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**ARHEOLOOGILISED  
VÄLITÖÖD  
EESTIS**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
FIELD WORKS  
IN ESTONIA**

**2000**

Koostanud ja toimetanud  
*Ülle Tamla*

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*Esikaas:* hõbetatud naast Viljandi Pähklimäelt  
*Cover:* plaque decorated with silver from Pähklimägi in Viljandi

*Tagakaas:* kuljus Viljandi Pähklimäelt  
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# PROBABLE CULT SITE BESIDE THE TÕNIJA TARAND-GRAVE ON THE ISLAND OF SAAREMAA

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Two Tõnija *tarand*-graves, one from the Pre-Roman and the other from the Roman Iron Age, were excavated during the years 1995–1997 (Mägi-Lõugas 1996; 1997). The burials uncovered were mainly inhumations but the bones lay in total disorder, indicating that they were secondary burials of only parts of skeletons. The trench that was made in 1999 partly embraced a stony elevation northwards of the *tarands*, which had been recorded even earlier. Extended archaeological excavations there in 1999–2000 uncovered a stone construction, arguably a cult site that may be associated with funeral rituals for the *tarand*-graves.

Excavations at Tõnija were carried out in co-operation with the Nordic Union of Amateur Archaeology in 1999 and with a group of Swedish amateur archaeologists organised by Mikael Vendel in 2000. The Museum of Saaremaa and the Institute of History also helped to finance the digs. The finds were stored in the Museum of Saaremaa (SM 1466).

## STONE CONSTRUCTION

The area of the trial excavations at the elevated site covered only 15 m<sup>2</sup> in 1999. A layer of badly burnt stones about the size of a fist was uncovered, inside which a pit with stone walls as in a well had been dug (Photo 1). The pit was almost circular, with inner diameter of 110 cm (in the upper part) and 70–85 cm (at the bottom). The depth of the pit was 80 cm.

In 2000 the excavations were extended, finally covering an area of about 110 m<sup>2</sup> between the Roman Period *tarand*-grave and the present Tõnija-Rõõsa road. A great part of the area, however, did not contain any cultural layer. The stony elevation proved to be a rectangular platform oriented WNW–ESE with dimensions of 8 × 7 m (in the preserved part). It had been obviously connected with the Pre-Roman Period *tarand*-grave eastwards of it (see Fig.). However, a cellar built in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a hollow, probably Aarne Michaël Tallgren's trench from the year 1921, had destroyed most of the eastern part of the platform.



The construction of the stony platform resembled that of the *tarand*-graves, i. e. a rectangular enclosure surrounded by a wall of bigger stones was filled with smaller stones. The southern wall of the construction, built of big boulders, had survived particularly well. Judging by several bigger granite stones, a similar wall parallel to the southern one had been situated 7 m to the north. Its poorer state of preservation can be explained by the presence of the cellar nearby. Beside and between the boulders of the southern and northern walls a great quantity of badly burnt fist-sized stones was recorded. Single potsherds and fragments of animal bones among the burnt stones suggest that the used heating stones of ovens were deposited here. The western wall of the construction, consisting mainly of limestone, was quite poorly preserved as well, perhaps because of the later road nearby. The foundation stones of the western wall were clearly at a lower level than these of the southern and northern walls, which can be explained by a lower terrace in the western end of the platform. A NE-SW oriented wall, about 3 m long, of somewhat smaller granite stones was recorded between pits No 1 and 4. It was marked the boundary between the layer of small limestone slabs to the north and west, and the layer of burnt heating stones to the south and east of it.



Photo 1. Pit No 1 with stone walling as in a well.

Foto 1. Kaevuraketele sarnaneva kivivooderdusega auk nr. 1.



