

Trofastbacken: Excavation of a Pre-Roman House in Korsnäs, S. Ostrobothnia, Finland

Introduction

Korsnäs is a small commune on the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, about 50 kms south of the town of Vasa (Fig. 1). Its area measures at the most 29 kms (N–S) by 12 kms (E–W). Of the total area of 222 km² only approximately 13 % is cultivated, the rest being forest, marshland and broad, stony beaches (Ulfvens 1981, 9).

Until recently Korsnäs was also one of the very few totally blank areas on the archaeological map of Finland, without any known finds, structures or sites of prehistoric date. As the highest parts of the commune are at an elevation of somewhat over 20 m asl. (the highest point being Storberget at 38 m asl.), sites older than the Pre-Roman Iron Age are hardly to be expected, either.

However, a survey carried out in 1984 brought to light nine locations with prehistoric monuments: burial cairns and »dwelling pits» (unpublished report by P. Honkanen in the archives of the National Board of Antiquities, Section of Prehistory). In 1985 another survey, which was very brief due to lack of time, revealed two probably prehistoric cairns as well as a stone labyrinth (unpublished report by the author in the archives of the NBA).

Consequently, one of the sites chosen for excavation during the field season of 1985 as part of a course in archaeology at the Summer University of Vasa, was Trofastbacken in the village of Harrström in Korsnäs. During the 1984 survey two quadrangular stone-settings measuring c. 6 × 6 m, one 10 m due east of the other, were discovered at the site. A small test-pit near the center of the western one produced a few fragments of burnt bone and charcoal (NM 22746). The author was appointed field instructor and leader of the excavation, in which a dozen enthusiastic local amateurs participated, while the commune together with the Korsnäs Local Heritage Society furnished funds.

Trofastbacken is a small low ridge situated on the plateau of Snickarbacken, rising to about 22.5 m asl., 1.3 km east of the Harrström village and 250 m south of the road leading from Harrström (W) to the church of Korsnäs – Ribacka road (E) (Fig. 2). The ridge itself is of stony moraine, covered sparsely with fir, while the surroundings are somewhat lower-lying, partly marshy with thicker, spruce-dominated forest.

The structures

On the surface, the western structure (chosen to be excavated) seemed more or less square, with stones faintly visible here and there along the sides from under

