



The discovered hill fort of Holstre-Polli in Viljandimaa

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INTRODUCTION

The hill fort of Holstre-Polli was discovered in 2020 by Andres Vindi (TÜ) who noticed an anomalous location of a rampart-like structure when working with digital maps of Estonian Land Board. Checking the situation on the spot in the autumn revealed a charred log in the test pit in the depth of ca. 15/20 cm.

The hill fort of Holstre-Polli is situated in the historical Paistu parish, 2.3 km north-east of the parish centre and 2.9 km north-west of the Holstre manor, in a periphery between Viisuküla, Paistu and Lolu villages. The site lies within a hummocky forested area (Fig. 1), presently a nature reserve, ca. 200 metres south of Lake Polli Kõverjärv, and ca. 800 m west-south-west of the Holstre-Polli leisure and sports centre. According to present-day administrative division it is located in the territory of Viljandi rural municipality, being divided by the border of Paistu and Lolu villages. Historically it belonged to the lands of Polli farm in the Paistu village. In the Final Iron Age the site was situated in the core areas of the Sakala (*Saccala*) province (HCL).

The relative height of the hill is ca. 20 m on the western and northern side, and ca. 23 m in the east. The size of the plateau which slants towards the east is ca. 3200 m². Access to the plateau is the easiest from the south where the relative height is 10–12 metres and the slope is less steep. The south-western and southern side of the plateau are bordered by a broad rampart-like elevation which becomes vague in its southern end (Fig. 2).

The study of the site began in the spring of 2021 with metal detector investigations performed by Aleksandr Kotkin (history club 'Taaler'). Detecting yielded no archaeological finds, indicating either the considerable age or short-term use of the site.

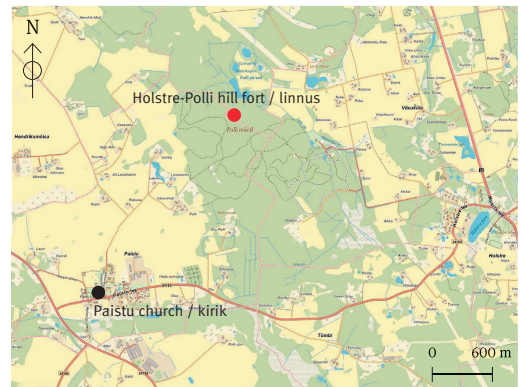


Fig. 1. The location of the Holstre-Polli hill fort.

Jn 1. Holstre-Polli linnamäe asukoht.

Map / Kaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet

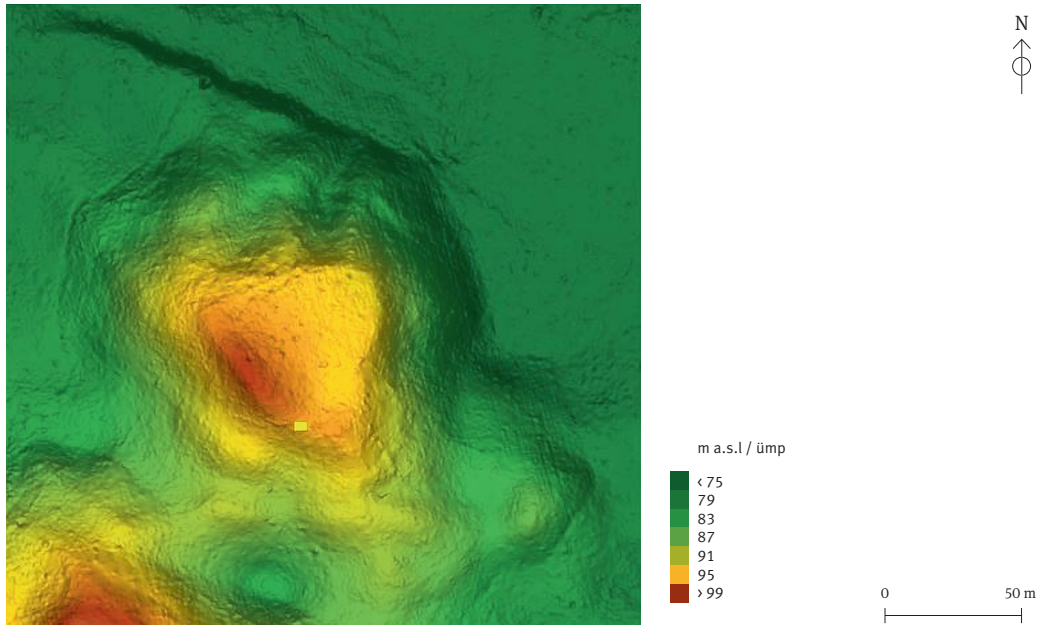


Fig. 2. Elevation map of the Holstre-Polli hill fort and the location of the trench.