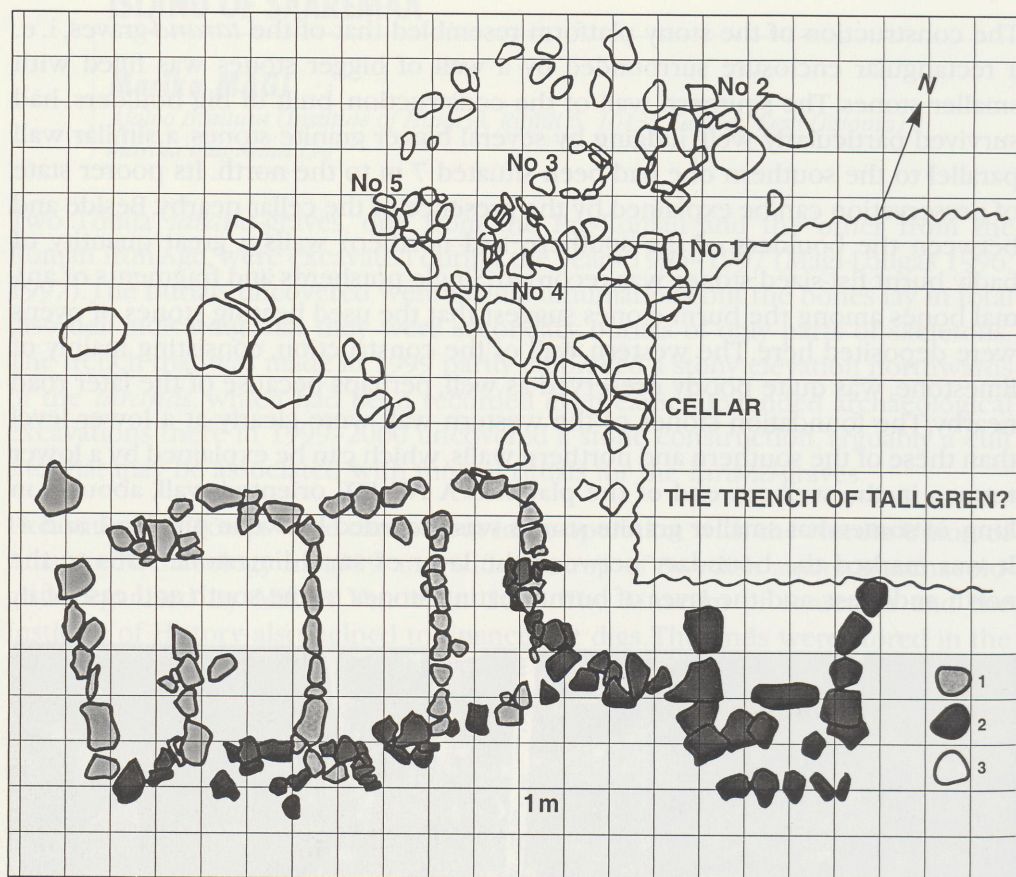


Figure. The complex of monuments at Tõnija Tuulingumäe. 1 - 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century tarand-grave; 2 - Pre-Roman Period tarand-grave; 3 - probable cult site.

Joonis. Tõnija Tuulingumäe muistiskompleks. 1 - 4.–5. sajandi tarandkalme, 2 - eelrooma rauaaegne tarandkalme, 3 - arvatav kultuskoht.

## THE PITS

In addition to the pit No 1 that was found in 1999 four more pits lined with stone slabs were uncovered inside the platform in 2000 (Photo 2). They were situated within 0.5–1 m of each other, with some variation in their size and shape. All of them were 70–80 cm deep, about 30–40 cm of this depth having been hollowed out of the natural ground under the platform stones. A layer of solid clay or a limestone slab in the natural ground formed the bottoms of the pits. A stone construction as in the wall of a well were observed only in pit No 1; the walls of the other pits were lined with vertical or slightly outwardly inclined limestone slabs.



The pit No 2 was slightly oval, with the upper inner diameter 70–80 cm. It was joined directly to the northern wall of the construction. Pit No 3 was only partly lined with the vertical slabs, while the western side of it remained “open”. Such an incomplete building of the pit, or actually sort of a niche, can probably be explained by the terraced construction of the platform, being much lower westward of the pit than to the east. Pit No 4 was bigger than the others and it was triangular in plan; one side of the triangle was formed by a smaller wall inside the platform. The dimensions of the pit in the upper layer were  $117 \times 105$  cm. The smallest was pit No 5 beside the western end of the southern wall. It was circular, with an upper inside diameter of 70 cm. The layer of stones between the pits, except the burnt stones south and south-west of pit No 1, had been paved with limestone slabs. Most of the pavement stones had been broken into smaller pieces in the course of time but in some areas, as beside pit No 2, even the larger horizontal limestone slabs were intact. The pavement was almost level with the upper edge of the vertical stones that lined the pits. In some cases the latter extended up to 7 cm above the pavement stones.

The bottoms of the pits were covered with stones that had collapsed from the upper parts of the wall-lining; the rest of the pits were filled with almost stone-



Photo 2. Pits No 1, 3, 4, 5 and the southern wall of the probable cult site at Tõnija (view from W).  
Foto 2. Tõnija arvatav kultuskohi koos aukudega nr. 1, 3, 4, 5 ja lõunapoolne müür.  
Pildistatud läänest.



free dark soil. Only a few small potsherds and bone fragments were found inside the pits. In every pit, about a 5 cm thick layer with tiny pieces of charcoal was observed at a level about 50–60 cm from the bottom. A similar charcoal layer was uncovered everywhere above the limestone pavement and/or between its upper stones.