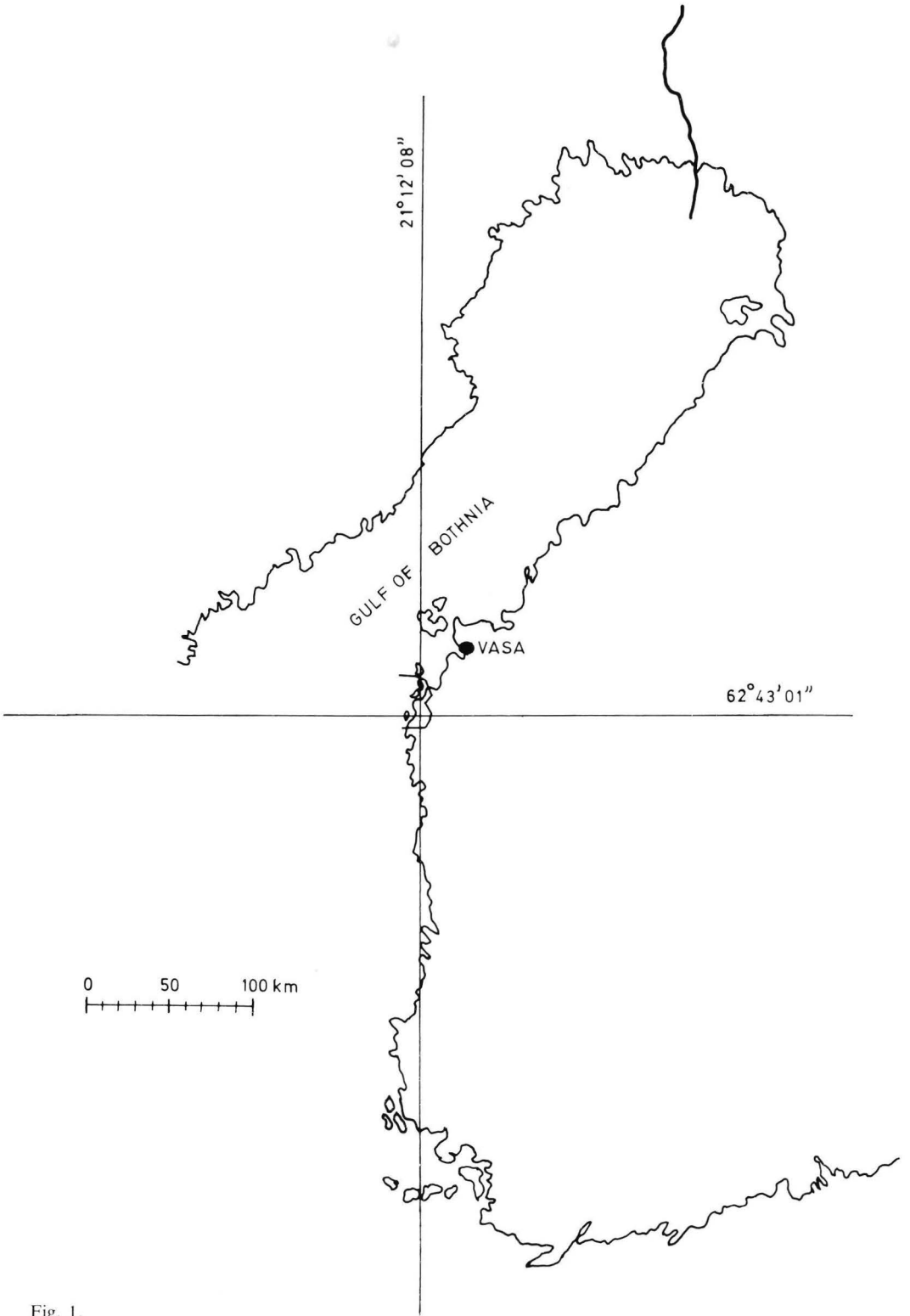


Fig. 1.

