



# A Viking Age silver hoard from Sürgavere, Viljandi County

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## DISCOVERY AND FIELDWORK

On 8 August 2019, licensed detectorist Rihet Ots informed the National Heritage Board of Estonia, that he had just discovered several silver coins in Sürgavere, Viljandi County. A few hours later, an archaeologist of the Heritage Board arrived to document the find. With the aid of a metal detector, silver coins and coin fragments were collected from an area of 38 × 30 m. Two test pits revealed no trace of an occupational layer – the soil consisted of 25–40 cm thick mixed ploughed layer, situated on the natural loam. Later, R. Ots handed over coins and coin fragments with location data from the site on several occasions, most recently in August 2020.

Follow-up fieldwork led by the National Heritage Board in collaboration with the University of Tartu took place in October 2019. A 107 m<sup>2</sup> trench was made to the area where the greatest concentration of metal detector signals had been recorded and where most of the coins had been found earlier. Because coins were scattered over a large area and the soil was already mixed by melioration and ploughing, a shovel loader was used for peeling approximately 10 cm thick layers of soil that were searched with metal detectors (Fig. 1). Using this method, 68 coins and coin fragments were found. The thickness of the entirely mixed ploughed layer in different parts of the trench varied from 20–25 to 40–45 cm and it extended down to the natural loam. The coins were situated 11–47 cm beneath the ground level, most often at the depth of 20–30 cm. The original location of the hoard was not determined, as the coins were



**Fig.1.** Excavations of the Sürgavere hoard.

**Jn 1.** Sürgavere aarde kaevamine.

*Photo / Foto: Maria Smirnova*

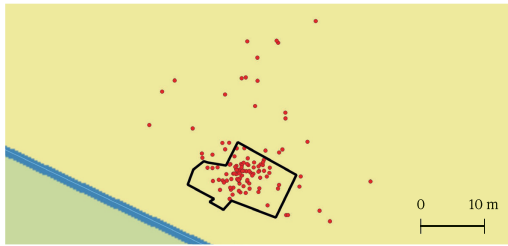


Fig. 2. Location of coins and the trench in the finding place of Sürgavere hoard.

Jn 2. Müntide ja kaevandi paiknemine Sürgavere aarde leiukohas.

Basemap / Aluskaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet; drawing / joonis: Helena Kaldre

spread by ploughing over an area of  $76 \times 36$  m (Fig. 2). There were also no traces of a vessel that the hoard might have been deposited in. After the fieldwork, some more coins and fragments were found from the excavated soil. All the coins from the Sürgavere hoard are stored in the Estonian History Museum.

## LOCATION

The earliest written records of the village of Sürgavere (Germ. *Surgauer*) are from 1583 (Polnische Akten IV, 151). Sürgavere manor was built in the place of the village in the middle of the 17th century. The Late Iron Age

and medieval settlement site where hand-made and wheel-thrown pottery has been found (TÜ 2429) is located nearby the former main building of the manor, the current schoolhouse. The prehistoric settlement formed close to the Liiduvere and Ängi streams, which belong to the Navesti river basin. About 550 m east of the settlement site, on the other side of the Ängi stream, was a flat-cairn cemetery with cremations. It was excavated in the 1890s by the landlord of Sürgavere manor, Oskar von Wahl (Jb. FLG 1900, 14). According to Jaan Jung (1898, 213), this large burial site had already been completely destroyed by 1897. Weapons such as a sword and a spearhead were found in the cemetery, as well as axes, horse equipment, jewellery, a padlock key, a scythe, and pottery with lattice decoration. Based on the dating of the preserved artefacts (VM VMT 52; 53), the cemetery was in use from the second half of the 10th century until the beginning of the 13th century and was thus contemporary with the settlement site.