## THE FINDS

Only a few datable finds were collected from the site, and there was too little charcoal for C<sup>14</sup> analyses. There were almost no metal finds but quite a few potsherds were found above and between the upper stones of the platform. Quite a number were usually clustered, mixed with fragments of animal bones. One may suggest that pots filled with food were broken at such locations. Some of these vessels had been placed alongside the small wall inside the construction, thus immediately outside the limestone-paved central part of the platform. The small individual potsherds found inside the pits had probably fallen there with the soil fill; such potsherds found near the walls had ended up there together with the used heating stones collected from ovens.

The study of bones found on the platform and inside the pits is in progress. It can be stated, however, that the great majority of them belong to the domesticated animals. In addition to them few fragments of human bones, teeth or pieces of skulls, were found. Three tiny skull fragments were unearthed in the very bottom of three pits.

The layer of small limestones, which surrounded the *tarand*-grave of the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> century, partly reached above the first stones of the platform, thus indicating that the cult site could be dated to earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. Most of the pottery found on the platform could not be dated more precisely than to the first half of the Iron Age. There were some potsherds with pitted decoration, which are rare in Estonia. Similar pottery has been found in a stone circle grave at Tansi-Jaani, 7-km away from Tõnija, which has been dated to the Roman Period with some reservation (Kustin 1962, 99). Nevertheless, there is nothing to argue against its belonging to the Pre-Roman Iron Age.

Inside pit No 2, but in the highest layer of the infill soil, a Viking Period penannular brooch with rolled terminals was found. Some potsherds with line decoration near the brooch, as well as similar ones above the pavement outside the pit, belong to the same period.



## DISCUSSION

One may suggest, judging by the few finds and some features of the stone construction, that the probable cult site at Tõnija was used during the Pre-Roman and/or the Roman Iron Age, simultaneously with the earlier *tarand*-grave. In the Viking Age its ruins had not yet been turfed but the pits were already filled with collapsed stones, decay and soil. At some time before the Viking Age, some wood had been burned on top of the stone construction, as indicated by the layer with charcoal pieces, observed both in the upper parts of the pits and above the platform stones. Perhaps the building had been erected partly of wood, the remains of which were destroyed in a fire.

The closest counterpart to the Tõnija site can be found at Strazde in northern Couronia. Ten pits of about the same size as in Tõnija but without stone lining were uncovered there inside an elevated sandy area in the 1930s. The site was excavated by Eduards Šturms, who interpreted it, referring to some fragments of Late Iron Age artefacts, as an unusual burial ground of the Viking Period (Šturms 1937). In contemporary Latvian archaeology, however, the monument is considered to be a cult site (Jānis Asaris, personal communication). A stone-lined pit with a smaller diameter was observed at the Vecate cult site in Vidzeme, Latvia, and interpreted as the hole of a post sculpture of the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD or earlier (Graudonis 1997). In the circular stone cairns of Pre-Roman Iron Age Gotland, the cremated bones were sometimes buried inside so-called “well-shaped” pits that resemble the pits at Tõnija (Nylén 1958, 72–73; Figs. 8–9). Burial pits lined with stone slabs have also been found in Reznas, 20 km eastwards of Riga, where they have been dated to the Bronze Age (Graudonis 1961). The pits in Tõnija, however, did not contain human bones enough for talking about burials.

Some burial pits without bones in East Swedish graves have been mentioned by Anders Kaliff. He suggests that these pits could have contained unburned but ritually crushed bones that have not been preserved. He refers to another Swedish archaeologist, Victoria Björkhager, who has presented a theory that the empty pits were symbolic graves of the family members who had died elsewhere (Kaliff 1992, 125–127 and references). However, as indicated by the unburned bones in Tõnija *tarand*-graves, the conditions for the bones to be preserved there were good. It is also difficult to explain why people who died elsewhere should be buried in pits of a type completely unknown in Estonia, while the others were buried in a traditional way. It may be suggested, therefore, that the stone platform with pits near the Tõnija grave was connected, in some way, with the funeral rites,



possible with the preparations for a secondary burial.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **ARVATAV KULTUSEKOHT TÕNIJA TARANDKALME KÕRVAL SAAREMAAL**

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1999. aasta proovikaevamised Tõnija tarandkalmetest põhja ja kirde poole jääval kivisel kõrgendikul paljandasid tugevasti põlenud kerisekivide kihi ning selle sisse tehtud 70–110 cm läbimõõduga lehtrikujulise augu sügavusega 80 cm. Sarnaselt kaevuraketele olid augu seinad vooderdatud kividega (foto 1).