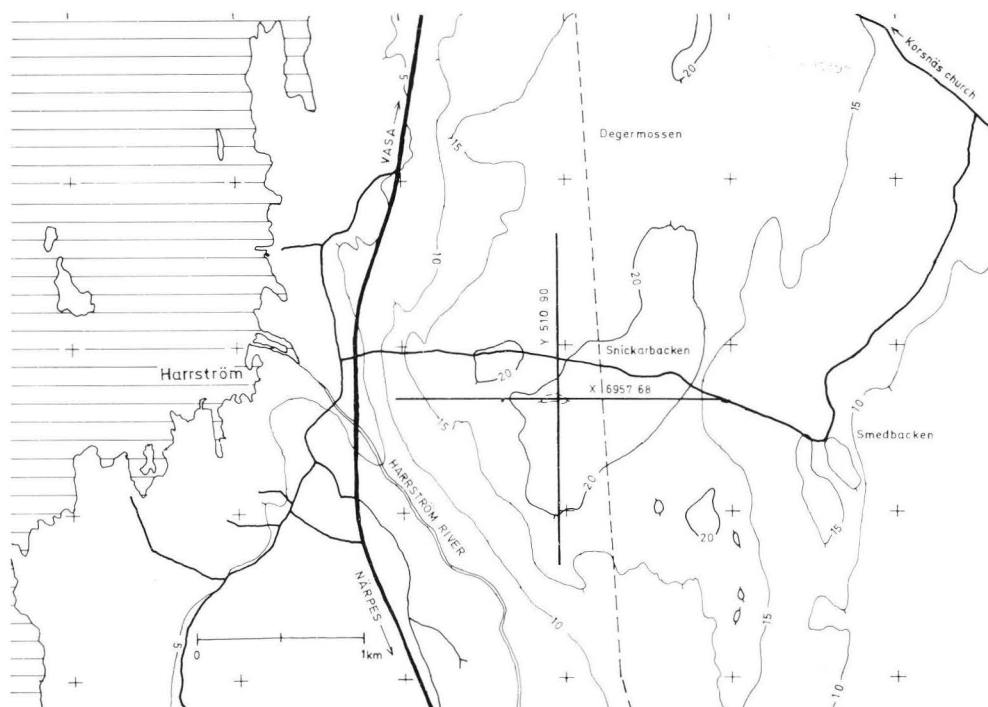


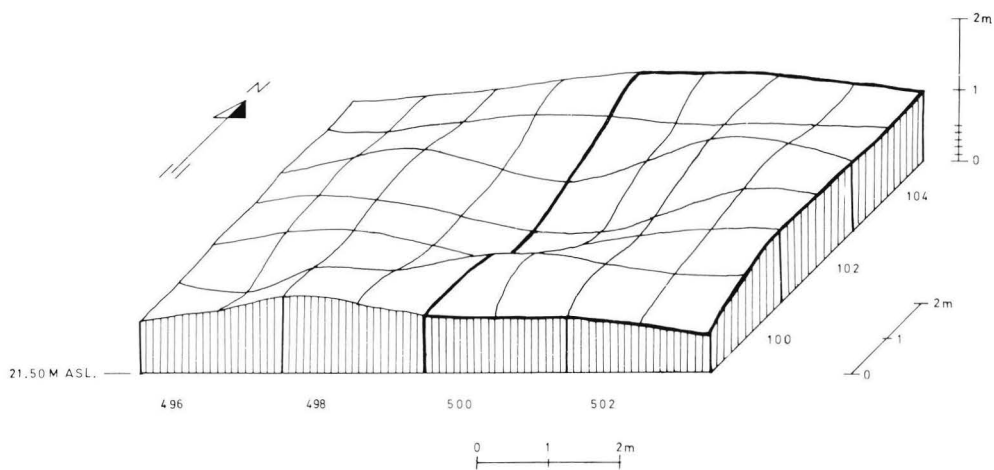
Fig. 2. A map of the surroundings of the site, with the basic coordinates shown. The dashed line marks the boundary of the villages of Harrström and Taklax.

a thick turf and moss cover. The area in the middle was deeper and apparently without stones. Surface leveling showed a difference in elevation of *c.* 40 cm between the center and the surrounding walls (Fig. 3).

As time was very limited (September 2–4, 1985), only an area of 24 m², corresponding to roughly half the volume of the structure, was excavated (Fig. 4). Three excavation layers (in practice 10–20 cm per layer, depending on the size of stones) sufficed for the investigated area. The difference in height between the surface outside the walls and the lowest point at the excavated bottom of the pit was *c.* 60 cm.

The soil was uniform dark grey, almost black in colour, changing without any clear boundary from turf mixed with (very thin) podsoil and humus in the first layer to humus strongly stained with soot in the second, then turning gradually into gravel in the third, after which excavation was stopped. Test-pits dug with spades ensured that untouched soil had been reached all over the excavation area.