The finding place of the hoard is about a kilometre west of the settlement site at Sürgavere, near the Lohu farm. Lohu is a new farmstead established in the 1930s. As the name of the farm – Estonian word *lohk* (*gen. lohu*) means a landscape depression – suggests that the ground there is shallow and was therefore unsuitable for dwelling in prehistoric times. Today, the water regime of the area has been changed by drainage. According to the soil map, there are temporarily overly moist Endogleyic Glossic Retisol in the hoard site. The coins belonging to the hoard were on the edge of the fallow, by a land improvement ditch. In the past, this area was forested, as shown on the map of 1638 (RA, EAA.308.2.200). It can be concluded from the finding condition and changes in the landscape that the hoard was hidden away from the contemporary village buildings, possibly in a certain place in the forest.

## COMPOSITION AND DATING OF THE HOARD

Probably due to the soil conditions, most of the coins had not corroded but had become fragile. Thus, the deposit contains a number of coins that were not fragmented intentionally but were simply damaged during earlier work in the fields or at the time of finding and unearthing them. This makes the total number of coins in the deposit slightly uncertain, since it cannot be established whether every fragment (especially if small) represents an individual coin or whether some of them may have belonged together.

After checking every fragment separately (yet not excluding possible inaccuracies), it has been concluded that the deposit consists of 223 coins and their fragments: 61 Islamic coins

(27.4%), seven Byzantine coins (3.1%), two denarii of the Holy Roman empire (0.9%), 115 Anglo-Saxon coins (51.6%), two Irish coins (0.9%), 33 Anglo-Scandinavian coins (14.8%) and three Danish coins (1.3%).

The 61 Islamic coins represent diverse dynasties. 15 or 16 dirhams were struck by ʿAbbasid caliphs. Notably, only three of them date from the 8th century. The rest date from the late 9th/early 10th century. Normally, Samanid coins form the most significant part of Islamic coins in Baltic hoards starting from the 10th century. Here their prevalence is less prominent (22 coins). The dynasties located in the territories of present-day Syria, Iraq and Iran – the Hamdanids (5), Uqaylids (6), Marwanids (2) and Buyids (5 pieces) – are also quite numerous. In addition, the deposit includes three Volga-Bulgarian dirhams.

The youngest datable Islamic coin in the deposit is an Uqaylid dirham from Nasibin, 395 AH = 1004/5 AD. The composition of the Islamic part of the deposit, with its high percentage of late ʿAbbasid and other non-Samanid coins, is characteristic of deposits from the late 10th/early 11th century in Estonia and other countries around the Baltic Sea (Leimus 2007a, 109, 111).

A Marwanid dirham of Mumahhid ad-daula (Fig. 3) bears graffiti on both sides: a swastika on the obverse and a hexagram or two overlapping (arrow or spear?) points on the reverse. Both motifs are previously known from Russian and Swedish finds (Dobrovolskij *et al.* 1991, nos 46, 154, 157 and 264 respectively).

The seven Byzantine miliaresia are chronologically divided as per usual in northern finds (Jankowiak 2016, 126): one coin each of Nicephorus II Phocas (963–969) and John I Tzimisces (969–976) and five coins of Basil II & Constantine VIII (976–1025, class II). It is likely that most of the miliaresia in Nordic finds do not reflect direct contact with Byzantium, but were rather acquired on trade journeys to Mesopotamia (Leimus 2009).

The deposit contains only two German coins, both of them minted in Regensburg in the name of King Henry II (Fig. 4). This is somewhat unusual since the so-called Otto-Adelheid deniers, as a rule, constitute the majority of the coins of the Holy Roman Empire in the given period.

115 Anglo-Saxon pennies form the most significant part of the deposit. Overwhelmingly they were struck in the name of King Aethelred II – six coins of the Crux type, 71 of the Long cross type, four of the Helmet type and 29 of the Last small cross type. In addition, there are four coins of the subsequent king Cnut in the find – two of the Quatrefoil type, one of the Pointed helmet type and one of the Short cross type (Fig. 5). The two latter are the most recent among the western coins, struck ca. 1023–1029 and 1029–1035, respectively.



