



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN THE PÕLTSAMAA OLD PARISH CEMETERY

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the instalment of water and sewerage pipelines in the area of the former Põltsamaa St Nicholas church and churchyard archaeological supervision was carried out.¹ During the survey several skeletons and a stone wall were found, and important material about the size and usage period of the churchyard was gathered.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It is conjectured that before the Livonian Crusades and Christianization of the area of present-day Estonia, there was a county centre of the small Mõhu (*Mocha*)² province in or near modern Põltsamaa (Lavi *et al.* 2012, 217). Medieval Põltsamaa (Germ. *Oberpahlen*) was a hamlet without town privileges with a population as little as 100–200 people (Selart *et al.* 2012, 181–182). In the Medieval and Early Modern Times the settlement was situated along both shores of the Põltsamaa River. This position by the riverbank and near the important trade routes made it possible for Põltsamaa to become an important place for craftsmen and merchants. So far, most of the archaeological research has concentrated on the castle of the Livonian Order in Põltsamaa, located on the western bank of the river, hence there is little known about the settlement of the eastern shore, including the area of St Nicholas church and cemetery (Fig. 1).

It is plausible that there had been a wooden church building, which was established soon after the Christianization of the Mõhu province in the second quarter of the 13th century, before the foundation was laid for a stone church. However, consoles made of limestone which resemble those of the nearby Türi church were found at the church site. Due to the similarity of the stone consoles of the two churches, it has been suggested that the Põltsamaa stone church was erected at the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century (Raam 1970, 47–49). In the year 1600, the church was razed during the Polish-Swedish war (1600–1629) (Raam 1999, 107).

It is likely that local people began to bury their dead in the old parish cemetery right after the plot was consecrated, which supposedly took place in the second quarter of the 13th century. The churchyard was continually used as a burial ground even after the church had been destroyed. However, burying in the churchyard was inhibited in 1773, when the estate owner of Uue-Põltsamaa (Germ. *Neu-Oberpahlen*), Jacob Heinrich von Lilienfeldt, donated land for a new cemetery (Kuurme 2001, 79). The abandonment of the old burial site was probably connected to the laws set in 1771–1772,

¹ The fieldwork was conducted by Peeter Piirits from MTÜ Arheoloogia ja Ehitusajaloo Grupp.

² *Mocha* has been mentioned in the chronicle of Henry of Livonia (HCL XV: 7; XXIV: 5; XXVIII: 9).

that ordered cemeteries to be established at a certain distance from the churches and settlements, to avoid the spread of contagious diseases (Polnoye 1830, 409, 500, 691).

The site of the St Nicholas church has not been studied yet, however the first archaeological excavations at the churchyard took place in 2010 (Lavi *et al.* 2012, 217–226) (Fig. 1). During the fieldwork, four *in situ* burials, commingled bones, coffin nails and a piece of a penannular brooch were found (*ibid.*). Due to agricultural and building activity in the churchyard area, lots of human bones have come out of the ground over time (Kulo & Kuik 2008, 50–51).