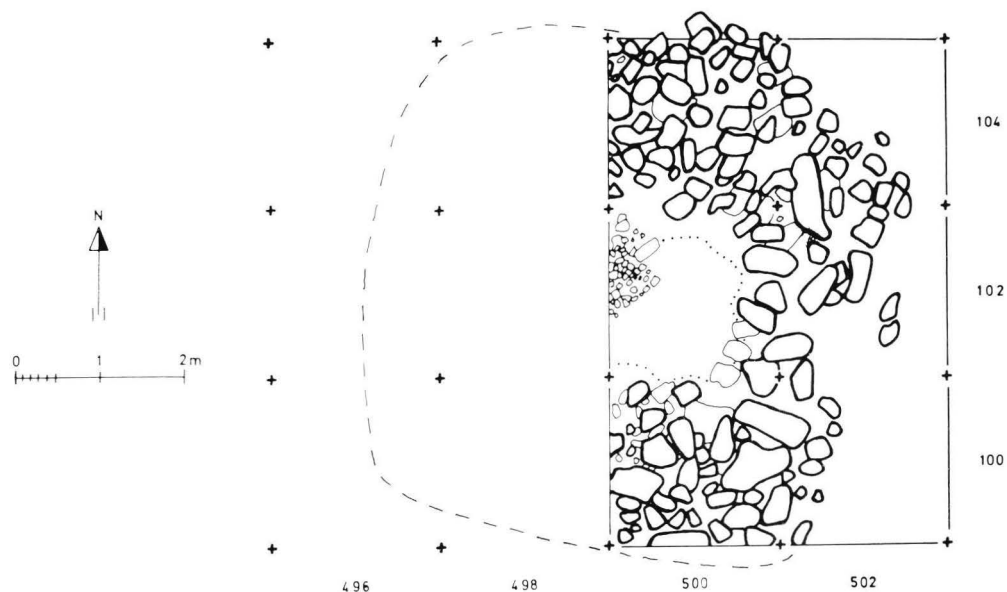
The structure of the wall foundations became clear as soon as the turf was removed. A part of a roughly quadrangular stone-setting with rounded corners appeared, lying north by northeast – south by southwest (Figs. 4 & 5). It was formed of rather large (*c.* 50–70 × 30–50 cm) elongated flat stones laid on the flat side, surrounded and supported by numerous smaller and multiform ones. In the second layer there were already clearly less stones and none in the third. The depth of the wall-structure averaged 30 to 50 cm and the total width varied from less than 1 to almost 2 meters.



T.S. 1985

Fig. 3. A »simulated» net projection of the western monument before excavation, based on surface leveling (Seger & Nieminen 1983). Azimuth = 135°, vertical viewing angle = 45°.

Approximately in the middle of the pit there was a hearth, more or less circular in form, having a diameter of *c.* 1 m. Half of it was excavated, the other half continuing into the western profile. It appeared in the second layer, although already in the first there were occasional stones literally pulverized by heat scattered over grid square 102/500 (Fig. 4). The fireplace was a good 20 cm deep with plenty



T.S. 1985

Fig. 4. Detailed map of the excavated area. Thick line = stones in the first layer, thin line = stones in the second and third (only in the hearth) layers, dashed line = estimated boundary of the unexcavated part of the dwelling, dotted line = area with occasional stones pulverized by heat in the first layer.

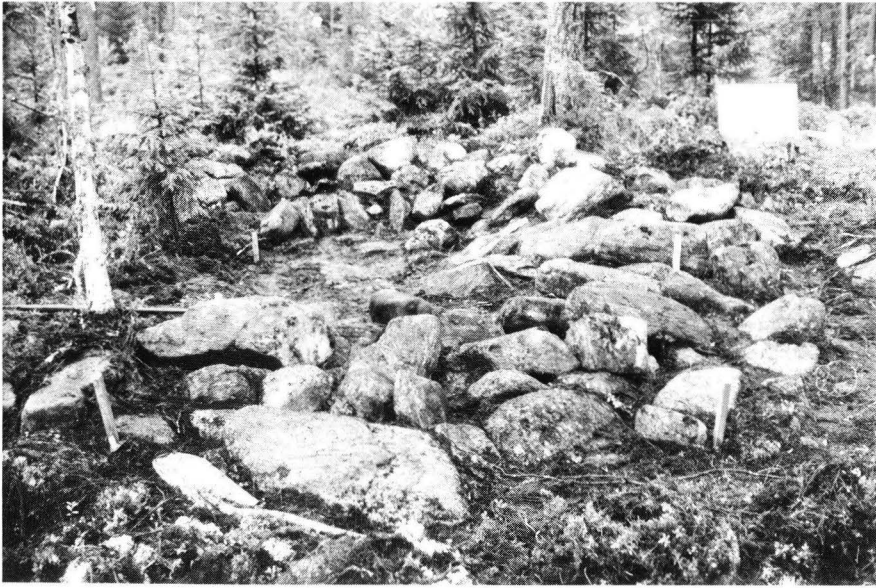


Fig. 5. The first excavation layer of the investigated area seen from the south. Photo T. Seger.

of charcoal in between, around and beneath the stones. Several samples were collected for ^{14}C analysis.