Fig. 3. Graffiti on a Marwanid dirham, Mumahhid ad-daula (997–1010), Mayyafariqin.

Jn 3. Graffiti Marwaniidide dirhemil, Mumahhid ad-daula (997–1010), Mayyafariqin.

Photo / Foto: Ivar Leimus



Fig. 4. Regensburg, Henry II, 1st rule (1002–1009).

Jn 4. Regensburg, Heinrich II, 1. period (1002–1009).

Photo / Foto: Ivar Leimus



**Fig. 5.** Cnut, Short cross (ca. 1029–1035), London, moneyer Grim.

**Jn 5.** Cnut, Short cross tüüp (u 1029–1035), London, mündmeister Grim.

Photo / Foto: Ivar Leimus



**Fig. 6.** Danish coin, Cnut, Last small cross (ca. 1014–1017/8), Lund.

**Jn 6.** Taani münt, Knud, Last small cross tüüp (u 1014–1017/8), Lund.

Photo / Foto: Ivar Leimus

Presumably, the two Irish coins of Sihtric III, whose design imitates that of the English pennies of the Long cross type, reached the Baltic with other British coins.

In addition, the deposit contains a rather high proportion of Anglo-Scandinavian coins, mostly imitating the Long cross type of Aethelred II. But there are also three Long cross/Cnut's Quatrefoil mules among them. The three Cnut coins of the Last small cross type are in fact Danish and were struck in Lund (Fig. 6).

Leaving aside the two late pennies of Cnut (these of the Pointed helmet and Short cross types), all of the most recent coins in the deposit – two Anglo-Saxon, one Irish and three Anglo-Scandinavian – were struck after ca. 1017/8. So how can we explain the presence of these two anomalously young coins in the find? Firstly, there is a possibility that they do not belong to this hoard at all. In Estonia, as in Gotland, we know several locations in which a number of deposits have been found next to one another, not just single deposits

(e.g. Leimus & Kiudsoo 2016; 2017, 353; Jonsson 2017). Thus it cannot be excluded that the Pointed helmet coin and the Short cross penny originate from another, long since vanished hoard, which was buried later than the deposit under discussion, or even lost randomly.

Secondly, it is a peculiarity of Estonia that the decades starting from the 1020s have yielded relatively few coin finds whereas coin deposits from that particular period are rather abundant in other Nordic countries (e.g. Jonsson 2015, 55, fig. 5; Talvio 2002, 49, tab. 7). For some reason, a remarkable influx of western coins to Estonia only resumed around 1060 (Molvõgin 1994, 581–582; Leimus 2018, 67). It is possible that there was simply a lack of fresh coins in the village and that only a couple of them were added to the main bulk of the deposit.

Be that as it may, the main part of the deposit was formed by the beginnings of the Quatrefoil-type of Cnut, i.e. around 1020. As such, the Sürgavere hoard belongs to the group of deposits that can be dated from the 1010s. In total, there are at least 12 Estonian coin deposits from that very decade (Molvõgin 1994, nos 13–20; Leimus 2007b, no 41; 2019; Konsa *et al.* 2019).

The high percentage of Anglo-Saxon pennies – in this case 51.6% (or 51.1% if we exclude the two youngest pennies of Cnut) – is remarkable but not exceptional for this particular decade (Leimus 2019, 208). What is exceptional for the Estonian as well as other Nordic hoards, however, is the almost total lack of denarii from the Holy Roman Empire in the deposit. As a rule, they are much more numerous and normally dominate not only Estonian hoards, but also other deposits around the Baltic Sea (e.g. Molvõgin 1994, *passim*; Jonsson 2015, 53–54). The deliberate selection of better executed and thus, probably, more trustworthy coins (as the Anglo-Saxon pennies could have been regarded in comparison to the German denarii) would