Jn 2. Holstre-Polli linnamäe kõrguskaart ja kaevandi asukoht.

Height map / Kõrguskaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet & Andres Kimber

THE TRENCH

A trench of 3 × 2 metres was opened in late autumn 2021 in the place where the trial pit had shown the charred log near the southern end of the rampart-like elevation. Its lower edge was located in the distance of ca. 3 metres from the sharply slanting edge of the hill slope (Fig. 3). Excavations were continued and finished in 2022. All the soil was sieved on 6 mm eye meshes.



Fig. 3. Charred logs on the Holstre-Polli hill fort with the trench bottom excavated to the level of 50 cm from the ground surface. View from the west.

Jn 3. Söestunud palgid Holstre-Polli linnamäel, kaevandi põhi 50 cm maapinnast, vaade läänest.

Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk

In the depth of 15/20 to 70 cm the total of 11 mostly 50–100 cm long charred log brands were found, most of them lying in east–west direction parallel to the edge of the plateau (Fig. 3). The longest brands measured 1.54 and 2.1 metres, whereby the longer ones continued into the trench wall. The diameter of the preserved remains was mostly between 8/9 and 19 centimetres, but also brands with the diameter of 22 and 26 cm were found. Remains of charred pine bark could be observed on some of the logs. Radiocarbon analysis from its outermost tree rings under the bark remains¹ gave the result 820±30 BP, calibrated age (95.4% probability) 1175–1273 AD.

¹ Poz-166619. Radiocarbon samples were calibrated with OxCal 4.4 programme (Bronk Ramsey 2009) and IntCal 20 calibration curve.

The parallel location of the brands indicates their origin from a timber wall made of horizontal logs. In addition, two brands lay perpendicular to the rest, probably originating from fallen vertical posts. Around the logs also some granite stones with the diameter of 10–15 cm and with traces of fire were discovered.

The soil upon and around the logs was evenly dark until the depth of ca. 40 cm from the ground surface. In that depth the character of soil changed north of the logs where a ca. 50 cm thick fill of disturbed yellow gravel appeared. In other parts of the trench the disturbed soil was of uneven consistence and still contained tiny charcoal particles. It was light brown in the eastern part of the trench, but evenly dark in the south and the darkest in the south-eastern corner.

In the depth of ca. 1 metre the trench reached the original undisturbed ground – ca. 7–8 cm thick light brown soil which lay upon intact mineral clayish loam (Fig. 4). On this surface ten shorter, also mostly E–W or SE–NW oriented brands (in two cases N–S orientation) were found in the eastern end of the trench, six of them stretching into the trench wall and one having remains of partly charred birch bark on it. These brands had probably fallen from the top of fortifications. The bottom of the cultural layer on original ground surface in the eastern end of the trench contained several dispersed pieces of birch bark. A radiocarbon sample from it² gave the result of 905±30 BP, calibrated age (95.4% probability) 1041–1108 AD (38.7%) or 1115–1217 AD (56.8%).



Fig. 4. The bottom of the trench on the Holstre-Polli hill fort: original ground level with small brands on it in the eastern end of the trench. View from the north-west.

Jn 4. Holstre-Polli linnamäe kaevandi põhi: algne mul-lakiht selle lasuvate väikeste tukkidega kaevandi idaotsas, vaade loodest.

Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk

The finds

In spite of careful sieving, the trench yielded only two fragments of hand-made pottery. One of them, gained from disturbed soil, was of light brown colour and contained coarse stone rubble (Fig. 5: 1). The second sherd, found from the original ground surface, was decorated with short rows of diagonal notches and dot ornamentation, dating either from the late Bronze Age or Pre-Roman Iron Age (Fig. 5: 2).³ In addition, another sherd of hand-made pottery (Fig. 5: 3) was found from the plateau – not from the trench, but from a molehill at its the north-eastern corner.



Fig. 5. Pottery sherds from the Holstre-Polli hill fort.

Jn 5. Savinõukillud Holstre-Polli linnamäelt. (TÜ 2965: 2, 3, 1.)

Photo / Foto: Andres Vindi

² Poz-165993.

³ Estimation by Professor Valter Lang (TÜ).

INTERPRETATION

The brands lying parallel to the edge of the hill fort plateau evidently originate from some timber wall which was made of horizontal logs and supported the soil heaped up behind it. The genesis of the one-metre-thick layer of soil and gravel can be explained only by the falling of such fill of earth and gravel, which had been taken from the hill fort plateau. It remains unclear whether the logs lined an escarp or the outer side of an earthen rampart, made of timber 'boxes' filled with soil and gravel. Judging by the thickness of the fallen and eroded soil layer, the escarp or rampart lined with logs must have been at least 1.5–2 metres high, having, probably, a wooden wall on its top. When the timber lining was destroyed in fire, the fill from behind it was released and buried the fallen logs, preventing them from decay. Evidently, the trench was located outside the line of fortifications which stood somewhere not far north of it. The granite stones with the diameter of 10–15 cm may have served as 'ammunition' laid on top of the wooden fortifications.