The finds

The number and nature of the finds (NM 22866: 1–21) can be seen in Table 1. Although by no means spectacular, they are highly informative e.g. concerning the dating and purpose of the dwelling. Also their distribution is of interest.

All the finds came from the three grid squares 100–104/500 and, what is more important, from within the stone structure. Nothing was found outside or beneath the walls. The vertical distribution was also clearly limited: all finds are from the

Table 1.

	<i>N</i>	Weight (grams)
<i>Ceramics</i>	41	133
decorated rim sherds	2	7
undecorated rim sherds	2	5
undecorated base sherds	2	29
decorated wall sherds	4	32
undecorated wall sherds	31	60
<i>Stone artefacts</i>	2	205
<i>Quartz waste</i>	6	146
<i>Burnt bone</i>	1108	203.5

second excavation layer (except a single fragment of burnt bone from the third layer by the hearth). In other words, the cultural layer containing finds was only 10–15 cm thick at the most and totally concentrated inside the house.

The pot sherds (Fig. 6), all rather small, are probably from a single vessel with a flat bottom. Both the outer and inner surfaces are scratched. The colour is greyish brown, with the inside partly stained black. The decoration consists of small pits of irregular (not clearly circular or oval) form, stamped with rather wide spaces on top of the rim (22866: 1–2) as well as still smaller, but just as irregular ones on the walls, clearly observed only in two sherds (22866: 17). No pattern can be reconstructed because of the small size of the sherds and the sporadic decoration on the preserved ones. The clay is rather porous, being tempered with very fine particles of mica and sparse, comparatively crude grains of sand.

Both stone artefacts seem to be of temporary nature. One (22866: 4) is a rather large (85 × 70 × 16 mm) scraper, crudely shaped from a disk of grey sandstone. The other (22866: 10) is a small pebble with traces of use as a polishing stone. The six pieces of quartz signify occasional, although anything but intensive quartz-working at the site. The numerous fragments of burnt bone were scattered rather densely over the floor, with a concentration in and around the fireplace.

Discussion

As the lowest levelled point (the bottom of the hearth) measured 21.38 m asl., the coastline contemporary with the dwelling cannot have been higher than 20 m asl. According to a summary by Meinander (1977, 12), based on shore displacement chronology (Siiriäinen 1969; 1972; 1978) and taking the error margins into account, the maximum and minimum dates of the 20 m shoreline in Southern Ostrobothnia are 200 B.C. and 50 A.D.

The ceramics can be defined as Morby Ware (Meinander 1969; see also Edgren 1969; Miettinen 1982, figs. on pages 59–60), a southern and western coastal phenomenon, dated to the Pre-Roman Period (Meinander 1969). This is well in accordance with the shoreline dating. Ostrobothnia is the northernmost area with known Morby sites. Their number in the province, however, has grown considerably since the publication of Meinander's (1969) article (Fig. 7).

Of the samples collected for ¹⁴C analysis, one has been analyzed at the time of writing. The result in conventional radiocarbon years is 2300 ± 110 B.P. (Su-1485). The uncalibrated age (i.e. 460–240 B.C.) seems somewhat too high when compared to the shoreline dating. This is most probably due to the »dead-wood syndrome», i.e. the ¹⁴C date of the sample of charcoal taken from the bottom of the hearth naturally measures only the age of the wood burned (e.g. Meinander 1971, 10; Siiriäinen 1972, 16; Miettinen 1982, 58–59), which may be considerably higher than that of the fireplace itself.

Not very much can be said about the original structure of the house. A wattle-and-daub construction can be ruled out, as no traces of burnt clay (or any other kind of clay) were found. Nor is a conical pole-construction probable due to the form and structure of the stone-setting. Although the latter reminds one to a degree of the stone foundations of historical timber houses, I am highly inclined to doubt that this would point to a horizontal timber construction, already because of the strongly rounded corners.