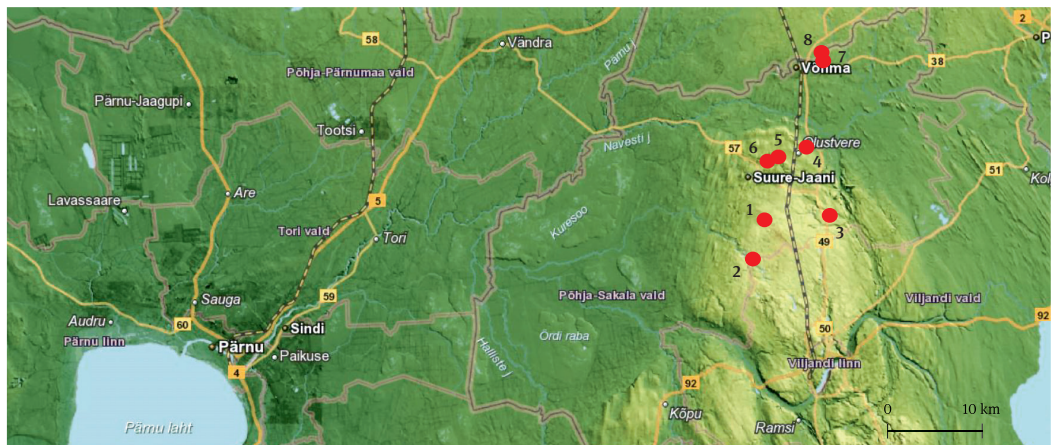
indeed be an explanation. However, it was the time when coins were valued just for their weight in silver not for how they look, at least when it comes to hoarding. Thus, this would presuppose a remarkably different criterion for the choice of coins that no other Nordic hoard of the era reveals.

It may be concluded that the composition of the Sürgavere deposit reveals several stages of its formation. During the 10th and early 11th century, Islamic and Byzantine coins were accumulated. These coins reflect commercial ties with the Orient and would have been obtained either directly on trade journeys made by Estonian inhabitants to the East or through the intermediation of Slavonic tribes. Then, by ca. 1020 the western coins were purchased, probably from Gotland or another Scandinavian centre. This particular contact must have been one-off and short-lived; otherwise more Holy Roman denarii would have occurred in the deposit. In addition, and this is noteworthy, the Scandinavian agent from whom the western coins were acquired must also have possessed no (or almost no) German denarii. This would be difficult to explain unless his business contacts at home were limited to just a few transactions. Finally, a couple of younger Anglo-Saxon coins may have been added to the main bulk in the deposit, but this is by no means certain. All of this hints at quite a weak circulation of coins in the given place at the given time.

## DISCUSSION

The countries around the Baltic, especially Sweden, Poland and Russia are remarkably rich in silver hoards from ca. 800–1150. In Estonia, too, far more than a hundred deposits with thousands of Viking Age coins have been unearthed so far (Leimus *et al.* 2018, 41–45).

Sürgavere is already the third silver hoard left in the ground in the 11th century, which has been found in Northern Viljandi County during the last decade (Fig. 7). In 2012, a hoard containing silver coins and jewellery was discovered in Soomevere north of the Navesti River (Tamla & Kiudsoo 2017). In 2018, a hoard was found in Vanamõisa by the Lemmjõgi River (Konsa *et al.* 2019). Four other 11th-century hoards were already known before from the



**Fig. 7.** Distribution map of the 11th century hoards mentioned in the text. 1 – Sürgavere, 2 – Vanamõisa, 3 – Immaküla, 4 – Olustvere, 5 – Lõhavere hill fort, 6 – Lõhavere settlement, 7 – Soomevere, 8 – Vahamulla.

**Jn 7.** Artiklis mainitud 11. sajarete levikukaart. 1 – Sürgavere, 2 – Vanamõisa, 3 – Immaküla, 4 – Olustvere, 5 – Lõhavere linnamägi, 6 – Lõhavere asulakoht, 7 – Soomevere, 8 – Vahamulla.

