

The *Karelian Culture* after the Crusade Period

Ville Laakso

Ville Laakso, Department of Archaeology, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turun yliopisto, Finland:
vilaakso@gmail.com

Abstract

The Crusade Period (ca. AD 1050–1300) is widely considered as the period when ancient Karelia flourished. There are, however, many unanswered questions regarding its chronology, especially during the later stages of the period. From an archaeological point of view, the Middle Ages (ca. AD 1300–1500) have remained very poorly visible, and our understanding of the period has been based almost totally on written sources – which are very few in number. Especially the material culture of rural areas – where the vast majority of people lived – has been poorly understood. Recent results of archaeological studies show that several of the classical artefact types of the *Karelian culture* were still used in the Middle Ages. The cultural continuation is even more obvious in the form of some archaeological sites, most notably cemeteries. It is fair to state that the *Karelian culture* of the Crusade Period still prevailed during the first century of the historical era. Especially in Käkisalmi Karelia, there is a degree of continuation of material culture until the 17th century. At the same time, the major changes that are present in the medieval written sources are not very visible in the archaeological record.

1 Introduction

The Crusade Period (ca. AD 1050–1300) is the best-known and most famous of the prehistoric periods of Karelia.¹ It is vividly manifested in the archaeological record, especially in inhumation cemeteries and rich materials from them (e.g. oval brooches, chain holders, and other bronze ornaments). The term *Karelian culture* has regularly been used to describe this complex (see e.g. Huurre 1979: 170–171; Kivikoski 1961: 262–276; Nordman 1924: 184). The cultural area that is discernible in the archaeological record has been connected with Karelians on the basis of the earliest written sources concerning the area. It is worth noting that similar terms concerning other areas of Finland in the Crusade Period are not widely used. The Crusade Period has traditionally been considered as the greatest period of flourishing of ancient Karelia (e.g. Nordman 1924: 195; Saksa et al. 2003: 384–385; Uino 1997: 166).

Despite the richness of the archaeological material, the chronology concerning the *Karelian culture* poses several problems, for example in the form of artefact chronology. A distinct problem is the final phase of the period: the exact time when Crusade Period artefacts fell out of use is not known. The visibility of the end of the period is blurred by the cessation of the furnished burial custom. Because of this, even the juncture of the end of the period and the beginning of the Middle Ages (ca. AD 1300) has been defined on the basis of written sources (the so-called Third Crusade, the peace treaty of AD 1323) – not on the basis of archaeological materials (see already e.g. Nordman 1924: 195–196).

The beginning of the Middle Ages also means a geopolitical division of Crusade Period Karelia. By 1323 at the latest, the area became divided between western and eastern interest spheres into areas taxed by Sweden and

Novgorod. The western part is called Viipuri Karelia and the latter Käkisalmi Karelia, according to their centres. The border between them ran in the middle of the Karelian Isthmus from north-west to south-east.

2 Starting points

From an archaeological point of view, the whole medieval period (ca. AD 1300–1500) in the area has remained archaeologically poorly visible, mainly because of a lack of research.² Our knowledge of the Middle Ages has been mainly based on written sources, which are, however, scarce.

It has already quite early been noted that some of the finds characteristic of the *Karelian culture* may, in fact, have still been used in the medieval period, namely in the 14th century (Nordman 1924: 195). Due to the lack of exact datings of archaeological materials, this remained a mere assumption for a long time.

However, in recent years, more precisely datable archaeological material has accumulated, and our knowledge of medieval material culture has increased substantially. The aim of this paper is to estimate what features of the *Karelian culture* may have continued until the medieval period. The estimates are based on materials recently excavated, surveyed, or published.

3 Cemeteries and burial customs

Since the late 19th century, inhumation cemeteries have been the most important archaeological sources for the archaeology of *Karelian culture* in the Crusade Period. The use of the cemeteries can be quite effortlessly followed until the end of the Crusade Period, when the decreasing number of artefacts placed in graves also makes it difficult to date graves and cemeteries. It is well known that most of the inhumation cemeteries in the area also contain completely unfurnished burials. At many sites, this phenomenon has been interpreted by archaeologists as a continuation of use until the Middle Ages or even later (see e.g. Saksa 1998: 58, 60–62,

131; Uino 1997: 139).

