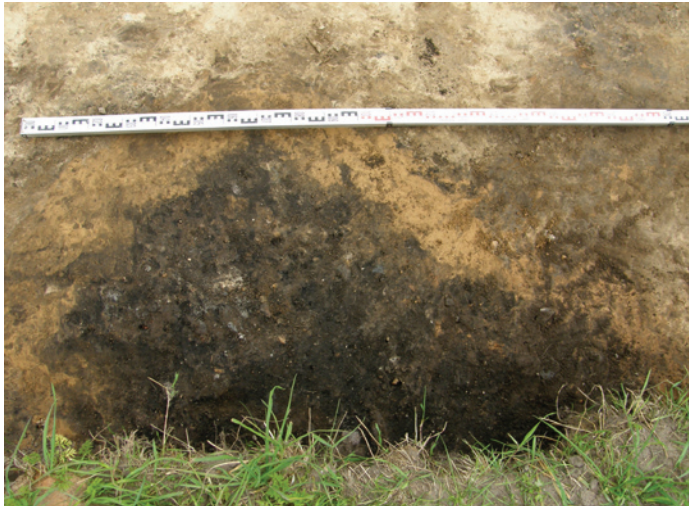


Fig. 3. Hearth 11. View from the north.

*Jn 3. Kolle 11. Vaade põhjast.
Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak*



Fig. 4. Hearth 14. View from the north.

*Jn 4. Kolle 14. Vaade põhjast.
Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak*

a quite sharp border between the dark cultural layer and ordinary brown field soil was visible.

The hearths usually consisted of small granite stones (often charred or with marks of fire) and very dark soil (Figs. 3; 4), but sometimes the dark soil was absent in the hearth. In some cases pieces of charcoal could be collected. The stones formed clusters of one or two layers, although the number of the layers could have originally been bigger (the upper part of the hearths had been removed). The diameters of the hearths varied from 40–177 cm. The remaining parts of the hearths were usually choppy round or oval, they were preserved as deep as 10–40 cm.

Fig. 5. Striated ceramics from the hearth 11.

Jn 5. Riihitud keraamika koldest 11.

Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak



11 hearths (2, 3, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 23) from 17 contained finds, mostly fragments of hand-made pottery. Eight hearths (2, 3, 8, 9, 11, 14, 17, 19, 23) included the sherds with striated surface (Fig. 5), whereas textile-impressed pottery was absent in the settlement site. The ^{14}C -dates from hearths 2 and 3 yielded the results 1565 ± 51 BP (cal. 95.4% 396–603 AD)² and 1675 ± 54 (cal. 95.4% 242–466, 481–534 AD)³, correspondingly. Striated pottery was in use for a long period from the Bronze Age to the 5th–6th centuries AD in south-eastern Estonia and it was quite common also in the southern part of Tartumaa (Laul 2001, 173–174). It has also been found from the hill fort of Alt-Laari in the trial excavations in 1927 (Aun 1992, 22–23) and one sherd was also discovered from Erumäe hill fort (see fig. 8, Valk *et al.* Excavations on the Hill Forts ..., this volume). In addition, some animal bones were found in the hearths (11, 13, 14), including unburnt ones. For example, a horn of a bovid was found between the stone layers of the hearth 14. Hearth 17 contained mostly fragments of pottery with small holes in the rim, i.e. the so-called Rõuge-type pottery (Fig. 6), and a fragment of a vessel with smoothed surface, both types being typical to the second half of the 1st millennium AD. The ^{14}C -sample from the hearth was dated to 1275 ± 50 BP (cal. 95.4% 659–870 AD).⁴ Also, at least one fragment of striated pottery was found in the hearth 17. It is possible that the hearth was in use over several periods, but it cannot be excluded that the piece of the striated pottery had been there in the second half of the 1st millennium AD. Hand-made ceramics were found also in the remains of the cultural layer (spots 15 and 16, the first one containing striated pottery, too).

² Tln-3134.

³ Tln-3135.

⁴ Tln-3137.

