

BOOK REVIEW

Hannu Takala: The Ristola Site in Lahti and the Earliest Postglacial Settlement of South Finland

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The colonisation of Finland during and after the deglaciation is the theme of the printed dissertation by Hannu Takala. Concerning this period, one has to be aware that a large part of present-day Finland was submerged due to the heavy pressure of the land-ice and the later accumulation of glacial melt-water. It is only during the ninth millennium BP that the isostatic and eustatic positions allow for any dry land to be settled. Special surveys have recently been carried out near the town of Lahti, focusing on the current elevation c. 70 m a.s.l., which was the coastline during Preboreal–Early Boreal times. More than twenty sites were identified within the present valley of the Porvoonjoki River. The reason for carrying out these surveys was the finds already made in 1970s at the site Ristola, where excavation revealed a large number of quartz artefacts in layers at 70–76 m a.s.l. More surprisingly at Ristola was an associated assemblage of flint artefacts. Flint is found in neither bedrock nor moraines within Finland. The small number of fragmentary objects indicated a connection to westernmost part of Russia to the east, or to the Baltic States region to the south (Edgren 1992).

Thus, in 1995, a new excavation was started in order to study the site, the setting and the finds in greater detail. This project continued for five years.

The dating of the site is based upon a single radiocarbon date, providing the value 8880 ± 75 BP (Hela-727). Except for one Neolithic date, all others analyses gave recent values. The shoreline displacement curve places the site within a period before the Ancylus transgression, at about 9000 BP or somewhat later. As no reconstruction maps of the relation between water and land are

available for the period in question, it is not possible to determine exactly how close to the shoreline the Ristola settlement was located.

Altogether more than 60,000 artefacts were recovered, of which some three hundred are flints. Pottery was also found, marking a later settlement belonging to the Corded Ware Culture of the Neolithic. The history of research on the site is well presented, as are the different excavation areas. The natural and artificial changes in the vertical distribution of artefacts are well documented. However, a presentation of the horizontal spread of finds is totally lacking, despite the fact that the author occasionally mentions that there is a marked uneven distribution of quartz and flint, as well as tools made of these materials. As a result, the reader cannot take into consideration the shape and eventual number of individual settlement occupations of the site.

The single early date of the site is made on burnt bone. The bone material includes elk, beaver, hare, a small number of birds and fish, including cyprinids and zanders. An extensive presentation of the bone finds from the Finnish Mesolithic indicates that a similarity exists between Ristola and early Mesolithic sites. But still more dates have to be made, since at least some bones might originate from the Neolithic occupation.

Quartz totally dominates the find materials, and this lithic raw material is available in the neighbourhood of the site. The different tool types are well presented. However, the quartz finds are not used in defining the Ristola site, chronologically or culturally. Quartz is a difficult material to handle for these purposes, but e.g. tanged points of a type not found earlier in Finland could be potentially used for relative dating.

Despite the small number of flints, 315 all together, these finds are carefully presented and illustrated. Indeed, this is the first detailed presentation of a flint assemblage from the Finnish Mesolithic. Flint of the cretaceous type is stated to be of south Baltic origin, whereas the

provenience of the more common carboniferous flint is likely in the western part of northern Russia. In both cases distances of 500 km or more are involved. However, the distributions of these types of flint in moraines are not taken into account.

The finds include a rather high proportion (31 %) of heat-treated flints. Interestingly, it is flints used for scrapers and flakes that show a high percentage of heat-treatment. Blade cores were relatively rarely heat-treated. This is not discussed in the volume, but it might be an indication of an initial, uncertain stage in flint knapping technology. A number of more or less fragmented tanged arrowheads can be classified as arrowheads of the Pulli-type, named for a site in southern Estonia. Other objects, such as retouched bladelets and blades, are well known types at the Pulli site, belonging to the Kunda culture. Similar finds from the Kunda culture and the western Russian Butovo culture include bladelets used as inserts in slotted bone objects. Therefore, the Ristola site can be linked to early Kunda and Butovo sites, dated from about 9500 BP until about 8500 BP. The radiocarbon date from Ristola is consistent with this chronology, although the author argues for placing the site somewhat earlier.

The publication includes a well-balanced presentation of other early sites in Finland. Sites dated to the Preboreal are not only present in southern Finland, but also in northernmost part of the country, probably reflecting contacts with the Komsa culture, known from northern Norway. This might mean that the colonisation was more complex, at least in the central part of Finland. In southern Finland sites with radiocarbon dates somewhat earlier than Ristola have been found. This small number includes sites with finds entirely made of quartz, along with sites with a small sample of flints. In this volume, no attention is paid to the possibility that these finds might mirror complex colonisation processes and/or different structures of hunter-gatherer social network systems. Nor does the volume explore the implications of the Pulli-type arrowhead assemblage from Ristola. The Mesolithic layers yielded a total of five Pulli arrowheads, excluding three items that appear to represent related variants of this type. This type of arrowhead is usually found in just a very small number at each site, and it is relatively abundant at Ristola. It might indicate that this tool was of

special importance to the society – an object of symbolic value – exchanged among groups across considerable distances. The population at Ristola was part of a highly mobile, low population density society, and it might well have been integrated in such a network exchange system. That should have led to further considerations, theoretical as well as empirical, but unfortunately this is not carried out in this volume. The excavations of the Ristola site, as presented in Takala's dissertation, should continue to provide much interesting knowledge about the Preboreal settlement of southern Finland, including processes of colonisation, aspects of settlement structure and the role of social network systems.

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