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# New data from the hill fort of Värtemäe: addendum to the excavation results of 2016

**Heiki Valk**

*Tartu Ülikool, ajaloo ja arheoloogia instituut* (University of Tartu, Institute of History and Archaeology), Jakobi 2, 51005 Tartu, Estonia; heiki.valk@ut.ee

## INTRODUCTION

In July 2017, minor excavations, a continuation to those of 2016, took place on the hill fort of Värtemäe[1] in Karula parish, Valga County. In 2016, the stronghold was studied in two trenches: in the first of them a post hole from the fortifications, in the second one – occupation layers from the 6th–7th cc. were uncovered (Valk 2017).

The trench, located in the lower, southern corner of the strongly sloping plateau of the hill fort (Valk 2017, fig. 7), was extended upwards. The aim was to get more and contextualized information about the pottery with dot ornamentation, especially concerning the vessel a fragment of which (Valk 2017, fig. 9: 18), was found from the outer, hill-side edge of a 1 m² sized 'tooth' (square D/3) protruding from the main body of the trench of 2016 (see Valk 2017, fig. 7, stony area in the foreground). The new trench (5 m²) surrounded the 'tooth' from all unexcavated directions (Fig. 1). As the border of the former field on the hill fort plateau was located higher than the trench of 2017, the area had not been disturbed by ploughing. All the soil was sieved on 4 mm eye mesh.

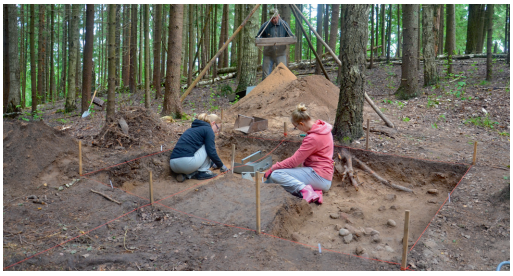

**Fig. 1.** *Trench of 2017 on the Värtemäe hill fort.*
**Jn 1.** *2017. aasta kaevand Värtemäe linnamäel.*
*Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk*

## RESULTS

The dark eroded top soil contained some tiny fragments of hand-made pottery. In the depth of 12–15 cm it was followed by light yellowish brown disturbed sand with some dispersed fire-cracked stones, also of eroded character. From this layer a grinding stone with strongly worn surfaces (Fig. 2) was found. In the


**Fig. 2.** *Grinding stone from the Värtemäe hill fort.*
**Jn 2.** *Jahvekivi Värtemäe linnamäelt.*
*(TÜ 2670: 100.)*
*Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk*

[1] In the previous publication, the name of the hill fort has erroneously been presented as Värtemägi. Factually, Värtemägi is a different hill located *ca*. 500 m south of the hill fort. The hill fort is called Värtemäe because of its location on the land of Värtemäe farmstead which got its name from Värtemägi Hill.


**Fig. 3.** *Pottery from the Värtemäe hill fort.*
**Jn 3.** *Keraamikat Värtemäe linnamäelt.*
*(TÜ 2670: 139, 68, 123, 112, 188, 33, 74b, 228.)*
*Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk*

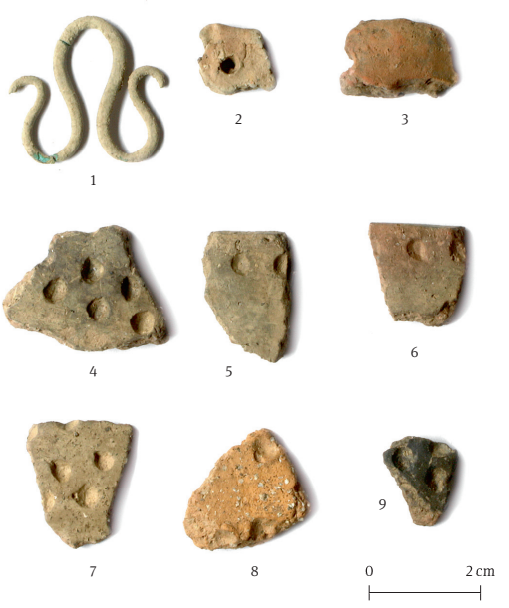


**Fig. 4.** *Loop and pottery from the Värtemäe hill fort.*
**Jn 4.** *Riputussang ja keraamika Värtemäe linnamäelt.*
*(TÜ 2670: 202, 77, 125, 101, 204, 215, 180, 52, 230.)*
*Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk*

upper part of the trench, the eroded sand stretched until intact mineral ground. In the lower part of the trench, however, it was followed by an *in situ* occupation layer – up to 10 cm of thick grey soil containing numerous fire-cracked stones (diameter 8–12 cm).