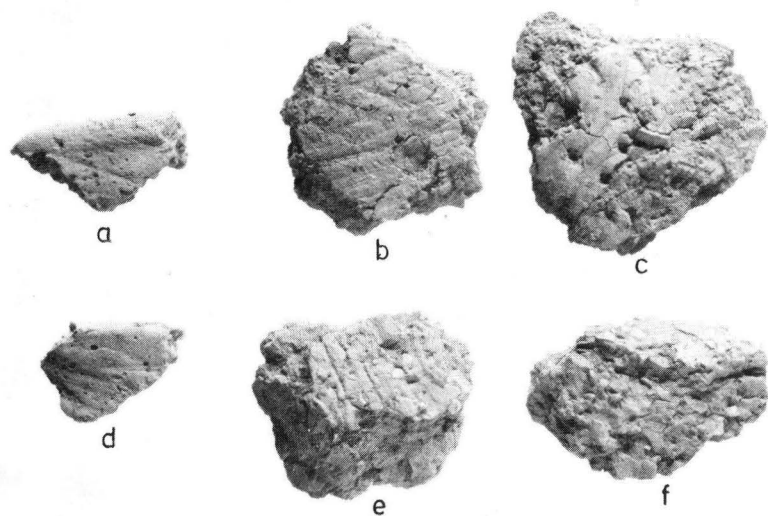


Fig. 6. Ceramics from the excavation: a and d = rim sherds (NM 22866: 1, 2), b and c = decorated wall sherds (22866: 19, 17), e and f = base sherds (22866: 7, 16). Photo NBA.

The remaining and most plausible alternative is a house with walls built of turf (or possibly rushes). This kind of wall construction demands a rather wide stone foundation with rounded corners (e.g. Salo 1984, 117, 124).

In regarding the location of the site in relation to the reconstructed 20 m coastline, one perceives that it was on a smaller island (c. 1.8×0.6 km) some 2.5 nautical miles (c. 4.5 km) from the nearest point on the mainland (Fig. 8). It is obvious that the site was not inhabited the year round. Rather, it seems natural to regard it as a base for some seasonal activity.

Unfortunately the bone finds have not been analyzed by an osteologist at the time of writing. However, even for a non-expert it is easy to see that at least the great majority of them are from a comparatively large species of animal, which in the circumstances can hardly be anything else than seal.

In consequence, the most logical interpretation of the results of the investigation is to regard the site as a seasonal base for a small group of men coming over from the mainland to hunt seal, most probably at the edge of the ice in spring, when the easy-to-catch young are born. Spring sealing expeditions were a custom, or evidently rather a passion, for the men of Korsnäs even far into the present century, as Masalin (1981) describes in a fascinating article.

It is difficult to estimate the inhabitable floor area of the house, as only part of it was excavated. An educated guess would point to an area of perhaps 12 m², a not-so-princely sleeping space for some 6–10 men at the most. Whether the neighbouring, unexcavated dwelling was inhabited earlier, at the same time or later

