

# Built of Wood and Turned to Soil: Perspectives of Research History and New Observations Concerning Finland's Oldest Churches with Reference to Ristimäki in Ravattula

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## Abstract

A few years ago, the remains of Finland's oldest identified churches were still dated to the 1230s. Since the founding of parishes was dated to the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, these remains were associated with the period of ecclesiastical organisation. In 2013, the well-preserved stone foundation of a church presumably built already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century was excavated in south-western Finland. Located in the middle of an inhumation cemetery, this building was associated with the ecclesiastical activities of the period of missionary activity in Finland and may have been the church of a village or locality used by a community smaller than later parishes. Also two previously known foundations of belfries from two separate inhumation cemeteries may date from this period of transition from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. Because very little is known about the remains of early churches, the new finds discussed in this article provide considerable additions to our view of the early ecclesiastical culture of Finland.

## 1 Introduction

In August 2013, the remains of a small church were discovered in archaeological excavations in the village of Ravattula in the municipality of Kaarina, near Turku in south-western Finland. The site is only some 4 km as the crow flies from the medieval Cathedral of Turku. Situated on the bank of the Aurajoki River, the location is known as Ristimäki (En. *Cross Hill*). It is a small isolated stand of forest amidst fields, some 250 metres both from the river and the plot of the historical village of Ravattula (Fig. 1). The remains of the church were discovered in an archaeological project of intensive research conducted over a period of several years.

A possible inhumation cemetery was noted at the site in the late 1990s in an archaeological

survey that revealed elongated pits that were thought to be depressions on the surface left by graves. A trial pit excavated in one of these depressions revealed burnt clay and a bronze ring suggesting that Ristimäki was the site of an inhumation cemetery from the Crusade Period (AD 1025/1050–1150/1200) of Finnish prehistory (Lehtonen 2009).

There were no written sources, tales, or items of oral tradition concerning ecclesiastical activity at Ristimäki. The University of Turku was interested in the place name and the extent, date, and nature of the possible cemetery at the site and launched archaeological excavations directed by the present author in the area in 2010. The first excavations already revealed a few burials dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The excavations were continued yearly, and in September 2013, the discovery



Figure 1. Finland's oldest known church site is located in a small isolated stand of forest (in the middle in the foreground in the illustration) by the Aurajoki River in the village of Ravattula in Kaarina, south-western Finland. Photo: I. Korhonen.

of Finland's oldest church could be announced – the remains of a church building dating from the period of missionary activity in Finland. The finds place its time of construction in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (on the research project and the church, see Ruohonen 2013; forthcoming).

Before the finds at Ristimäki in Ravattula came to light, the oldest known remains of church buildings in Finland were from the 1230s. This was already the period of parish organisation with churches maintained by parishes or groups of several villages for local congregations. According to present views, this system was adopted during the second quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Hiekkänen 2010: 343–344). There was no archaeological data on earlier church buildings, which no

doubt had existed in Finland.

The present article is on the oldest church buildings in Finland, which were without exception made of wood. To provide a broader background, I also discuss the churches built during the early stage of the parish system and their history of research. The nature of earlier churches is considered with reference to views previously presented by researchers and finds from the church at Ristimäki in Ravattula. I also discuss the possible existence of churches at certain sites from the end of the Iron Age with reference to data on cemeteries, tales, oral tradition, and place names pointing to churches. I also seek to argue how the recent finds from Ristimäki can alter our overall view of early ecclesiastical organisation in Finland in the Late Iron Age and Early Middle Ages.

Since the research project still continues, the results presented here are preliminary (Fig. 2).

According to the established chronology of Finnish research, the Middle Ages are defined as the period from approximately 1150/1200 to the 1520s, with the Early Middle Ages extending to approximately 1300. The Crusade Period was the last period of the prehistoric Iron Age. In western Finland, it is dated to about 1050–1150/1200, and in the archaeology of eastern Finland, it is considered to have ended around 1300. Chronologically, the period of missionary activity in Finland can mostly be associated with the Crusade Period, but it can also be extended to the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2 Finland's oldest ecclesiastical buildings

Scientific dating results and finds of artefacts show that the recently discovered church at Ristimäki in Ravattula was most likely built in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The wooden building was erected in connection with an inhumation cemetery already in use that had been established by the 11<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. The church ceased to be used by the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when the building was apparently emptied and dismantled or left to decay. Burials in the adjacent area also ended around this time. These are the oldest presently known and hitherto found remains of an ecclesiastical building in Finland, and the only church-related finds dated to the missionary period.