Such interpretation does not explain, however, why the fortification was not constructed at the edge of the hill plateau, but in the distance of at least 6 metres from it. However, it cannot be excluded that there was also another wooden wall just at the edge of the plateau, somewhere at the beginning of steepening slope.

The overlapping part of the two radiocarbon datings refers to the construction of the fortifications in the very final stage of the Iron Age – in the second half of the 12th or in the early 13th century – in the time range between 1175 and 1217 AD. This opens the way for two different interpretations.

First, the very short-lived hill fort may have been founded in the circumstances of competition between local power centres in the final stage of the Iron Age. Thus, the hill fort of Viljandi probably eliminated and subordinated the competing centres of Sinialliku and Naanu in the final stage of the Iron Age (Valk 2014, 334–340) and a similar fate can also be suggested for the newly founded Holstre-Polli hill fort. The instability of the social system and centres in the surroundings of Viljandi is also shown by the presence of two hill forts at Sinialliku (Valk & Niinesalu-Moon 2022) in the distance of only ca. 5.5–6.5 kilometres from the Holstre-Polli hill fort.

Second, the hill fort may have been constructed during the period of crusades which lasted in Sakala from 1208 to 1223. Considering the small difference between the upper date of the overlapping part of the two radiocarbon dates (1217 AD) with the date of the Estonians' big uprising of 1223, and the 95.4% probability of calibration, it is also possible that the hill fort was founded hurriedly in the unrest of the uprising. Archaeological record from south-eastern Estonia suggests the re-fortification of formerly deserted hill forts in the period of crusades, probably during this uprising (Valk 2014, 357–358; 2008, 45–52). The weakness of occupation traces on the Tõrva hill fort in the Helme parish, southern part of the Sakala province, can be interpreted in a similar way. The total lack of Final Iron Age artefact finds on the Holstre-Polli hill fort rather suggests its connections with the war period of the crusades than with earlier time.

The location of the Holstre-Polli hill fort near the later parish centre of Paistu, with its medieval church located only 2.3 km from the site, needs to be considered. This circumstance makes it possible to suggest that Paistu, where a priest was mentioned in 1234 already (Hildebrand 1887, 48), was the centre of an Iron Age territorial unit *kihelkond* and that building a parish church in its centre in the period of crusades was based on earlier central meaning of the site.

Evidently, the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age pottery fragment does not belong to the context of the hill fort, but indicates much earlier activities on the hill.

The almost total lack of archaeological finds in the sieved soil, originating, plausibly, from the hill fort plateau, shows that there was no active human occupation on the hill before constructing the fortifications. The fragments of pine and birch bark on the brands refer to using unpeeled logs, i.e. to working in haste. The hill fort seems to have been in use for a limited time only and abandoned after its destruction. Archaeology gives no evidence of re-constructing the burnt fortifications.

CONCLUSIONS

The hill fort of Paistu is a valuable addition to the list of short-lived hill forts, numerous in south-eastern Estonia, but poorly known yet in the south-western part of the country. Originating from the late 12th or early 13th century, its sudden emerging and short-time existence gives evidence either of social instability and competition between local power centres or of hill fort construction during the period of crusades. In both cases the construction of a new and rather big hill fort testimonies the presence of a territorial unit at Paistu in the final stage of Estonian prehistory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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HOLSTRE-POLLI LINNAMÄGI

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Holstre-Polli linnamägi asub Paistu kihelkonnas, kirikust 2,3 km kaugusel ajalooliste Paistu, Viisukiüla ja Lolu külade vahelisel piirilal Polli mägedes, Holstre-Polli vabaajakeskuse peahoonest ligi 800 m loodes (jn 1) ja Polli Kõverjärvest ligi 200 m lõuna pool.

Linnamäe kolmes küljes on nõlvad väga järsud, lõunaosas ja edelaküljel, kus nõlv laugem, asub lai lame vallitaoline kuhjatis (jn 2). Mäe pealispind langeb tugevasti kagu poole. Kuna platoo servad on laugjad, jääb õueala suurus ebamääraseks, kuid selle võib hinnanguliselt arvata ligi 3200 m² suuruseks. Muistise avastas Andres Vindi (TÜ) 2020. aasta sügisel, tuginedes Maa-ameti reljeefkaardil märgatud ja linnusevallile viitavale anomaaliale. Kahtlast kohta kontrollides tuli proovisurfist 15–20 cm sügavusel nähtavale

söestunud palk. Eeluurunguna tehtud detektoriuuringud mäelaele ei andnud mingeid leide.