Base map / Aluskaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet; additions / täiendused: Marge Konsa

area between these two sites in the northern part of the Sakala Uplands. The coin hoard of Immaküla was collected in Võivaku village by the branch of Tääksi stream (Molvõgin 1994, no 16). Another deposit containing coins and silver objects was discovered in the settlement site of Olustvere south of the Navesti River (*ibid.*, no 54). There is also one 11th century coin hoard known from the Lõhavere hill fort on the bend of the Lõhavere stream (Tamla & Kiudsoo 2017, 72) and the other hoard from the settlement site 1.5 km downstream of the hill fort by the same stream (Molvõgin 1994, no 59; Kiudsoo 2013). In addition, remnants of coin deposit have reached the collections from Vahamulla, which is less than 2 km north of Soomevere north of the Navesti River (Molvõgin 1994, no 35; Tamla & Kiudsoo 2017, 72). This hoard also belongs to the same group with others; although according to today's administrative division, Vahamulla is located outside Viljandi County, in Järva County. Thus, eight 11th century hoards have now been found in this twenty-kilometre-long area. At the same time, no hoards from that time are known from the rest of Viljandi County, except for one English penny (*tpq* 1030) found somewhere near Viljandi (Molvõgin 1994, no 88). In the following, we will discuss the possible reasons why the hoards were concentrated in this area in Northern Viljandi County.

The existence of hoards refers, on the one hand, to the economic capacity to accumulate wealth, but also, on the other hand, to the anxious times that caused the treasure to be hidden and remain in the ground when its owner died. Islamic coins in the hoards of Northern Viljandi County imply that the inhabitants there participated in Viking-era Eastern trade. It has been assumed that during the Viking Age, the inhabitants of the Estonian inland used the Peipsi-Pskov waterway for long-distance trade trips, which were accessed through the waterbodies of the East Estonian river basin (Kiudsoo 2019). However, since the waterbodies of the northern part of the Sakala Upland belong to the West Estonian river basin, the inhabitants there probably participated in long-distance trade through Viljandi, which was located at the water divide and the crossing of water and land roads. Until the 11th century, Viljandi was the only hill fort in the northern part of the Sakala Uplands and it can be assumed that until the late 10th–early 11th century, this area was the hinterland of Viljandi hill fort.

The region became independent from Viljandi, probably with reorientation to western trade. At the end of the Viking Age, the proportion of Western European coins in hoards increased. The Sürgavere deposit also points to possible direct contacts with the Scandinavians. All the above-mentioned finding places of 11th-century hoards or settlement sites nearby are by the watercourses belonging to the Navesti river basin and thus have a direct waterway connection to the Baltic Sea without going through Viljandi. In the 11th century, Lõhavere hill fort was established as a local power centre just 20 km north from Viljandi hill fort. It can be assumed that Viljandi was not satisfied with the changed power relations and responded to it with hostilities. In any case, the hitherto known hoards of the first half of the 11th century in North Viljandi County, i.e. Immaküla (*tpq* 1014), Vanamõisa (*tpq* 1018) and Sürgavere (*tpq* 1017/18 or 1029), are located near the border of the later parishes of Suure-Jaani and Viljandi. In the 11th century, however, it may have marked the border between the hill fort districts of Lõhavere and Viljandi and could have been the first target of attacks. The location of these three hoards is also similar in the sense that they were buried outside the settlement site, 1–2 km away from it. It is a characteristic spot for emergency hoards, which were buried to hide wealth when the village was attacked during looting raids or military campaigns.

The hoards of the second half of the 11th century in the dwellings of Olustvere (*tpq* 1080) and Lõhavere (*tpq* 1084) and in the hill fort of Lõhavere (*tpq* 1083) were left in the ground near

the buildings. It is possible that these hoards together with those of Soomevere (*tpq* 1089) and Vahamulla (*tpq* 1054?) were deposited or left behind as a result of one event (Tamla & Kiudsoo 2017, 72). If it was a military attack, it directly affected the Lõhavere hill fort, its nearest villages, and settlements on the northern border of the hill fort district. Even if the attack subjugated Lõhavere for a while, the hill fort was rebuilt more powerfully in the 12th century.