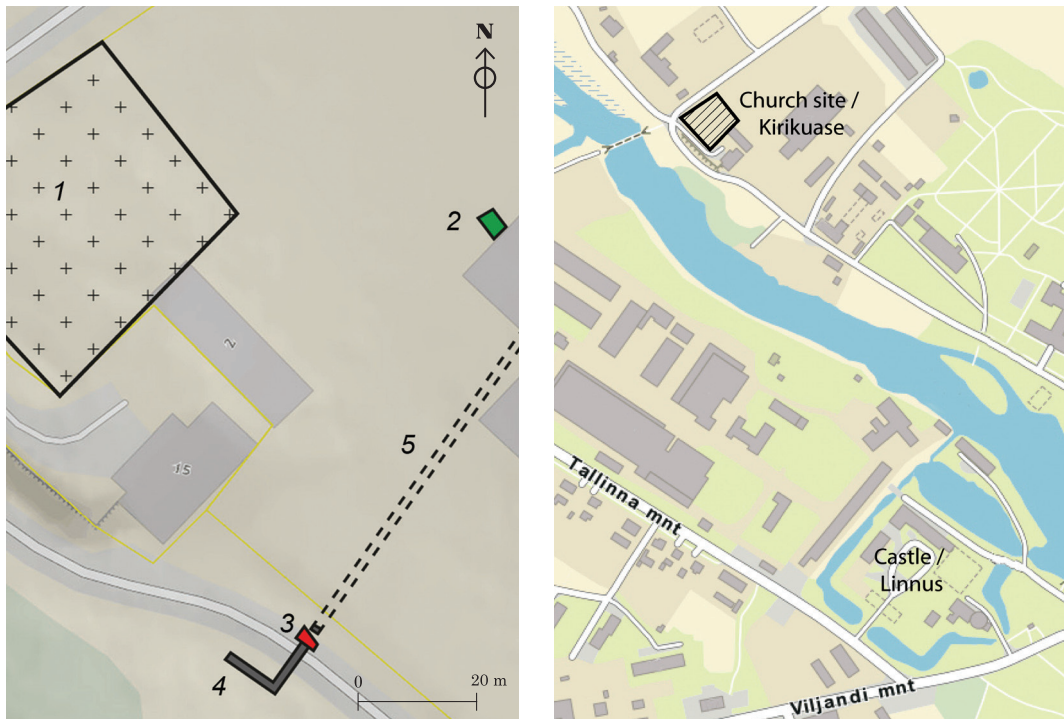


Fig. 1. The burials and the stone walls found from the old parish cemetery of Põltsamaa. 1 – site of the St Nicholas church, 2 – burials found in 2010, 3 – burials found in 2013, 4 – unearthed churchyard wall, 5 – likely position of the churchyard wall.

Jn 1. Põltsamaa vanalt kihelkonnakalmistult leitud matused ja kivimüürid. 1 – Püha Nikolause kiriku ase, 2 – 2010. aastal leitud matused, 3 – 2013. aastal avastatud matused, 4 – väljapuhastatud kalmistumüür, 5 – oletatav surnuaiapiirde asukoht.

Drawing / Joonis: Raido Roog, Maria Smirnova

BURIALS AND THE EASTERN WALL OF THE CHURCHYARD

During the supervision in 2013, six *in situ* burials³ and many commingled bones were discovered from an area of ca. 10 m². The fractured bones originated from the earlier graves that had been mixed when later graves were dug on the same spot. Numerous mixed bones refer to the great density of burials in the churchyard.

The bodies had been placed in the graves in a consistent row, in extended supine position (Fig. 2). Heads of the deceased were directed to southwest, presumably to fol-

³ Bones that belong to an infant were found from the pelvis area of the skeleton no. 4 and were given a separate number – 4B.

low the position of the nearby Põltsamaa River. The hands of the deceased were set on the chest and belt area, but there was no uniform allocation. The depth of the burials varied between 1.08–1.54 m below the present day ground level. In four of the graves, in total six Russian *dengas* were found (Table 1) as grave goods. Most of these coins had been minted between 1731 and 1760.⁴ All coins were found in the upper body area – in three cases, under the left shoulder (burial no. 1) or under the left side of the chest (burials nos. 2 and 4). Due to the corrosion of the coins, some hair had been preserved at the back of the cranium and several wooden shavings under the burial no. 6. It was a well-known custom to put the shavings, which were leftovers of the coffin making process, under the deceased body (see also Malve *et al.* 2012b, 203). A lot of dry-rotted timber and coffin nails had also been preserved in addition to coins (Table 1). It is likely that the fragments of the coffins belonged to board coffins, which are common for Medieval and Early Modern Times (Tiirmaa 1997, 96; Malve *et al.* 2012a, 191), when the cemetery was used.

Besides the burials, the remnants of the eastern wall of the churchyard were found 0.6 m below the present-day ground level (Figs 1 and 3). The wall was directed from northwest to southeast and was 1.4–1.5 m wide. It was laid of boulders (with a diameter of up to 55 cm) and fastened with mortar. The lower part of the wall was fastened with soil instead of mortar. Also, a 2.6 m wide gate was unearthed. This was presumably the eastern portal to the churchyard. Furthermore, the remains of the southwestern corner of the churchyard were found. The corner was preserved only at a height of two stone rows. The burials that were situated under the wall (nos. 2 and 3) can refer to the age of the structure (Fig. 3): it is likely that this wall had been built in the second half of the 18th century, sometime after 1773, when the cemetery was no longer in use.



Fig. 2. Burial no. 6 in board coffin.

Jn 2. Luustik nr 6 laudkirstus.

Photo / Foto: Peeter Piirits



Fig. 3. Part of the churchyard wall and burials no. 2 and no. 3 that were under the wall.

Jn 3. Välja puhastatud surmuuaia müür ja selle alla jäänud matused nr 2 ja 3.

Photo / Foto: Peeter Piirits

⁴ TÕ 2272: 99–103, identified by Peeter Piirits.

THE HUMAN REMAINS

Seven skeletons were found during the archaeological survey (Table 1). The sex of the buried was determined by the characteristics of the cranium and the pelvic bone (Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994, 16–20). The age at death was found out according to the changes in pubic symphyseal face (Todd 1920; 1921) and wearing of the teeth (Brothwell 1981, 72). Body height of the grown ups was calculated using the Trotter & Gleser (1952) method by the length of the left humeri. The age of subadults was determined by examining the development and eruption of the teeth (Ubelaker 1989, 63), the epiphyseal fusion (WEA 1980, 531) and the length of the long bones (Allmäe 1998, 183). The sex of the children was not specified because a child develops distinct gender characteristics only after puberty.