2000. aasta kaevand hõlmas tarandkalmete ning Tõnija–Rõõsa tee vahele jääva künkanõlva. Kaevandi kogupindala oli u.110 m<sup>2</sup>, kuid enamik sellest ei sisaldanud kultuurikihti (joonis 1). Eelmise aasta augu juures paljandus kividest platvorm, mille mõõtmed olid säilinud osas 8 × 7 m. Selle idaosa oli lõhutud keldri ning arvatavalt 1921. a. A. M. Tallgreni rajatud kaevandiga. Platvorm oli piiratud suurtest kividest müürialustega, millest eriti hästi oli säilinud lõunapoolne müür. Seest oli ehitis täidetud väiksemate kividega ning osaliselt sillutatud paeplaatidega. Müürialuste kõrval leidis rohkesti põlenud kerisekive. Kivist platvormi sisse oli tehtud, lisaks 1999. aastal leitule, veel neli auku, mis



olid vooderdatud paeplaatidega. Augud asetsesid üksteisest 0,5–1 m kaugusel ja olid mõnevõrra erineva põhiplaani ning suurusega (foto 2). Aukude põhi oli täitunud vooderdusest varisenud kividega, ülejäänud osa aga peaaegu ilma kivideta tumeda mullaga, milles leidsid üksikuid savinõukilde ning luid. Kolme augu põhja pealt leiti kolm väikest inimese koljufragmenti. Kõikide aukude põhjast 50–60 cm kõrgemal, kiviplatvormi peal ja ülemiste kivide vahel, täheldati u. 5 cm paksust väikestest sõetükkidest põlengukihti. Võimalik, et kiviplatvormi peal paiknes kunagi puukonstruktsioon, mis hävis tules.

Kaevendist saadi vaid üksikuid dateerivaid leide ja korjatud sõetükikesi oli liialt vähe, et neist oleks saanud teha C<sup>14</sup> analüüsi. Platvormi ülemiste kivide pealt ja vahelt leiti rohkesti savinõukilde, mis enamasti paiknesid kobaras koos loomaluudega. Ilmselt oli siin tegemist toiduga täidetud savipottidega, mis olid purunenud kohapeal. Augu nr. 2 täitemulla ülemisest kihist leiti viikingiaegne hoburaudsõlg ning joonornamendiga keraamika kilde. Seega olid viikingiajal augud mulla ja kõduga juba täitunud ning kiviplatvorm oli veel kamardumata. Kuna 4.–5. sajandi tarandkalmee äärevare ulatus osaliselt arvatava kultuskoha konstruktsiooni peale, pidi see olema varasem 4. sajandist pKr. Enamik leitud keraamikast ei võimaldanud rauaaja esimesest poolest täpsemat dateerimist. Leitud lohkornamendiga savinõudele on teada lähedased vasted Tõnijast 7 km kaugusel paiknevast Tansi-Jaani kiviringkalmest, mille Aita Kustin dateeris oletamisi rooma rauaajaga, kuid mis tõenäolisemalt kuulub eelrooma rauaajaga. Arvatav kultuskoht peaks olema seega enam-vähem üheaegne Tõnija varasema tarandkalmega.

Sarnastesse kividega vooderdatud aukudesse on maetud varasel rauaajal Ojamaal ning pronksiajal Väina suudmealal. Põhja-Kuramaal ja Vidzemes on analoogseid auke leitud kultuskohtadest. Ida-Rootsist on teada ka mitmeid tühje n.ö. matuseauke, mida on üritatud seletada kas eemal hukkunud pereliikmete sümboolsete haudadena või matusekohtadena, kus purustatud, aga põletamata luud pole säilinud. Tõnija tarandkalmete hästi säilinud luumaterjal välistab viimase võimaluse. Pole ka alust arvata, et mujal surnud pereliikmetele oleks sümboolselt rajatud siinmail täiesti ebatavalised matuseaugud, samas kui ülejäänute luud sängitati tavapäraselt tarandkalmesse. Kuna Tõnija aukudest leitud üksikud väikesed koljukillid ei võimalda rääkida neist kui matuseaukudest, tuleb oletada, et kiviplatvorm ning selles olevad augud olid tõenäoliselt seotud luude hoidmise ja rituaalse purustamisega enne tarandkalmesse matmist.