

Varikkoniemi in Hämeenlinna — A Trading Site from the Viking Period

One of Finland's most significant Late Iron Age sites was recently discovered at Varikkoniemi in Hämeenlinna. Varikkoniemi was a trading and crafts centre that had existed already in the Viking Period and had remained in use at least until the end of the Crusade Period.

Varikkoniemi is located on the eastern shore of Lake Vanaja opposite to the castle of Häme less than a kilometre north-northeast of the centre of the city of Hämeenlinna. In archaeological connections it has also been referred to as Linnaniemi (Castle Cape) or Linnasaari (Castle Island), but the original place-name according to older maps is Hätilänniemi.

Detailed archaeological research in the area became necessary when this site of some 19 hectares was acquired by the city of Hämeenlinna and the planning of construction projects came under way.

Earlier land use at Varikkoniemi places restrictions on the planning and execution of archaeological field work. Until the late 19th century, the location served as the pasture of the Hätilä estate and the village of the same name. Subsequently a steam-powered sawmill was built at the site. After the sawmill was closed down, the area was acquired by the Finnish Defence Forces and stores and depots were built. It can be assumed that this last stage of use provided for the preservation of the site.

In 1895 a hoard of silver artefacts was found at Varikkoniemi, consisting of silver chains, penannular brooches, beads, pendants and 56 separate coins. The latter include both Arabian and Western specimens and the oldest ones date from the 7th century A.D. The coin of latest date was minted by Archbishop Ruthard (archbishop of Mainz from 1088 to 1109 A.D.) (Salmo 1948, 29, 30; Nordman 1921, 15).

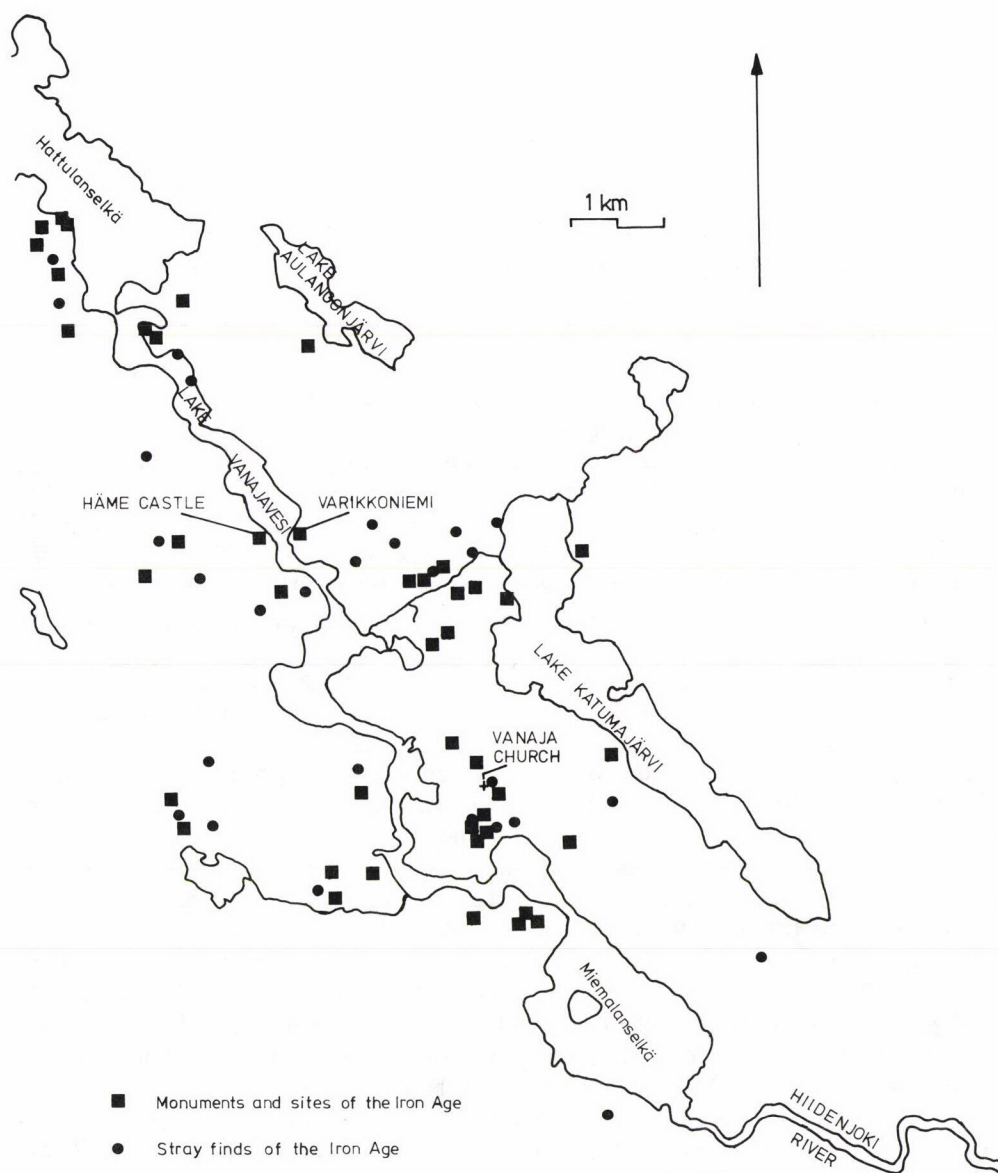
In connection with the find it was also noted that around the year 1890 a silver-ornamented iron axe and a socketed spearhead had also been found at the site. These were previously regarded as burial finds.