Three of the skeletons belonged to adults (one female and two male) and four to children. The small number of excavated skeletons hinders generalisations. Typical pathologies, which are related to the natural aging of the skeleton, lifestyle and nutrition, as well as development disorders, were found during the osteological analysis (see Table 1). Notable injuries of the burial no. 6 are brought out separately.

Table 1. Burials of the Põltsamaa old parish cemetery.
Tabel 1. Põltsamaa vana kihelkonnakalmistu matused.
Compiled by / Koostanud: Martin Malve

Burial no/ Matuse nr	Sex/ Sugu	Age/ Vanus	Pathologies/ Patoloogiad	Grave goods/ Panused	Coffin remains/ Kirstu jäänused	Stature/ Kehakasv (cm)
1	?	2 years ± 8 months	-	Russian <i>denga</i> (1731)	wood and two coffin nails	-
2	?	0–2 months	Calcified hemorrhages on the internal side of the neurocranium	Russian <i>denga</i> (1731)	wood	-
3	♂	50+ years	Tooth abscesses, <i>ante mortem</i> tooth losses, osteoarthritis on the limb joints and on the spine, spondylosis, Schmorl's nodes, four button osteomas on the right parietal bone, spondylolysis	-	wood and four coffin nails	165.3 ± 4.05
4	♀	40–50 years	Caries, tartar, medium alveolar reduction, osteoarthritis on the limb joints and on the spine, spondylarthrosis, spondylosis	Russian <i>dengas</i> (1750; 1760)	-	152.1 ± 4.45
4b	?	0–4 months	-	-	-	-
5	?	6 months ± 3 months	Calcified hemorrhages on the internal side of the neurocranium	-	-	-
6	♂	21–24 years	Caries, tartar, slight alveolar reduction, VII–X ribs of the left side were in the state of healing, Schmorl's nodes, button osteoma on the right parietal bone, sacralization of the fifth vertebra	Russian <i>dengas</i> (17??; 17??)	wood	169.9 ± 4.05

Many chest injuries were identified on a young male skeleton (burial no. 6). On the left side of the chest, ribs VII to X were broken (Fig. 4). Each rib had one fracture. The fractures were situated at the back side of the ribs, at the angle of the rib. The broken parts of the ribs were only at the initial stage of the healing process – porous callus formation could be seen at the place of the fracture. Parts of the VII rib had not yet merged completely (Fig. 4). It is plausible that the man had died within a couple of weeks after the trauma. Healing of a broken rib usually takes about two to four weeks (Petlem 1974, 50). It is also possible that the man had fatal internal injuries due to this trauma. Fractures like this could have been caused by falling, for example.