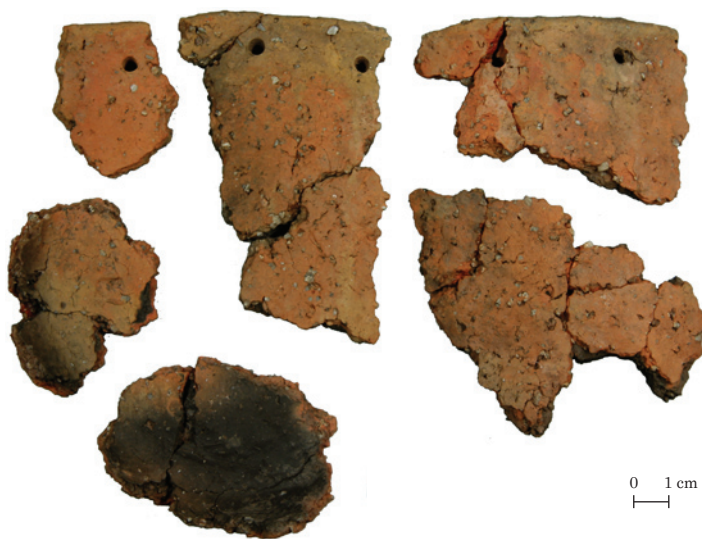


Fig. 6. Rõuge-type ceramics from the hearth 17.

Jn 6. Rõuge tüüpi keraamika koldest 17.

Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak



Fig. 7. Excavation plot in the western part of the settlement site. View from the north-east.

Jn 7. Kaevandiala asulakoha lääneosas. Vaade kirdest.

Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak

Wheel-thrown pottery was absent in the hearths, because the upper part of the cultural layer containing material from the Latest Iron Age and the Middle Ages was entirely destroyed in the area of the road and the car park.

The dark brown cultural layer in the narrow, 23×0.5 m zone south of the western part of the road, was situated on the western slope of the plateau; it was about 40–45 cm thick and was covered with about 25 cm thick layer of brown erosion soil, that did not contain any finds (Fig. 7). Many settlement sites in the hummocky regions of south Estonia are disturbed by the erosion, for example, the settlement site of Ala-Pika in the Otepää Upland (Kihno & Valk 1999, 223). The erosion layer in Alt-Laari was removed for the excavations by a backhoe.



Fig. 8. Pennies of the Tartu bishopric.

Jn 8. Tartu piiskopkonna pennid.

(TÜ 1695: 20, 61.)

Photo / Foto: Anti Lillak

The cultural layer was rather homogeneous, in the lower part of the slope it contained some stones with a diameter of about 10 cm. Finds varied a lot – in the upper part of the cultural layer fragments of wheel-thrown pottery from the 11th–13th cc. were found, as well as two bracteate-pennies of Tartu bishopric from the 13th–14th cc.⁵ (Fig. 8). The lower part of the cultural layer contained a lot of hand-made pottery from the second half of the 1st millennium and earlier potsherds with striated surfaces from the Roman Iron Age. In the western end of the excavation plot a small hearth (Fig. 2: 23) was unearthed about 45 cm below ground level, containing single granite stones and ceramics, including sherds with striated surfaces.

The depth of the hearth was about 12–16 cm; its bottom did not reach the natural soil. In general, striated pottery was represented by larger sherds than the pottery of the Middle Iron-Age and the Viking Age. In the lower, sloping part of the excavated area another shallow hearth (Fig. 2: 18) was unearthed. It had been dug in the yellow natural soil. In the hearth several rather small stones were revealed, but finds were absent.

In the broader context of south-eastern Estonia Alt-Laari settlement is outstanding for the presence of striated pottery and the lack of textile-impressed ware. The ¹⁴C-dates also give evidence of its beginning in the Roman Iron Age. It seems that the settlement of the Roman Iron Age was rather big in size. The site was inhabited also in the Viking Age and in the Latest Iron Age – until the 13th – 14th cc. When the settlement was deserted, life continued in the centre of the present-day Uueküla village that has been inhabited at least since the 11th–12th cc.

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⁵ Identified and dated by Mauri Kiudsoo (AI).