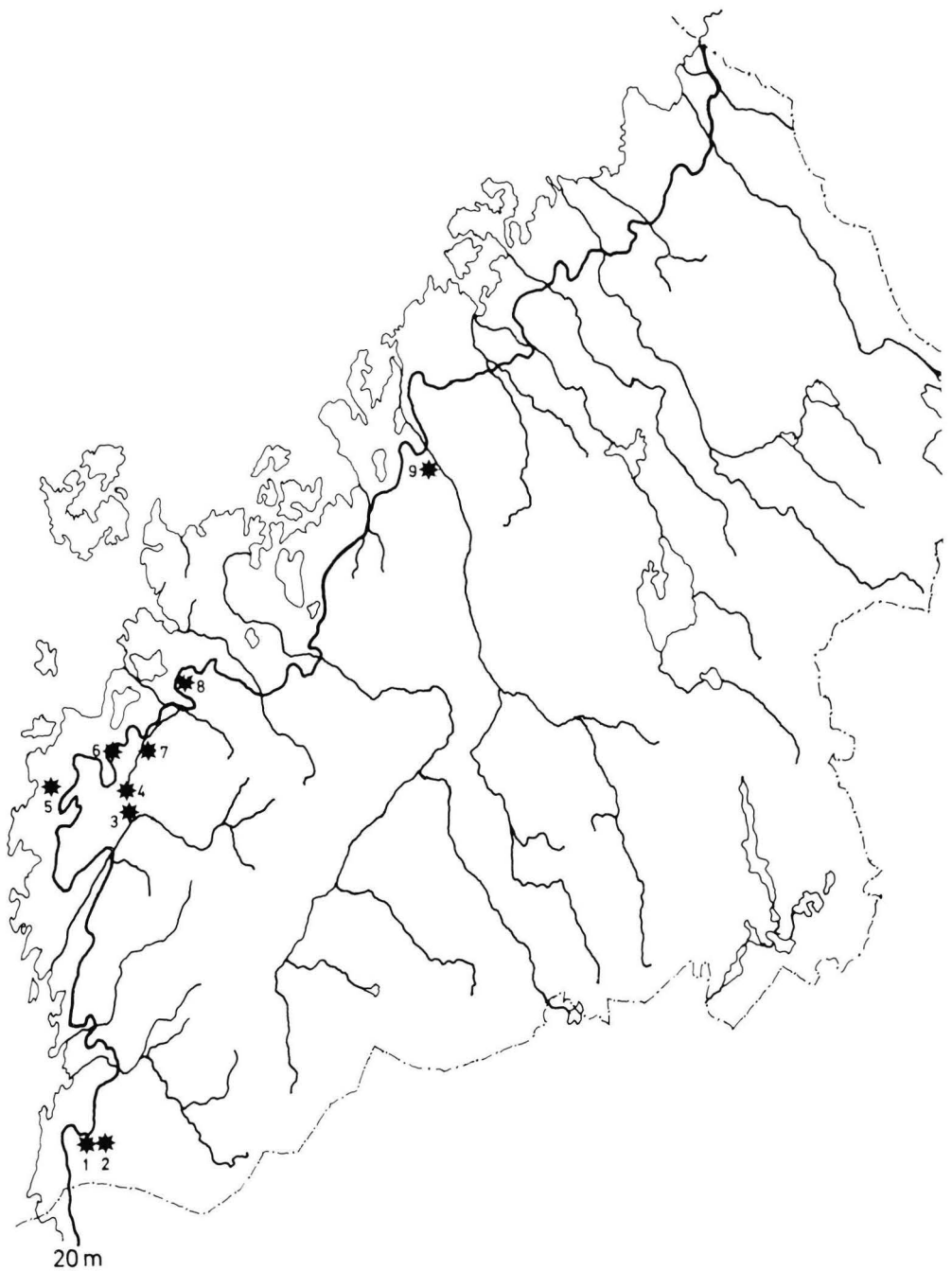


Fig. 7. The Ostrobothnian sites with Morby Ware. The thick line represents a crudely reconstructed 20 m coastline. 1 = Lappfjärd Starräng (Meinander 1969, 44). 2 = Lappfjärd Korsbäck (Meinander 1969, 44). 3 = Pörtom Pörtbäck (Miettinen 1980, 51–55). 4 = Pörtom Velkanebäck (Meinander 1969, 45; Miettinen 1980, 57–58). 5 = Korsnäs Trofastbacken. 6 = Petalax Brännskogen (Miettinen 1982, 41–49, 58–60). 7 = Petalax Tallmossen B (Miettinen 1982, 49–50, 58–60). 8 = Korsholm (Solf) Storhällorna (Mirja Miettinen, personal communication) and 9 = Alahärmä Karkaus (Siiriäinen 1978, 16).