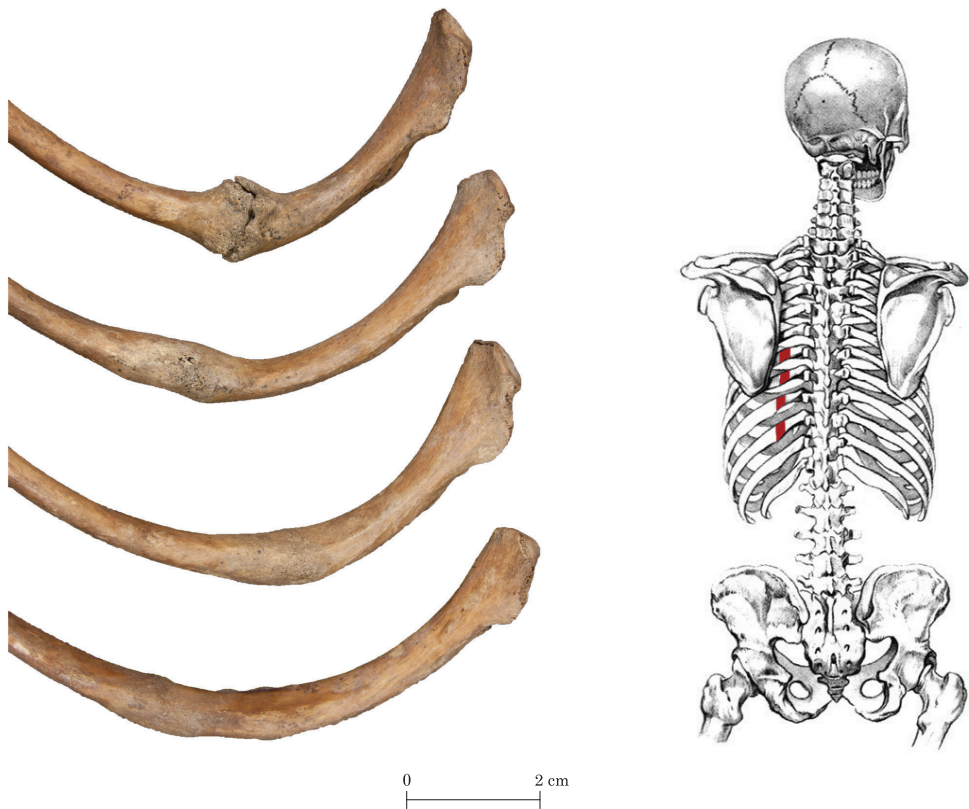


Fig. 4. Costae of burial no. 6 show early stages of fracture healing on the left side of the chest (Nienstedt et al. 2007, 101, fig. 103). Callus formation (thickened area) can be seen on the fractures. The first rib (VII) from the top has not fused completely.

Jn 4. Varases paranemisjärgus vasaku kehapoole roided (luustik 6). Murrukohas on näha tekkinud luumõhna (paksenenud ala). VII (ülevalt esimene) roie pole veel täielikult ühinenud.

Photo / Foto: Raido Roog

SUMMARY

Six burials and some parts of the churchyard wall were unearthed during the archaeological supervision at the old parish cemetery of Põltsamaa. The outcomes of the survey are as follows: the eastern boundaries of the churchyard, the location of the gate and the end of the using time of the churchyard were specified. Seven burials were discovered, three of which were adults (one female and two male) and four children. The customs of the burials were typical to the 18th century burial sites. Only Russian *den-gas* were found from the graves as grave goods. The deceased were inhumed in wooden coffins. The burials and the wall of the churchyard originated from the 18th century.

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ARHEOLOOGILISED KAEVAMISED PÕLTSAMAA VANAL KIHELKONNAKALMISTUL

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Arheoloogilise järelevalve käigus satuti kunagise Põltsamaa Püha Nikolause kiriku ja kirikaia alal luustikele ja maakivimüürile (jn 1). Kihelkonnakalmistule matmine algas tõenäoliselt kohe pärast paiga sissepühitsemist 13. sajandi teisel veerandil, mil seal võis olla puukirik. Kivikiriku ehitamisajaks on pakutud 13. sajandi lõppu ja 14. sajandi algust. Kirikaeda kasutati aktiivselt ka pärast kiriku purustamist aastal 1600 ja matmine lõpetati alles 1773. aastal.

Uuringute käigus avati kuus *in situ* matust (s.h üks kaksikmatus) ja leiti rohkelt segatud inimluud. Arvukas segi paisatud inimluude hulk viitab suurele matmistihedusele kirikaias. Surnud olid sängitatud ühtses reas selili-siruli asendis peaga edelasse (jn 2). Käed olid asetatud rindkere- ja vööpiirkonda, ühtset kätepaigutust ei esinenud. Matmissügavus varieerus 1,08–1,54 m vahel tänapäevasesest maapinnast. Panustena saadi neljast hauast kuus Vene dengat 18. sajandist (tabel 1). Lisaks müntidele oli säilinud rohkelt kirstu kõdupuitu ja naelu (tabel 1).

Uuringute käigus avastati kirikaia idakülje müüri alaosa jäänused (jn 1, 3). Müür oli loode-kagu suunaline, paksusega 1,4–1,5 m ning laotud mördiga ühendatud maakividest. Välja puhastati ka arvatav kirikaia idapoolne väravakoht ning kirikaia edelanurk. Matused leiti surnuaia müüri ja värava koha alt (jn 3). Suure tõenäosusega rajati aed millalgi pärast 1773. aastat, mil kalmistu polnud enam kasutusel.

Arheoloogiliste päästekaevamiste käigus leiti seitse luustikku (tabel 1): 3 täiskasvanut (1 naine ja 2 meest) ning 4 last. Kuna leitud luustike hulk oli väike, siis ei võimalda see teha suuremaid üldistusi. Osteoloogilise analüüsi käigus tuvastati mitmeid tüüpilisi patoloogiaid, mis on seotud nii inimese loomuliku vananemise, toitumise ja elustiiliga kui ka arenguhäiretega (tabel 1). Huvitavamaks juhtumiks oli matus nr 6 luustikul tuvastatud mitmed rindkere vigastused (jn 4).

Uuringute tulemusena täpsustusid kalmistuala idaosa piirid, väravakoht ja kasutamisaaja lõpp. Leitud matused ja surnuaia piire pärinevad 18. sajandist.