## CONCLUSIONS

The hoard of Sürgavere shows that the inhabitants of agrarian inland areas in the Sakala Uplands also participated in long-distance trade to some extent. Although by land it seems that Sürgavere is far from the sea, by water the inhabitants actually had good access to the Pärnu Bay and from there to Gotland or other places along the Baltic Sea. On the other hand, the scarcity of hoards in the lower reaches of the Pärnu River suggests that this waterway may not have been in very active use and was probably of local importance.

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## SÜRGAVERE VIIKINGIAEGNE HÕBEAARE

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Viljandimaale Sürgavere lähiste peidetud hõbeaarde avastas 8. augustil 2019. aastal otsingulooga detektorist Rihet Ots, kes teavitas leiust Muinsuskaitseametit. Järgnenud välitöödel dokumenteeriti leitud müntide asukohad. Selgus, et mündid olid maaparanduse ja -harimisega 76 × 36 m suurusele alale laiali kandunud (jn 2). Müntide kõige tihedamasse esinemispiirkonda rajati 107 m<sup>2</sup> suurune kaevand, kus pinnas eemaldati kopplaaduriga u 10 cm kihtide kaupa ning otsiti metalliotsijatega läbi (jn 1). Pinnas koosnes segatud põllumullast, mis paiknes looduslikul saviliival. Mündid olid maapinnast 11–47 cm, enamasti 20–30 cm sügavusel. Uuritud alal kultuurkihi tunnuseid puudusid.

Varaseimad kirjalikud teated Sürgavere külast on 1583. aastast. Mõis rajati küla kohale 17. sajandi keskpaiku. Hilisrauaaegne ja keskaegne asulakoht asub mõisa kunagise peahoone ümbruses. Asulakohast u 550 m kaugusel ida pool oli tänaseks hävinud põletustatustega kivikalme (10. saj II p – 13. saj algus). Aarde leiukoht jääb asulakohast u 1 km lääne poole Lohu talu lähistele. Aardesse kuulunud mündid paiknesid söötis põllumassiivi servas, maaparanduskraavi ääres. 1638. aasta piirkonnakaardi järgi kasvas selle kohal varem mets, mis lubab järeldada, et aare peideti omaaegsest asustusest veidi eemale, võimalik, et kõrvalise kohta metsas.

Sürgavere aare koosnes 223 hõbemündist või selle katkest. Suurema osa aardest moodustasid anglo-saksi (115 tk), islami (61 tk) ja anglo-skandinaavia (33 tk) mündid. Vähemal määral olid esindatud Bütsantsi (7 tk), Taani (3 tk) ja Iiri (2 tk) ja Saksa (2 tk) mündid. Aarde mündikoosluse kujunemises võib eristada mitu järku. Esmalt on 10. saj jooksul ja 11. saj alguses kogunenud islami ja Bütsantsi mündid. Seejärel on u 1020. a paiku Gotlandilt või mõnest muust Skandinaavia keskusest omandatud lääne mündid. See pidi olema ühekordne või lühiajaline kontakt, muidu oleks aare sisaldanud rohkem Saksa münte. Kõige nooremad on paar anglosaksi münti, mis vermiti 1023–1029 ja 1029–1035 (jn 5), kuid nende kuuluvus aarde põhiosa juurde (*tpq* 1017/18) ei ole päris kindel. Aarde kooslus osutab üldiselt nõrgale müntide ringlusele antud kohas ja ajal.

