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On the Iron Age Settlement of Northern Finland

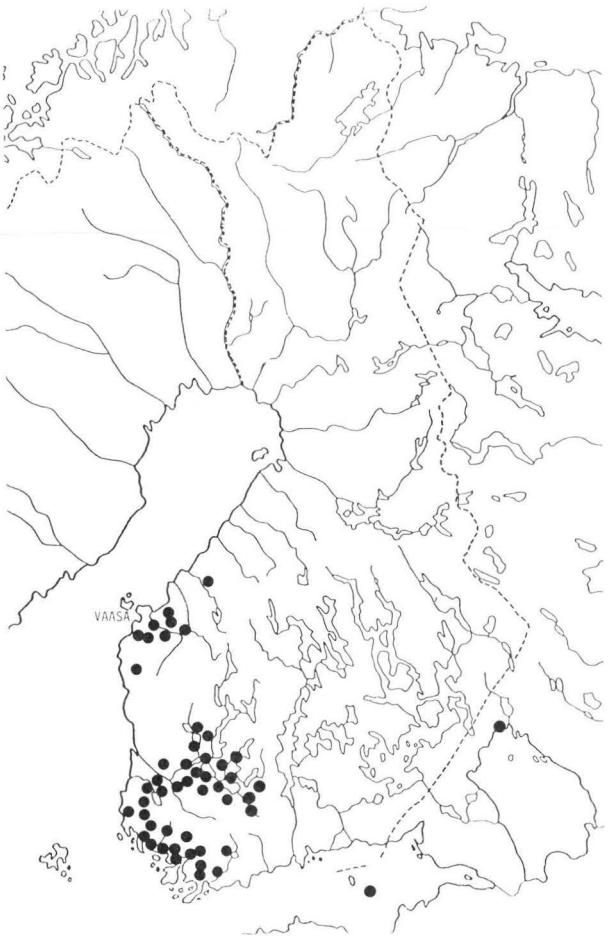
In the study of the Iron Age settlement of Northern Finland certain archaeological features characteristic of different regions emerge at a very early stage. During the Iron Age in Southern Ostrobothnia the areas around Vaasa formed their own stable community, whose development was interrupted for a couple of centuries by an enigmatic depopulation in the region at the end of the Iron Age. On the other hand, Northern Finland (Fi. Peräpohja – The Far North) has been regarded as having been an unsettled area in the Iron Age used mainly for hunting and trapping. This interpetation is due to a lack of finds indicating permanent settlement. The fact remains, however, that a population with a hunting-fishing economy roamed and lived in the area of non-permanent settlement. This population may be termed Lapps. In order to clarify and add to the present views on the development of settlement in the northernmost parts of Finland, hitherto based on a small body of archaeological material, the University of Oulu initiated a research project in 1972 in co-operation with Swedish researchers. This project has already yielded results indicating that the Tornionjoki river valley, for instance, was permanently settled earlier than previously assumed.

Special problems relating to Southern Ostrobothnia

The main problems of the prehistory of Southern Ostrobothnia are 1) the birth and origin of Iron Age settlement, 2) the reasons for strong Scandinavian ties mainly in the Migration Period and 3) the assumed depopulation of the region at the beginning of the Viking Period. An interesting additional feature to the latter two problems is provided by the unique bog finds of Leväluhta in Isokyrö and Käldamäki in Vöyri. The Iron Age settlement of Southern Ostrobothnia involves similar problems and theories as the origins of settlement in Southern Finland.

In his doctoral dissertation in 1905 Alfred Hackman presented his theory of migration that became highly popular and was upheld for over half a century (Tallgren 1931, 146; Kivikoski 1961, 118). According to him, Finland had been settled at the beginning of our era from the East Baltic region and especially its northern areas (Hackman 1905, 330). Already Julius Ailio had partly opposed this theory, mainaining that at least the inhabitants of the Häme region were descendants of the Stone Age Finns (Ailio 1917, 5–10).