In 1892 or 1893 a fragment of a sword had been found near the site of the hoard, but it had been lost already in 1895. In the last years of the 19th century a fragment of a glass bead, slag, clay daub and unburnt bones were also found at the site.

Stray finds also include a bronze convex-concave brooch found in 1952.

In 1895—1897 A.C. Heikel carried out an inspection and a survey of the site, but did not come across anything suggesting antiquities of a fixed character. Nor did E. Sarasmo (1939) or J. Leppäaho (1951) find any such remains in later connections. In 1984 J. Saukkonen carried out an inspection of the site, stating that a trial excavation was necessary.

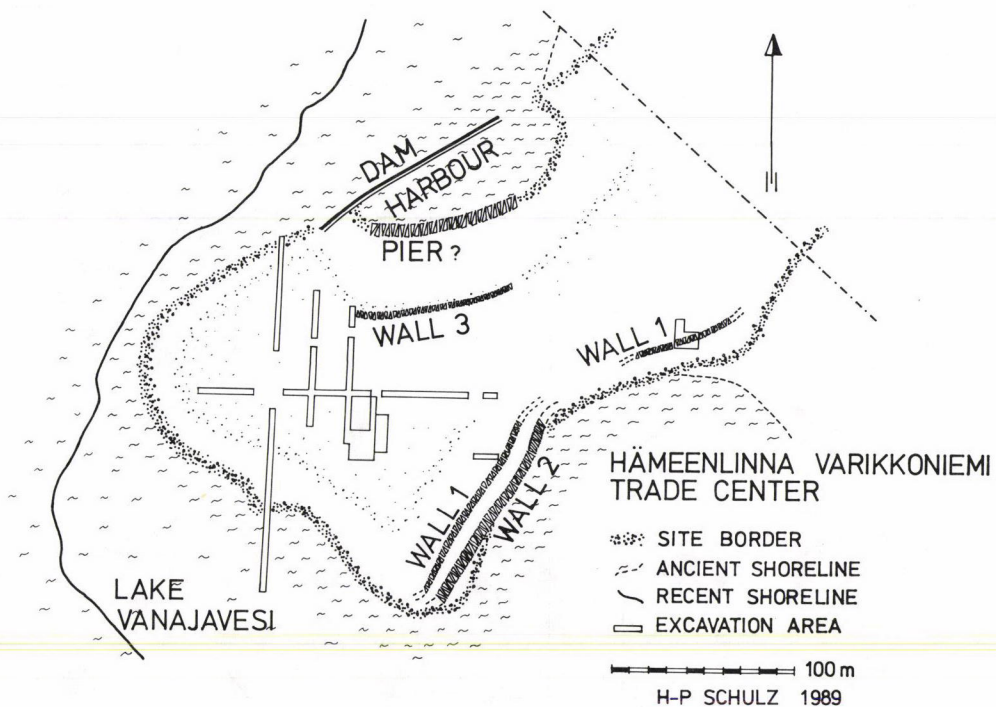
In 1986 a trial excavation 860 square metres in area was carried out at the site with documentation of 465 metres of profiles. Soil phosphate studies carried out in this connection encompassed an area of 1.2 hectares.



Map 1.

In 1987 the research area was enlarged by 6 hectares, of which 4 hectares were surveyed by soil phosphate analysis. An area of 150 square metres was excavated stratigraphically in the central part. A short trench was opened in the east part of the area. Both of the excavated areas provided samples of macrofossils and the vegetation of the Varikkoniemi site was studied in detail (T. Lempiäinen).