So far, few radiocarbon or coin datings are available for the graves postdating the Crusade Period, but the existing ones point to a clear continuation (see Laakso 2014: 129–131 and cited literature). Continuation is also reflected by a few finds of medieval (and later) metal icons and grave stones collected at some of the Crusade Period cemeteries (Laakso 2014: 22–23).

Yet another sign of continuation is the fact that for cemeteries established in the Middle Ages or later, locations exactly similar to the Crusade Period cemeteries were usually chosen (Laakso 2003; 2014: 30). In Käkisalmi Karelia, this type of *Orthodox cemeteries* were very widely used until the 17th century, in many cases until the 19th century – sometimes even until the 20th century (Laakso 2003; 2014: 22–23).

Continuity concerning cemeteries is most obvious in Käkisalmi Karelia, but it is discernible even in Viipuri Karelia (Kappelinmäki in Lappeenranta and the so-called *village cemeteries* in the Lappeenranta area, for example; see Laakso 2010; 2014: 23–25).³ The most obvious change in burial customs was the adoption of the unfurnished burial custom. This took place gradually during the 14th–15th centuries, the natural explanation being the Christianisation of the area (Laakso 2014: 131–134).

4 Settlements

There is little well-preserved and well-documented archaeological evidence on rural settlement sites predating the 15th century (see Uino 1997: 72–76). There are quite a lot of surveyed settlement sites in different parts of present-day eastern Finland, but most of these are situated in modern fields and are probably not well preserved (Luoto et al. 2014; Poutiainen et al. 1994; 1995).

Excavations at the settlements of the historical period at Papinniemi in Uukuniemi (Laakso 2014), as well as Sotkuma in Polvijärvi (Majoinen 2000; Pesonen 1998), have revealed more intact structures. Because

of the lack of comparative material from the Crusade Period, it is hard to estimate any possible continuation in the structures at the level of dwelling types or common features.

At least in the selection of suitable locations, there seems to be a continuation in the settlement sites, both in Käkisalmi and Viipuri Karelia. The material is small, but the known Crusade Period settlements are located inside the central areas of villages that are known well from historical sources of the 16th century (Uino 1997: 130–140).

The settlement in these villages usually continued at least until the 17th century (the time of Lutheran immigration in Käkisalmi Karelia), and in many cases until 1944 (ceded Karelia). Especially in the currently Finnish areas of Viipuri Karelia, this settlement still continues. These are obviously clear signs of continuity from the Crusade Period up to modern times.

Continuation is clear at a general level, but in individual cases, similar criteria for choosing the sites for settlement may have led to just an appearance of continuity: short breaks are not necessarily visible in the archaeological record. The settlement sites were most probably chosen from the point of view of the typical land-use of an agricultural population in both the Crusade Period and later times (on settlements, see especially Laakso 2014: 37–39, 136–142).

5 Hill forts

The exact dating of Karelian hill forts is problematic, as well. In a broad sense, this type of sites are dated to the Crusade Period and the Middle Ages (Taavitsainen 1990: 131; Uino 1997: 87). Furthermore, there is quite a lot of – at least circumstantial – evidence that they were still used much later, until the 17th century (Laakso 2014: 39–40; see even Laakso 2011). At least the Paasonvuori hill fort in Sortavala was still used in the Swedish–Russian war of 1741–1743 (Saarela 1932: 14).

Obviously, the use of hill forts continued from the Crusade Period onwards. However,

it is hard to estimate whether this reflects the continuation of a local culture. It seems plausible that these were simply strategically important sites, favourable for defensive purposes – regardless of whether they were used by the local population or foreign military contingents.