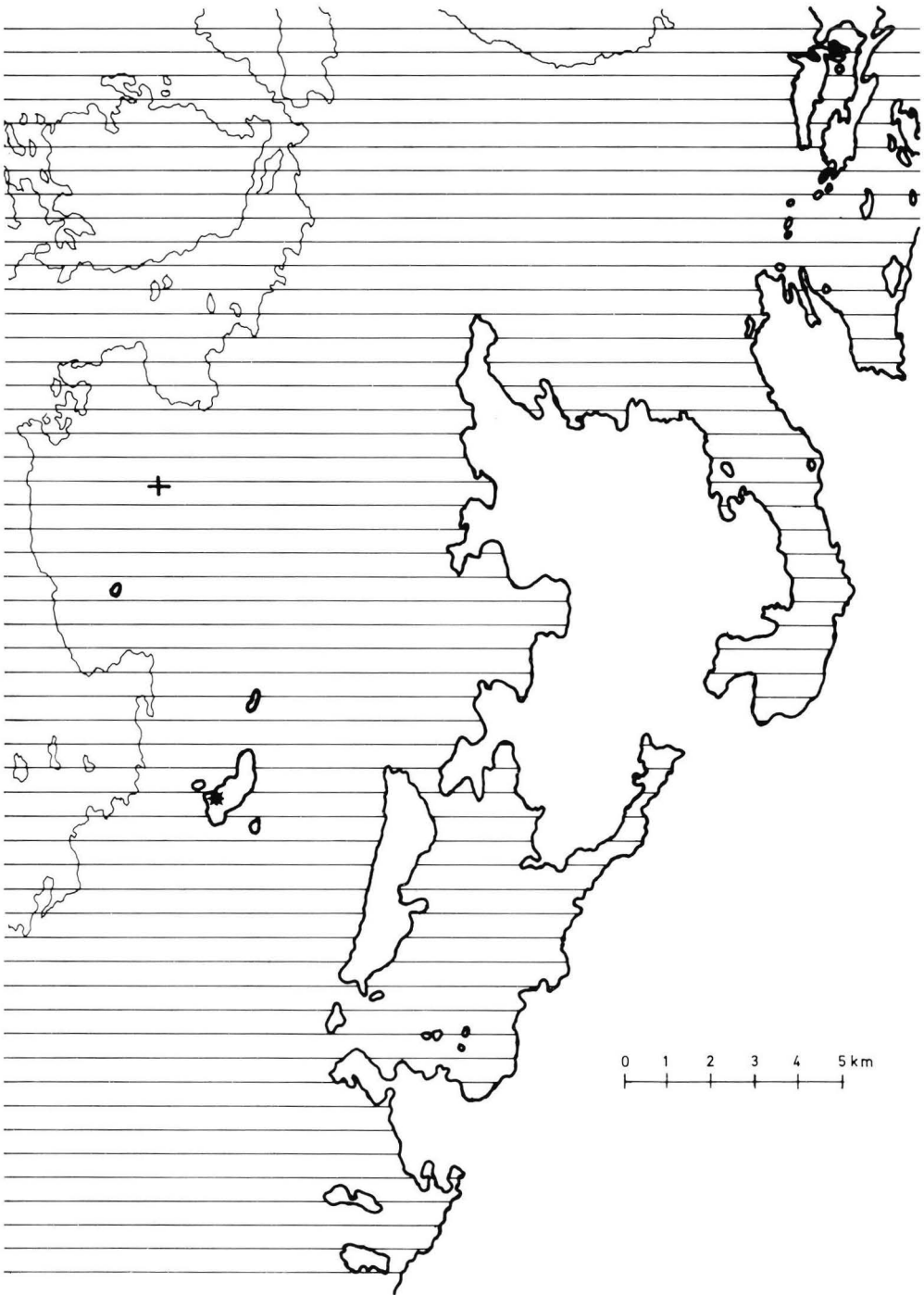


Fig. 8. A map of Korsnäs showing the Pre-Roman coastline reconstructed according to the 20 m contour curve (thick line) as well as the coast of today (thin line). * = the excavated site. The cross marks the location of the Korsnäs church for the sake of orientation.

than the excavated, is an important question, which at least for the moment remains unanswered. As to the longevity of habitation, the relative scarcity of finds together with the rather thin cultural layer imply that the house could not have been inhabited for a great number of years, even bearing in mind that it was probably only used for a few weeks a year.

Notwithstanding some minor structural differences, the Korsnäs house resembles, in function as well as structure, rather strikingly at least a few of the dwelling remains of the remarkable sealing village of Otterböte in Kökar, Åland (Meinander 1954, 121–136), although the latter are clearly older, dated to the Bronze Age. In any case, the former, besides being the first archaeologically investigated monument in the commune of Korsnäs, is also so far unique considering the combination of structure, function and dating, not only in the province of Ostrobothnia, but also throughout mainland Finland.

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