Field work and studies carried out to date indicate an occupied site of at least 3.17 hectares with at least 15,300 square metres of occupation layers. On the basis of soil



Map 2.

phosphate analysis and the finds from the fringes of the area the site has been fenced from outsiders.

Both in the central area as well in the edges four occupation layers were observed. In the centre these could be documented as overlapping house floors. The occupation layer was very thin at this location and most probably derived from the latest stage of settlement. A clear vertical stratigraphy could be observed in the marginal area with an occupation layer up to 1 metre thick.

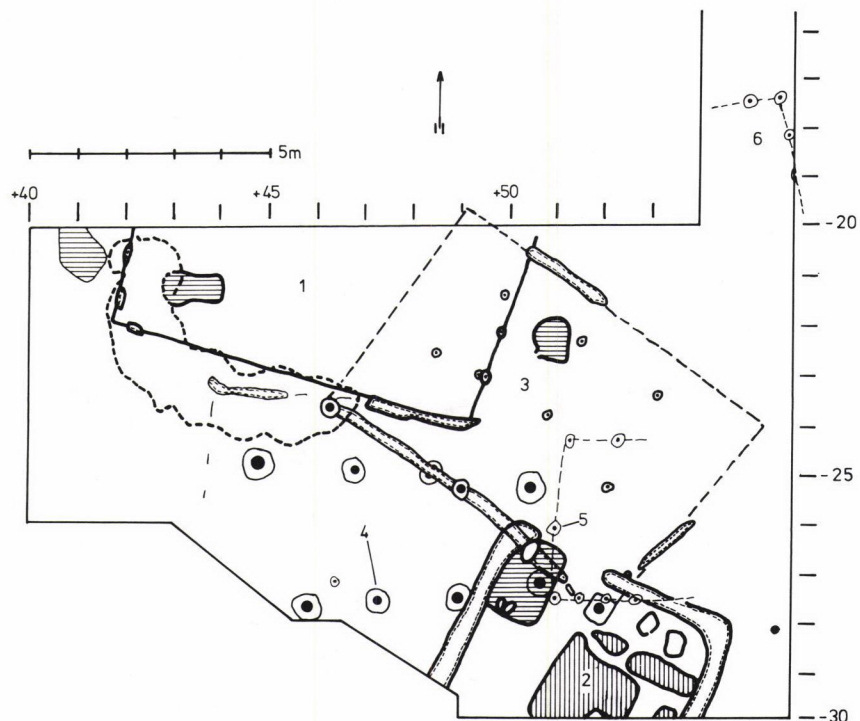
Archaeological datings (Salmo 1948, 30; Nordman 1921, 15,87; Kivikoski 1955, 80) and available radiocarbon results indicate settlement already around 900 A.D. and the destruction of the site probably at some stage in the 12th century.

A noteworthy feature is the high density of building remains and constructions. In the four excavation areas with preserved occupation layer (1986 and 1987, total 400 square metres), the foundations of 12 separate buildings were found, of which four were of the same date. Building remains were also found in a total of 65 trial pits. The pits were laid out in a ten-metre grid over an area of 1.2 hectares and occupation layer was observed in 110 pits. Assuming an average density of buildings of only a quarter of that indicated by available results, the latest stage of occupation would have comprised some 100 houses and buildings. This number of buildings would cover only about 10% of the site on the basis of the presently-known size of the structures. However, 60% of the excavated area contains traces and remains of buildings.

So far, only two complete house floors have been found (Central area 1987, Map 3).

HÄMEENLINNA VARIKKONIEMI
 TRADE CENTER
 Central area
 Building remains
 H.-P. Schulz

- Period IV (2nd half of the 13th century, buildings 1 and 2)
- Period III (12th–beginning of the 13th century, building 3)
- Periods I–II (8th–11th century, buildings 4, 5 and 6)
- post-hole
- ditch
- ◐ hearth/oven
- ◑ stone setting
- - - remains of a wall
- ◉ stone



Map 3.

Buildings of the central excavation area:

Building no. 1 measures 8 x 4.2 metres (33.5 square metres). Preserved of this house, belonging to the latest stage of occupation (Period IV) is a clay floor and two collapsed walls. The walls are attested to by some 110 kilograms of daub. The house was built with blockwork or corner-joining technique of logs 18—20 cm thick. Two of the walls had been completely covered over with clay. With the exception of the assumed doorway there were no upright posts. The foundation was a trench of sandy soil approximately 20 cm deep. Soil colouring indicates that this house had two rooms. The room located furthest from the doorway contained the remains of a clay oven and a concentration of loom weights.