In his work on the prehistory of Southern Ostrobothnia, C. F. Meinander presented already in 1950 the claim that the Iron Age population descended from the Bronze Age population, ie. they were »Pre-Finnic» (Meinander 1950, 80). In his publication of the results of his studies on the Pre-Roman Period burial cairn of Dåvits in Espoo, Meinander suggested a similar course of development for Southern Finland where settlement had continued. A decisive role in this scheme of development was played by the so-called Morby ceramics (Meinander 1969, 52). In



Migration Period (400–550 AD) cemeteries

maintaining that burial customs indicated a Bronze Age-Iron Age continuity of settlement in Southern Ostrobothnia, Meinander disclaims the possibility of a total migration of settlers from either Southern Finland or the East Baltic region (Meinander 1950, 63). Mirja Miettinen has come to a similar conclusion in her work on the prehistory of the Pirttikylä region. Pirttikylä is the northernmost find location of the so-called Morby ceramics (Miettinen 1980, 95–96). In suggesting a dating by topographic location of the cairns of the Central Ostrobothnian coast, that have not been studied so far to any greater degree, Ari Siiriäinen (1977, 19) interprets them as having belonged to two populations of the Bronze Age and Iron Age respectively.

In Ostrobothnia, settlement is concentrated in the Kyrönjoki, Laihianjoki and Vöyrinjoki river valleys, which, in the fourth century, formed a relatively stable area of settlement. This area bordered on Maalahti in the south and Vöyri in the north. The main route to the inland seems, however, to have been the Kyröjoki river. The Roman Period artefact material in Ostrobothnia as elsewhere in Finland shows distinct East Baltic influence. The material from Ostrobothnia shows certain areas of concentration, e.g. cross-bar fibulas are nearly completely limited to the above area.

Parallels to both the straightarmed and knob-ended types are to be found along the SE shores of the Baltic mainly in the Memel area (Moora 1929, plate VI; 1938, figs. 18, 19; Latvijas PSR Arheologija 1974, 116, plate 34; Meinander 1949, 5–17). The fact that this artefact group is limited mainly to Ostrobothnia may indicate direct contacts between these areas. The assumption of direct contacts between the Gulf of Bothnia and areas south of the Gulf of Finland is supported by the Storkåge find of East Baltic brooches from North Sweden (Serning 1960, plate 1,2). The livening of contacts within the Baltic has been explained by the rise of the Vistula area as a centre of trade with amber for the Roman Empire as its main article. In addition to amber also furs were sought after. Unto Salo underlines the importance of furs in livening contacts and explains the East Baltic features of Ostrobothnia by migratory movements from areas south of the Gulf of Finland supporting his arguments with an undated cairns from Riitasaari in Laihia that resembles tarand cemeteries. (Salo 1968, 184–185, 238, fig. 119).

According to the topographic density of cemeteries, the Iron Age population of Ostrobothnia was at its peak in the Migration Period (400–550 AD). The population obviously enjoyed some standard of wealth as witnessed by numerous valuable imported artefacts. The Scandinavian character of the material is so pronounced that some researchers have interpreted this as an indication of Swedish colonies (e.g. Tallgren 1931, 149; Europaeus 1925, 145, 152) or Swedish-ruled chieftainships (e.g. Nordman 1944, 318). Meinander takes a very critical view of these interpretations and offers a less radical model instead; »a relatively loose political union of chieftains having political ties with the Central Swedish principality» (Meinander 1950, 96; 1977, 34). The rise of culture can also be seen as wealthy conditions on western shore of the Gulf of Bothnia. This may have been the result of increased Norwegian activity in the Bothnian area, caused in turn buy the livening of North Sea trade. (Stenberger 1964, 572–573). The archaeological material, as material culture in all periods, is a sensitive indicator of changes in trading relations and economic conditions. Through the westward expansion of the Slavs, the Vistula area, thriving in the Roman Iron Age, lost its importance as a centre of trade. In the Migration Period, there was a concentration of trade in the North Sea area and the Rhine rose in importance. Relations with Scandinavia also took on a new meaning as indicated by the archaeological material of the period.

Exceptionally good contacts with Scandinavia were, however, caused by what was apparently a temporary economic boom, as the Merovingian Period (550–800 AD) material shows a clear decrease in Western contacts through the deterioration of the formerly thriving Central Swedish culture. Contacts between Southern Ostrobothnia and the rest of settled Finland became more active and a unification of culture came about (Kivikoski 1961, 181).