ARHEOLOOGILISED PÄÄSTEKAEVAMISED ALT-LAARI ASULAKOHAL TARTUMAAL

Konguta vallavalitsus alustas 2008. aasta juulis Vahessaare külas Alt-Laari muinasaegse asulakoha alal uut tee ja parkimisplatsi rajamist. Selle käigus hävitati asulakoha kultuurkihti umbes 2300 m² suurusel alal (jn 1). Kollases aluspinnases joonistusi selgelt välja tumedad koldepõhjad (kokku 17), samuti kultuurkihi alumised õhukeselt säilinud osad (6; jn 2). Tartu Ülikool tegi muistise avatud kultuurkihiga alal päästeuringuid, mida rahastas Muinsuskaitseamet.

Asulakoha kõige intensiivsema kultuurkihiga ala jäi uue parkimisplatsi alale ja selle sissesõidust lääne poole, madala kõrgendiku linnamäe-poolsele nõlvale, kus leiti kokku 9 koldepõhja ja 5 tumedat laiku. Kultuurkiht oli siin kohati 40–45 cm paks ning koldelaike esines võrdlemisi tihedalt. Parklast ida poole jääv ala on ilmselt asula väheintensiivse kultuurkihiga (paksus 10 cm ringis) perifeeria, kus tee peal võis umbes 80 m pikkusel ja 8 m laiusel alal täheldada seitset koldelaiku. Mõned asula lääneosas kolded ja laigud moodustasid sirge ida–lääne-suunalise rea. Pole välistatud, et sirges reas paiknevad kolded viitavad omaaegsele tee olemasolule praeguse külatee kohas juba muinasaegse eksisteerimise ajal, s.t. linnuse juurde viiva teelõigu järjepidevusele.

Koldelohkudes (jn 3–4) oli säilinud peaaesjalikult 1–2 kivikihti, mille seas võis kohati leiduda väikesi sötükke. Kolded olid ebakorrapäraselt ümmarguse või ovaalse põhiplaaniga, nende läbimõõt varieerus 40–177 cm vahel. Koldelohkude säilinud osad oli 10–40 cm sügavad.

11 kollet sisaldasid leiumaterjali, peamiselt käsikeraamikat, mille seas esines arvukalt riibitud

pindadega kilde (kokku 8 koldepõhjas; jn 5). Kaks riibitud keraamikaga koldekohta dateeruvad kalibreeritud radiosüsinikuproovi põhjal vastavalt vahemikku 396–603 pKr ning 242–466 või 481–534 pKr. Riibitud keraamika oli Lõuna-Tartumaal üsna levinud; selle valmistamisaeg jääb vahemiku alates pronksiajast kuni 5.–6. sajandini pKr. Tekstiilkeraamikat asulast ei saadud. Kolle 17, mis pärineb kalibreeritud süsinikuproovi põhjal vahemikust 659–870 pKr, sisaldas I aastatuhande teisele poolele iseloomulikke servaaukudega nn Rõuge tüüpi jämekeraamikat (jn 6) ja ühe silutud peenkeramikakatte, ent sealt leiti ka vähemalt üks riibitud pinnaga keraamikakild. Lisaks leidis mõnes koldes põlenud ja põlemata loomaluid. Kedrakeraamikat kolletes ei olnud.

Asula lääneosas, ehitatava tee lõunaservas kaevati läbi 23 m pikkune ja 0,5 m laiune riba säilinud kultuurkihti (jn 2: A, 7). Tumepruuni kultuurkihti kattis 20–25 cm paksune leidudeta ühtlaselt pruun põllumuld. Kultuurkiht oli umbes 40–45 cm paks; selle ülemine osa sisaldas kedrakeraamikat ning leiti ka kaks Tartu piiskopi brakteaatpenni 13.–14. sajandist (jn 8). Sügavamal esines käsitsikeraamikat, mille seas oli ka riibitud kilde. Kultuurkihi alaosa leiti leiumaterjalita koldelohk.

Alt-Laari linnusasula tekkis nähtavasti rooma rauaajal ning oli arvatavasti juba sellal võrdlemisi suurte mõõtmetega. Kui Alt-Laari linnus oli kasutusel arvatavasti I aastatuhandest II aastatuhande vahetuseni pKr, siis asula kestis edasi kuni keskajani ning jäeti maha hiljemalt 14. sajandil.