The trench of 2017 gave no organic remains for radiocarbon analysis but the overlapping part of radiocarbon dates from the lower, undisturbed layers in the trench of 2016 was 350–630 cal AD; when considering also overlapping with the sample from trench 1 – 563–630 cal AD (Valk 2017, 41–42).

The occupation layer provided 445 fragments of hand-moulded pottery (including tiny fragments from the sieve) (Fig. 3). The sherds were mostly of light brown, sometimes of greyish brown colour and originated both from vessels of fine (Fig. 3: 1–5) and coarse (Fig. 3: 6–8) surface. The edges of vessels were mainly upright (Fig. 3: 1, 2) but in one case also slightly profiled (Fig. 3: 3). A few sherds originated from vessels with a rim (Fig. 3: 5). Seven sherds (1.6%) were decorated with dot ornamentation (Fig. 4: 4–9) and three had a penetrating hole or semi-penetrating pit at the upper edge (Fig. 4: 2, 3).

Sherds with dot ornamentation had, unlike the majority, mostly smoothed and dark – dark grey, and in one case also polished black surface; two of them (Fig. 4: 4, 7) had a rim and two were fragments from upright edges (Fig. 4: 5, 6). They were found also from the grey *in situ* occupation layer with fire-cracked stones, as well as from the natural grey soil under it.

Ornamented pottery, including dotted sherds – the most common type of ornamentation in south-eastern Estonia in the second half of the 1st millennium AD –, has previously been suggested to have appeared in the region only since the end of the 1st millennium AD and to have existed for a limited time. The suggestion is based upon its presence mainly in the upper layers of Rõuge hill

fort, and on its finds from Unipiha hill fort in the 9th–10th cc (Aun 1976, 358; Aun 1992, 51). Finds of Värtemäe hill fort indicate a longer tradition of such fineware, stretching back into the early Pre-Viking Age. As pottery with dotted ornamentation has been found also from Urvaste Järveküla hill fort where calibrated radiocarbon date from the occupation layer is 537–669 cal AD (Valk 2007, 64–65), the history of the dotted ornament is probably longer than considered before.

A find worth of special noting is a double-S shaped loop from the bottom of the grey occupation layer with stones (Fig. 4: 1). Such finds are uncommon for south-eastern Estonia during the 1st millennium AD, but they are typical for the Latgallian culture in the Iron Age and in the first half of the 2nd millennium AD. As the oldest known find of that type from the territory of Latvia also originates from the 6th or 7th century[2], the item from Värtemäe is one of the oldest known representatives of this find group.

When comparing the excavation results of two years, the difference in the character of occupation layers must be noted. In the main part of the trench of 2016, the eroded top layer was followed by dark, partly sooty soil which contained brands and large amounts of burnt clay fragments whereby the soil was partly of reddish colour – evidently, because of the disintegration of weakly burnt or unburnt clay particles. The sooty soil contained no fire-cracked stones which, on the contrary, were numerous in the grey *in situ* occupation layer investigated in 2017, as well as in square D/3 of the 2016 trench. Evidently, a light timber building with walls plastered with clay had perished in fire, falling down along the hill slope. The different stage of disintegration of the clay particles can be explained by their different stage of burning in the fire. As the sooty soil had a definite end *ca*. 20 cm from the border of the 2016 trench, this line seems to mark the hill-side wall of the building. Judging by the small diameter of the brands, the building was of light construction. The use of non-cross-beam construction is evinced by the lack of clay daubs with triangular section and concave sides. As indicated by a large amount of clay particles, its walls were wind-proof but, considering the lack of fire-cracked stones and low number of pottery fragments in the *in situ* bottom layer, it was not a dwelling house but could rather be hypothetically interpreted as a cattle-shed. The upper wall of this building (i.e. that towards the hill fort plateau) had also prevented the spread of fire-cracked stones, connected with everyday human life activities, to its inside.

## CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the small size of the investigation area, the new trench on Värtemäe hill fort has enriched our knowledge of cultural processes in south-eastern Estonia in the middle of the 1st millennium AD. The excavations show the early presence of pottery with dot ornamentation, and refer to the use of light timber buildings with walls probably made of rods or branches and plastered with clay. The double-S-shaped loop, the earliest find of such kind from Estonia, gives evidence of an early Baltic cultural impact in southern Estonia during the primary stage of the Baltic expansion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[2] Oral data from Antonija Vilcāne, Institute of Latvian History.

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## LISANDUSI VÄRTEMÄE LINNAMÄE 2016. AASTA KAEVAMISTULEMUSTELE

Heiki Valk

2017. aasta suvel toimusid väiksemad jätkukaevamised Värtemäe linnamäel (Karula khk). Kaevand (5 m²) piirnes vahetult eelmise aasta kaevandiga selle mäepoolsel küljel (jn 1). Pinnase ülemisest, erodeerunud osast leiti käsitsikeraamikat ja kulunud kantidega jahvekivi (jn 2). Kaevandi põhjas oli kuni 10 cm paksuselt säilinud ka erosioonist puutumata, kohapeal tekkinud kultuurkihti. Hallikas, kergelt säbruline pinnas sisaldas rohkesti läbipõlenud 8–12 cm läbimõõduga kive.

Sõelumisel leiti nii peen- kui ka jämekeraamiliste käsitsi tehtud nõude kilde, valdavalt väikesed helepruunid tükid (jn 3). Seitsmel killul oli lohkornamenti (jn 4: 4–9) ja kolmel serva ääres paiknevad augukesi või poolläbivaid lohukesi (jn 4: 2, 3). Lohkornamenti leidus peamiselt vähestel tumeda, silutud pinnaga kildudel. Ehkki niisugune kaunistusviis on dateeritud I aastatuhande lõppu, leidus lohkudega kilde ka kultuurkihi erosioonist puutumata alaosas, kust pärit mulluste süsinikuproovide kalibreeritud ühisosa jäi aastate 350–630 pKr (arvestades ka teist kaevandit, aastate 563–630 pKr) vahemikku. Segamata kultuurkihi põhjast leiti loogakujuline riputussang (jn 4: 1). Sellised leiud on iseloomulikud Läti alale, kus neist varaseimad pärinevad samuti 6.–7. sajandist.

Märkimist väärib kultuurkihi erodeerumata alaosa erinev iseloom 2016. ja 2017. aasta kaevandis. Kui mullu oli tegemist osalt tumeda ja nõgise, osalt aga lagunenud savitihenditest punaseks värvunud pinnasega, milles savinõukilde oli väga vähe ja põlenud kive polnud üldse, siis selle aasta kaevandis oli kultuurkiht tumehall ning sisaldas palju põlenud kive ja savinõukilde. Eraldusjoon kahe piirkonna vahel oli selge ja konkreetne. Võib arvata, et 2016. aasta kaevandi alal on paiknenud kerge, seintele savi määrimisega tuulekindlaks muudetud, oletatavasti peenest puitmaterjalist ehitis (ehk loomalaut?), sellest vahetult mäe pool, st hoone seina taga aga põlenud koldekividega elutsoon.

Vaatamata väiksele ulatusele andsid kaevamised Värtemäe linnamäel 6.–7. sajandi kohta uut teavet. Tulemused viitavad lohkornamendiga, aga ka tumeda pinnaga silutud keraamika seni arvatust suuremale vanusele, samuti saviga määritud seintega kergele ja ilmselt mitte ristpalkkonstruktsioonis ehitisele. Loogakujuline riputussang annab tunnistust lõunapoolsetest kultuurimõjudest Karula kõrgustikul, mille laiem taust on baltide rooma rauaaja järgne ekspansioon.