The Merovingian Period material of the study area cannot be compared to the rich material of the preceding period either in quality or quantity. The number of finds decreases during the 8th century and ends completely by the mid-9th century (Meinander 1977, 28). The lack of burial finds has been interpreted as depopulation. This has been generally regarded as the best explanation for the phenomenon. (Meinander 1950, 151; Kivikoski 1961, 185–186; Meinander 1977, 42; Huurre 1979, 168). Various reasons for depopulation have searched for. Changes in trading relations and conditions have been suggested as one factor. Eastern trade grew in importance for Scandinavia with its main route along the Gulf of Finland. This may have led the inhabitants of Ostrobothnia to seek new and economically more profitable means of livelihood elsewhere. (Meinander 1950, 156, 158; Kivikoski 1961,

186; Huurre 1979, 168). A plausible reason for depopulation is the generally restless climate of the Viking Period where complete desolation could have been caused by an enemy. However, depopulation is such a gradual and long-term process that it cannot be explained by any sudden catastrophe, war or epidemic. Tapio Seger, who has studied the effects of epidemics on the density of population, however maintains that an epidemic in the region could well have contributed to a decrease in population. According to him, the Leväluhta and Käldamäki bog finds in Isokyrö and Vöyri, unique in Finland, could have been mass graves for victims of a plague (Seger 1982, 192). Previously scholars have regarded these locations as sacrificial sites of Germanic type (Hackman 1913, 313–314; Meinander 1950, 195–196; Meinander 1977, 38) or possible burial sites for slaves (Meinander 1950, 195–196). New viewpoints in the discussion on the bog finds are to be expected when the results of a thorough osteological analysis of the Leväluhta material, now in progress, are obtained. In the discussion on depopulation the following themes have not yet been touched upon – the effects of a possible slave trade in diminishing population and the effects of Christianity on burial practices and possibly also on economy.

Was depopulation then complete? In the lack of artefactual evidence, the answer must be sought from other disciplines, mainly toponymy, geology and physical anthropology. Such place-names of prehistoric cemeteries such as Hiidenmäki in Isokyrö and Ristimäki in Vähäkyrö may suggest a survival of local oral tradition from prehistoric times to our day.

The unpopulated period lasted for about 200 years, as paleoecological studies indicate permanent settlement in the area from AD 1000–1200 onwards (Tolonen, Siiriäinen, Hirviluoto 1977, 51).

Views on the early settlement of northernmost Finland

The Northern Finnish material does not include cemeteries indicating permanent settlement. Iron Age stray finds or isolated burials have not been interpreted as indications of fixed settlement but rather as evidence of voyaging to Lapland or of contacts with neighbouring areas.

The artefact finds of the Early Iron Age do not indicate the predominance of any particular area. The Mid Iron Age material reflects on the one hand eastern influences and the cultural sphere of the whole Gulf of Bothnia region on the other. In the Viking Period western contacts are indicated by four Scandinavian convex brooches found in Northern Finland. Artefacts identifiable as West Finnish begin to appear in the Northern Finnish material from the tenth century onward while Karelian influences appear only as late as the transition from the Viking Period to the Crusade Period. The research begun by the University of Oulu on the settlement of the northernmost regions shows that settlement became of permanent nature already in the 12th–13th centuries in the Tornionjoki river valley (Koivunen 1977, 433; Hjelmroos 1978). In his study on the toponymical history of settlement in the area, Jouko Vahtola states that the earlier settlers were from the southern and eastern regions of Häme, viz. the areas of Hollola and Vanaja. This Häme-based earliest stratum of settlement in the Tornionjoki river valley dates from the end of the Viking Period and the beginning of the Crusade Period (Vahtola 1980, 284–285). According to him, the Karelians seem to have come to the northern regions in the 12th century settling mainly along the lower reaches of the above-mentioned rivers, while the

Häme population already lived on the upper reaches. (Vahtola 1980, 384). Place-names indicate also that a certain element of the population came from Finland-Proper and Lower Satakunta, settling especially at the mouth of the Tornionjoki river and on the coast as well as in the Kemijoki river valley. Compared with the strong element of inland Häme-based settlement in place-names, the latter element from Lower Satakunta and Finland-Proper is of quite small scale. This may have been a Late Medieval settlement trend (Vahtola 1980, 308).

Thus far, the settlement-historical project of the University of Oulu has published the above-mentioned extensive toponymical study, paleoecological studies and Medieval find material. The results of the prehistorical sector of the project are eagerly awaited by researchers interested in the early history of Northern Finland.

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