6 Artefacts

At present, quite a few types of artefacts used in Karelia during the Crusade Period can be more or less exactly dated on the basis of stratigraphy, radiocarbon dates, or coin finds. Based on this information, it seems that several of the classical Crusade Period types remained in use even in the Middle Ages. In addition to the materials in Russian collections (see especially Belskiy 2014; Kochkurkina 1982: 105–108; Lesman 2012; Sedova 1981), the following list of late finds from Finnish collections can be compiled:

- oval tortoise brooches of Elvi Linturi's type C2/1a: Mikkeli Tuukkala grave 36/1886 (see Fig. 1), radiocarbon-dated most probably to the 14th century (Purhonen 1998: 162, 247);⁴
- cross-shaped chain holders of A. I. Saksa's type II:2 (Saksa 1998: 44; 2010: 123–124) from Mikkeli Tuukkala grave 36/1886;
- eared bronze tubes of Saksa's type I:3b (Saksa 1998: 42; 2010: 122) from Mikkeli Tuukkala grave 36/1886;
- knife sheath of bronze from Mikkeli Tuukkala grave 36/1886;
- barrel-shaped bronze beads from Mikkeli Tuukkala grave 36/1886;
- axe of A. N. Kirpichnikov's type VII (Kirpichnikov 1966) from grave 3 at the Kappelinmäki cemetery in Lappeenranta (see Fig. 2), coin dated to the 14th century (Laakso 2014: 193 and cited literature).

It is important to note that most of the C2/1-type oval tortoise brooches are so alike that they should be considered as having originated from the casting ladle of a single copper-smith (Tomanderä 1994: 40–41). This would, of course, mean a similar late dating for similar brooches from the Karelian parishes of Hiitola

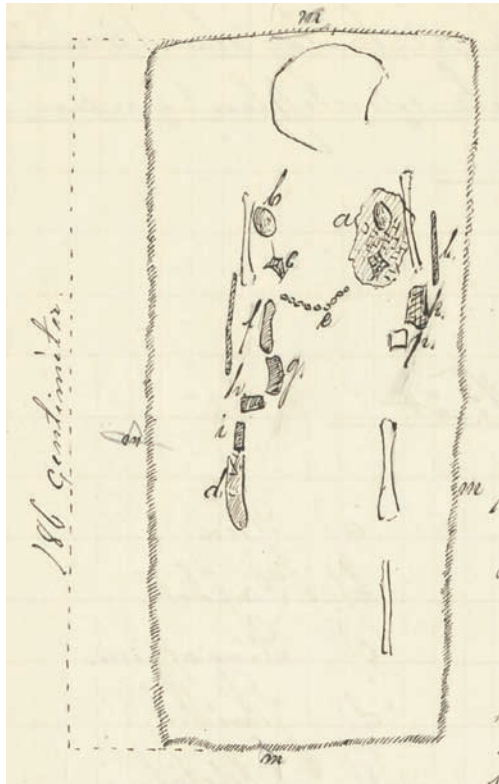


Figure 1. A contemporary plan by Major Tuderus of grave 36/1886 at Tuukkala cemetery in Mikkeli. Locations of the oval brooches marked with *a* and *b*. Archive of the National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

and Kurkijoki, for example. A late dating is further supported by a coin found in grave III of Visulahti in Mikkeli. Furthermore, according to Linturi (1980: 107), the brooch type Ailio D is, on typological grounds, at least partly *younger* than the C2/1a type.

In addition, there are some tools and implements that can be dated to medieval times as well as the Crusade Period, but they do not represent established archaeological types (see e.g. Saksa 2010: 252–253 and Fig. 89).

Furthermore, the so-called *Slavic-style pottery* is a very common find at cemeteries and settlements of both the Crusade Period and the historical period in Karelia. According to written sources, some of it was produced locally (so-called *Karelian ceramics*).⁵ This type of ceramics remained as the main type in use until

the 17th century in Käkisalmi Karelia. On the western side of the 1323 border, it seems to be less common than on the eastern side during the historical period (see Laakso 2014: 50–55). It seems that in this area, ceramics were replaced by western types (largely imported) quite early in the Middle Ages.