Viljandimaa põhja- ja Järvamaa lõunaosast on nüüdseks teada kaheksa 11. saj aaret (jn 7). Samal ajal pole kogu ülejäanud Viljandimaalt ühtegi selleaegset mündiaaret, mis tekitab küsimuse, miks koonduvad aarded Põhja-Viljandimaal just nimetatud piirkonda ning mis võis olla nende ladestumise ajendiks. Põhja-Viljandimaa aarete koosseisus olevad islami mündid osutavad, et sealsed elanikud osalesid viikingiaegses idakaubanduses. On oletatud, et Eesti sisemaa elanikud kasutasid viikingiajal kaugkaubandusretkedeks

eeskätt Peipsi-Pihkva veeteed, millele pääsesid Ida-Eesti vesikonna vete kaudu. Kuna aga Sakala kõrgustiku põhjaosa veekogud kuuluvad Lääne-Eesti vesikonda, siis osalesid sealsed elanikud kaugkaubanduses ilmselt Viljandi kaudu, mis paiknes vesikondade veelahkmel ning vee- ja maismaateede ristumispunktis. Viljandi oli kuni 11. sajandini ainus linnus Põhja-Viljandimaal ja võib arvata, et kuni 10. saj lõpuni või 11. saj alguseni oli see ala Viljandi linnuse tagamaa.

Piirkond iseseisvus Viljandist ilmselt koos ümberorienteerumisega läänesuunalisele kaubandusele. Viikingiaja lõpus suurenes aaretes Lääne-Euroopa müntide osakaal. Ühtlasi osutab Sürgavere aare sealsete elanike võimalikele otsekontaktidele skandinaavlastega. Kõik 11. saj aaretega seotud asulad paiknevad Navesti jõe valgasse kuuluvate vooluveekogude ääres ning seega oli neil veeteed pidi otseühendus Läänemerega Viljandit läbimata. 11. sajandil rajati kohaliku võimukantsina Põhja-Viljandimaal Lõhavere linnus. Võib arvata, et Viljandi linnus ei olnud muutunud võimusuhetega rahul ja vastas sellele vaenu-tegevusega. Igal juhul paiknevad seni teadaolevad Põhja-Viljandimaa 11. saj I poole aarded, Immaküla (*tpq* 1014), Vanamõisa (*tpq* 1018) ja Sürgavere (*tpq* 1017/18 või 1029), Suure-Jaani ja Viljandi hilisemate kirikukihelkondade piiri lähedal. 11. sajandil võis see tähistada piiri Lõhavere ja Viljandi linnusepiirkondade vahel ja olla rünnakute esimeseks sihtmärgiks. Nende kolme aarde leiusituatsioon on sarnane ka selle poolest, et kõik need paiknevad 1–2 km kaugusel asulakohast, mis on iseloomulik küla ründamise ajal peidetud nn häda-aaretele.

11. saj teise poole aarded Olustvere (*tpq* 1080) ja Lõhavere asulates (*tpq* 1084) ning Lõhavere linnuses (*tpq* 1083) jäid maapinda hoonete läheduses. Võimalik, et need aarded koos Soomevere (*tpq* 1089) ja Vahamulla (*tpq* 1054?) omadega olid ühe sündmuse tulemus. Juhul, kui tegemist oli sõjalise rünnakuga, toimus see Lõhavere linnuse vastu, ohustades selle lähimaid külasid ning asustusüksusi linnusepiirkonna põhjapiiril. Isegi kui rünnakuga suudeti Lõhavere mõneks ajaks allutada, siis seda võimsamalt ehitati linnus 12. sajandil uuesti üles. Sürgavere aare näitab, et Sakala kõrgustikul asunud agraarsed sisemaapiirkonnad osalesid samuti mingil määral kaugkaubanduses. Kuigi maismaad pidi tundub, et Sürgavere asub merest eemal, oli sealsetel elanikel tegelikult veeteed kaudu väljapääs merele ning Pärnu lahe suudmest ei ole Gotland väga kaugel. Teisalt viitab aarete vähe-sus Pärnu jõe suudmes, et see veeteed ei pruukinud olla väga aktiivses kasutuses ning oli pigem lokaalse tähtsusega.