

Evald Tõnisson (24. IV 1928 – 1. V 2001)



Unwillingly, we must resign ourselves to the fact that since May 1st Evald Tõnisson, the eminent scholar of Estonian national culture and professor emeritus of Tartu University, is no longer among us.

Evald Tõnisson was born on April 24, 1928 into a family of farmers in Mäo, Järvamaa, on the farm which was awarded to his father for his participation in the War of Independence. In 1946 he graduated from the secondary school in Paide and went to study archaeology at Tartu University. The choice of archaeology allowed him to maintain his original national attitude and mental independence. The protest attitude of the young man, and his participation in the students' resistance movement during his studies in Paide resulted in his arrest in 1951 and the deportation to the coal mines in North Komi region. After being released from prison camp he graduated from Tartu University as a historian-archaeologist. Already before the graduation, Professor Harri Moora employed this talented student in the department of archaeology and ethnography of the Institute of History, which remained his basic place of work. Here he was employed as an assistant, junior re-

searcher, senior researcher and as the head of the department until 1993. In 1990 he was elected professor to the restored Chair of Archaeology of the Tartu University (1990–1993), later becoming professor emeritus.

The first research topic of Evald Tõnisson started with his graduate paper and discussed the ancient hoards of Estonia. Today it is still one of the most exhaustive works in this field. Soon Harri Moora directed the young researcher to the archaeological finds from Livonian monuments, kept in Estonian collections. To obtain additional material, E. Tõnisson excavated, together with his Latvian colleagues J. Graudonis and Ç. Muğurçviès, several barrows of the Gauja Livonians. As a result of these investigations, the monograph "Die Gauja-Liven und ihre materielle Kultur" was published in 1974. This is still the most extensive existing study on the monuments and prehistory of the Gauja Livonians in the XI–XIII centuries. In 1968 E. Tõnisson had already defended the dissertation on the subject and received the degree of *cand. hist.* In 1970 he published a basic article about common traits and differences in the language and culture of the ancient Livonians of the

Daugava, Gauja and Curonian regions, in which he analysed the formation of the population and the type of economy. In later years, he repeatedly returned to the study of the ethnic problems of the Livonians. In recognition of this scientific contribution, the Latvian Academy of Sciences elected him to be a foreign member.

Evald Tõnisson had long and intensive contacts with Finnish colleagues. His articles were published in the journals "Suomen Museo" and "Finsk Museum". His competent advice was required for the appointment to the Chair of Archaeology in Turku, and in the defence of doctoral theses in Joensuu.

The main field of research of Evald Tõnisson became the ancient hillforts of Estonia. This had its roots in the archaeological excavations of the Lõhavere hillfort in the late 1950s where E. Tõnisson participated as assistant to H. Moora. In the following decades he excavated such outstanding Estonian hillforts as Soontagana, Konuverve and Varbola, where several archaeologists of the younger generation obtained their first research experience. The results were shaped into a manuscript, defended as a doctoral thesis in 1988. The preparation of the manuscript for publication was lately one of the main occupations of E. Tõnisson. Still, among his numerous scientific papers several general discussions should be mentioned – the chapters concerning the Middle and the Late Iron Age in "Eesti esiajalugu" (Estonian Prehistory, 1982) which received the state prize of the Estonian SSR in 1985, as well as his contributions to "Tallinna ajalugu" (History of Tallinn, 1976), "Eesti talurahva ajalugu" (History of the Estonian Peasantry, 1992), etc. His papers were never dry specialist writings; he was a remarkably talented popularizer. Readers loved his articles about Estonian hillforts which were published in the journal "Eesti Loodus" (Estonian Nature) and in 1966 also as a separate publication entitled "Linnamäed ja maalinnad" (Hillforts and earthen strongholds). Until the publication of "Eesti esiajalugu", the popular book of E. Tõnisson (writ-

ten in collaboration with J. Selirand) about Estonian prehistory, "Läbi aastatuhandete" (Through Past Millennia, 1963) was one of the most frequently used post-war studies of the subject, with new editions following in 1974 and 1984. It was published in Finnish in 1970.

Evald Tõnisson's attitude to the archaeological excavations was that of deep regard. He always emphasized that this work must be done sensibly and thoughtfully, with heart and soul. A long-time member of the Council for Heritage Protection and the expert council for archaeological monuments, he always strove to apply this principle. The necessity for the protection of monuments and archaeology led to the establishment of the Estonian Archaeological Society (1989), in which he was one of the initiators and also the first chairman.

Special mention should be made of Evald Tõnisson's teaching activities. Nearly all the archaeologists of the present generation have been his students. Long before the restoration of the Chair of Archaeology in the Tartu University he delivered lectures on the Iron Age of Estonia and the Baltic countries there to the students of archaeology studying by special program. He also supervised graduate papers and dissertations, reviewed them and acted as an opponent. This year, the president of the Republic of Estonia awarded to him the 3rd degree Order of the White Star in recognition of his life's work.

Evald Tõnisson continued his scientific work also after retirement. Colleagues would see him at his desk at the Institute of History nearly every afternoon. There he continued the preparation for publishing his monograph on Estonian hillforts only a day before his death. An unfinished article was left on his desk, the ideas not yet ripe for publishing. We must hope that his grand monograph, almost finished, will be edited and published by his students. This would perpetuate the memory of him as one of the leading Estonian archaeologists of the 20th century as well as an admirable colleague.

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