The other house (building no. 2) of the latest stage of settlement was located at right angles to the former at a distance of only 3 metres. Of this house only the stone foundation, clay daub and the remains of a hearth in one corner were preserved. It was built of timber of the same size as building no. 1 and measured 5.5 metres in width.

The remains of building no. 3 of Period III (7.5 metres x 5 metres, 37.5 square metres) consist of a foundation of sand and stones, large post holes at the corners and in the middle of the long sides. Within the house was a double row of posts. Daub was apparently not preserved. The order of the post holes suggests the use of upright-post technique.

In the case of building no. 4 (Period II) there are no clear remains of foundations. Within the house was double row of posts indicated by post-holes measuring 30 cm across. The posts were partly sunk to a depth of 30 cm and were partly supported by stone foundations. The daub contains impressions of posts and branches 12—15 cm in diameter which may be from wattle-and-daub constructions.

Remains of buildings 5 and 6 of the oldest stage of settlement (Period I) consist of post-holes of the walls placed at intervals of 0.5 to 1 metre. The daub contains impressions of wattle-and daub technique.

Other remains consist of 3 different ovens, 4 pit hearths, a cremation pit, a wooden trough and a structure of stones and timber at the edge of the site.

The find material indicates various craft practices. Bronze casting is indicated by remains of ovens and bronze slag (D. Warncke, Berlin — oral communication) as well as casting pegs, bronze thread and bronze plate with signs of working. The remains of a reduction furnace were found at two locations and iron slag was found in all of the excavated areas. Several metal-working tools were found in the area of building no. 1. There are also finds indicating textile crafts and a piece of glass indicating the making of glass beads.

Finds of trade practices consist at present of the silver hoard, a weight and a Thor's hammer of iron.

The vegetation study showed that agriculture had not been practised in the area. However, macrofossil studies revealed a large number of cereal grains, especially from within the houses. This indicates the acquisition of grain from outside sources. Finds also include medicinal plants, herbs and yard plants (T. Lempiäinen, Turku, oral communication).

High soil phosphate content also the large number of finds indicate intensity of occupation. In the central excavation area of 150 square metres 23 bronze artefacts, 285 iron artefacts, over 8 kilograms of ceramics, 13.5 kilograms of unburnt bone as well as over 65 bone, stone and clay artefacts were found.

A seven-year research plan has been drawn up in order to obtain as much data as possible from the site. This scheme will include excavations of some 3,200 square metres of the site. In the centre a large uniform area will be uncovered as well as several smaller

areas especially at the edges and by the former lake shore. Also a complete geophysical study of the area will be undertaken. A soil sounding and radar survey will be carried out in co-operation with the Imatran Voima power company. A magnetic mapping survey and soil resistance studies will also be carried out together with the Suomen Malmi company and the Department of Mining Studies of the University of Technology of Helsinki.

Osteological and paleobotanical studies must be extended as the finds are well preserved and provide unique opportunities for research.

The National Board of Antiquities will carry out a programme together with the Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory of the University of Helsinki for radiocarbon and TL datings for a precise dating of the beginning and duration of the various stages of construction.

The major significance of the Varikkoniemi site is that it is the first known prehistoric occupation site of urban character in Finland. It is not a town in the historic sense of the term and the local centre of administration was probably elsewhere at Rapola or Hakoinen. In connection with studying Varikkoniemi, other sites in the region must also be taken into account. Varikkoniemi appears to have been the reason for the founding of the castle of Häme. Although it was destroyed possibly over fifty years before the castle was founded, information on several raids on Häme from Novgorod suggest that the economic centre in question still existed.

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After the above paper was presented new results have been obtained in studies of the Varikkoniemi site.

The boundaries of the site were determined in the excavated area where it covers an area of 5.56 hectares. Remains of two encircling walls were found at the southeastern and eastern edges of the site. In the north part is a dock measuring 110 by 40 metres with stone setting 5—7 metres thick along its south side. To the north the dock is bounded by a dam construction 5 metres thick with an opening 20—30 metres wide at its northeastern end. Stratigraphical excavations of the central area revealed 5 hitherto unknown house floors. The latest radiocarbon datings indicated occupation already in the 9th century A.D. (sample from the encircling wall) and construction of houses in the latest stage around 1240—1280 A.D.

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