Future studies are needed to show whether these late finds of artefacts of types common in the Crusade Period are just exceptions. The finds from Novgorod and Oreshek seem to indicate that, for example, oval brooches were still used in Karelia after the abandonment of the furnished burial custom. On the other hand, the lack of this type of artefacts in the 14th-century graves of the Kalmistomäki cemetery in Kylälahti in Hiitola seems to point in the opposite direction (on this site, see especially Belskiy 2012). The explanation may lie in the special character of the Kylälahti site (a *pogost* cemetery with exceptionally lively external contacts).

7 Conclusions

From an archaeological point of view, the medieval period (ca. AD 1300–1500) of Karelia is only gradually becoming visible and understandable. On the basis of materials in

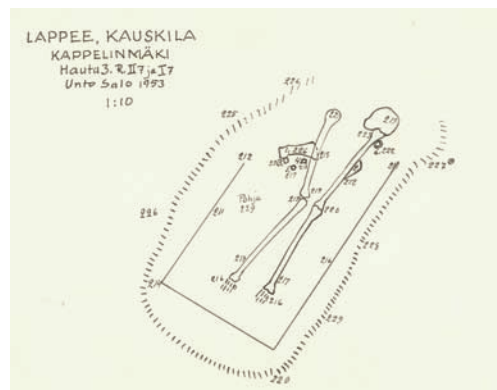


Figure 2. A plan from the 1953 excavation report depicting grave 3 at the Kappelinnmäki cemetery in Lappeenranta. Only the lower part of the inhumation was preserved, the axe situated under the right thigh-bone. Archive of the National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

Russian and Finnish collections, it is obvious that several of the classical artefact types of the *Karelian culture* were still used in the 14th century. In the form of some types of archaeological sites, most notably cemeteries, a continuation is even more obvious.

It is fair to state that *Karelian culture* still prevailed during the first century of the historical era. In addition, there is, especially in Käkisalmi Karelia, a degree of continuation of material culture until the 17th century, even though with increasing foreign influence. In Viipuri Karelia, changes during the Middle Ages seem to have been faster, but even there several elements of continuity can be discerned (village cemeteries, settlements).

The major political and religious changes that are strongly present in the medieval written sources (state formation, Christianisation) are not as clearly visible in the archaeological record. In Käkisalmi Karelia, more profound changes took place as late as in the 17th century. Written sources can be used to explain changes in the archaeological record, but interpretations of archaeological material should not be based on written sources.

Archaeologists – and hopefully historians as well – need to comprehend that the boundary between the Crusade Period and the Middle Ages set at ca. AD 1300 is not a proper boundary from the point of view of the archaeological material. With this kept in mind, the existing periodisation remains a useful tool – the importance of written sources should be acknowledged, and at least for now, archaeology cannot offer a more closely argued alternative.

In order to gain a growing understanding of the material culture of medieval times, future studies should concentrate more on materials from settlement sites, even though they are usually less impressive than jewellery placed in Crusade Period inhumation graves.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, *Karelia* is understood to cover the historical provinces of Finland, i.e. the parts of Viipuri Province that were ceded to the Soviet Union in 1940, as well as the provinces of North and South Karelia inside the borders of present-day Finland (Fi. *Pohjois-Karjala, Etelä-Karjala*). In the chronology used in Finland, the Crusade Period is the last phase of prehistory, preceded by the Viking Age and followed by the Middle Ages.
- 2 There are, however, reasonably large medieval excavated materials from the towns/castles of Käkisalme and Viipuri, but neither has been thoroughly published. Materials from several hill forts have been published more extensively (see e.g. Kochkurkina 2010), but there are not very many excavated sites with finds or structures reliably datable to the Middle Ages. The same applies to rural settlements and cemeteries (see text for details). On history of the archaeological research of medieval Karelia, see especially Laakso (2014: 15–19).
- 3 When considering continuation from a wider perspective, it should be noted that some inhumation cemeteries seem to reflect a continuation from the cremation cemeteries of the Viking Age (Kalmistomäki at Kuuppala in Kurkijoki, possibly Kalmistomäki at Kylälahti in Hiitola).
- 4 The finds from this grave are described in Heikel (1889: 217–219).
- 5 For the terminology used here, see Laakso (2014: 50–51 and cited literature).

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