Proovikaevamised Holstre-Polli linnamäel algasid 2021. aasta hilissügisel ja jätkusid 2022. aastal. Mäe looduslikult kõige vähem kaitstud kaguserva tehti tukiga proovisurfi asukoha ümber 3 × 2 m mõõtmatega kaevand, mille pikem külj oli järsult langevast mäeservast ligi 3 m kaugusel ja sellega paralleelne. Kogu pinnas sõeluti.

Loodusliku moreenpinnase peal olevat õhukest linnuse-eelset pruunikat mullakihti kattis ligi meetripaksune varisenud pinnase lade. Varingu ligi 40 cm paksune ülaosa koosnes ühtlaselt tumedast mullast, milles leidis suuri, piki mäeserva lebavaid põlenud palke ja palgijuppe (jn 3). Tukkidest mäe pool oli süga-

vamal segatud kollase kruusa kiht, nõlva pool jätkus põlenud palgijuppe sisaldav segatud muld. Kokku leiti 15/20–70 cm sügavuselt 11 söestunud palgitukki, mille pikkus jäi enamasti 50–100 cm vahemikku, ulatudes ühel juhul ka 1,54 ja teisel vähemalt 2,1 meetrini. Tukki läbimõõt oli enamasti 8/9–19 cm, jämedaimatel juhtudel aga 22 ja 26 cm. Ühel tüvel oli säilinud söestunud männikoort, ühel tukil aga kuumuses pooleldi söestunud ja tõrvastunud kasetohtu. Segatud pinnases oli väiksemaid sõetükke ja palkide ümbruses leidis hajusalt üksikuid 12–15 cm läbimõõduga põlenud raudkive.

Teine, suures osas seinä ulatuvate väiksemate tukiotste kogum paljandus kaevandi idaotsas looduslikul liivmullal. Kaevandi põhjast (jn 4), maapinnast ligi 1 m sügavuselt leiti varingu alt söestunud kasetohtu tükke.

Kaevamiste ainsad leiud olid kaks käsitsikeraamika kildu (jn 5: 1–2). Neist üks, mis saadi kultuurikihi alt algse loodusliku mulla pinnalt, oli kaunistatud täkkejoontest ornamendiga ja pärineb kas nooremast pronksiajast või varasest rauaajast. Arvestades leiu konteksti, võib see olla linnusest märksa varasem. Kolmas käsitsikeraamikakild (jn 5: 3) leiti mäe kirdeurgast mutimullahunnikust.

Kuna kaevandi alal lasus ligi meetripaksune kultuurikiht, mille ülaosa sisaldas hästisäilinud põlenud palke, peab see olema tekkinud ühekindse varingu tulemusena. Ilmselt kaitses linnust kergemini ligipääsetavast küljest rõhtpalkidest sein, mille taha

oli kuhjatud pinnast. Jääb ebaselgeks, kas tegemist oli tarandilaadse konstruktsiooniga toetatud valliga või kergelt lauge pinnaga mäeservale rajatud eskarbilaadse, palkidest esiseinaga muldkindlustusega. Palkseina põlemisel mattis selle taga olev muld varisedes põlevad tukid enda alla, mistõttu need säilisid maapõues. Varingukihi põhjal otsustades pidi palkseina taha kuhjatud mullakiht olema vähemalt 1,5–2 m paksune. Tõenäoliselt oli muldkindlustuse peal veel puidust kaitserinnatis, mis andis lisakõrgust. Arvestades varingut, pidi rõhtpalkidest sein asuma kaevandist pisut mäe pool, mäeservast 6–7 m kaugusel. Niivõrd suurt vahemaad silmas pidades ei saa välistada, et mäeserval asus teinegi, väline puidust kaitserajatis.

Kultuurikihi ja metallist detektorileidude puudumine viitavad linnuse väga lühikesele kasutusajale, koorimata palkide ehituseks kasutamine aga tööga kiirustamisele. Söestunud palgi välimistest aastarõngastest võetud radiosüsinikuproov andis tulemuseks 820±30 BP (kalibreerituna 95,4% tõenäosusega 1175–1273 pKr), proov kaevandi põhjas olnud kasetohust aga 905±30 BP (1041–1108 (38,7%) või 1115–1217 pKr (56,8%)). Need dateeringud võimaldavad paigutada väga lühiajaliselt kasutatud või ka lõplikult valmimata jäänud linnuse hilisrauaaja lõppjärku. Holstre-Polli linnuse rajamine ja hävimine võiks seostuda kas muinasaja lõpu ühiskonnas valitsenud sisemiste pingete ja linnuste kui võimukeskuste vahelise konkurentsi või siis ristsõdade ajastuga.