It should be noted, however, that there were definitely contemporary and perhaps even older church buildings, but for the time being, research has failed to recover concrete or unequivocal traces of them. Although late-19<sup>th</sup>-century research already considered it self-evident that there was ecclesiastical activity in Finland during the missionary period, and accordingly church buildings of the period (e.g. Wallin 1894: 256–257; Aspelin 1902), no archaeological material relating to such buildings has been recovered prior to fieldwork at Ristimäki.

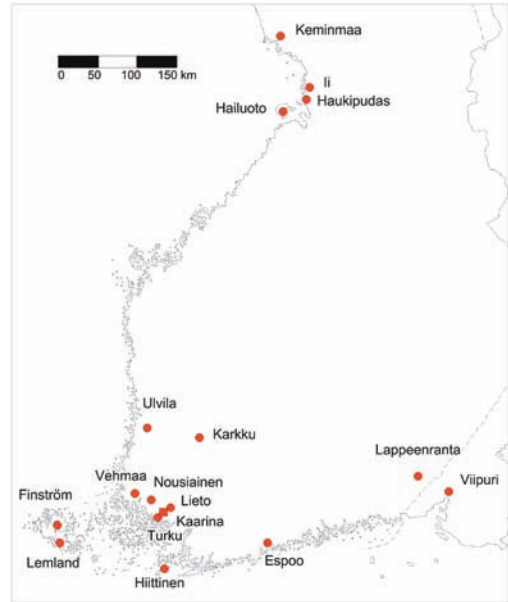


Figure 2. Map of locations discussed in the article. Illustration: J. Ruohonen.

While documentary sources state nothing about churches of such an early date, there are numerous references of varying reliability and standard concerning ecclesiastical buildings, for example many places associated with place names, oral tradition, and stories referring to churches. In some locations, there have even been observations pointing to buildings of this kind, but they have remained indefinite in terms of their specific character and dating. Although the information is diffuse and of dubious value as source material, it has permitted quite extensive interpretations of matters such as the dating of the coming of Christianity to Finland, missionary activity in Finland, and ecclesiastical organisation and the system formed by the early parishes (e.g. Cleve 1948: 81–84; Pirinen 1955; Rinne 1932: 109–149; Salo 2000: 135–140).

According to the view already presented in the 1950s by Ella Kivikoski, it was often the custom in the Early Christian period in Finland to build churches in connection with inhumation cemeteries in order to destroy old cult

sites (Kivikoski 1955: 160). This interpretation is based on burial finds and a widely known bull issued in 1229 by Pope Gregory IX (REA 7). Sent to the Bishop of Linköping in Sweden, the bull ratifies the rights of ownership of the local church to the pagan sacrificial groves and sites of worship (in Latin *lucos et delubra*) that the Finns had ceased to use upon converting to Christianity. The notion of churches having been built at the sites of old cemeteries has been criticised later (see below). According to an estimate by archaeologist Anna-Liisa Hirviluoto from the mid-1980s, there were a total of 12 inhumation cemeteries with remains of ecclesiastical buildings or associated with oral tradition relating to a church (Hirviluoto 1985: 127). The remains mentioned here are two possible foundations of belfries dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which are discussed below.

### 3 Village chapels or the churches of merchants and men of power?

The earliest Christian influences came to Finland through direct connections and indirect contacts. It has been natural to assume that the first churches were also built in connection with trading sites (e.g. Pirinen 1955: 53–54; Taavitsainen 1987: 98). Missionaries and Christian traders from elsewhere would thus have built their small wooden churches before the local population converted to Christianity. They may at first have had these churches only for their own use. There is, however, no concrete evidence of such churches, but on the other hand, there have been hardly any archaeological investigations of definite trading sites or other central locations of the period.

The building of churches would thus have been desirable for reasons of commercial contacts alone. Chieftains and prominent local men may also have had small churches built to promote their own trading aims. Local merchants would most likely have furthered trade by taking baptism in order to do business with Christian traders (e.g. Taavitsainen 1987: 98).

Alongside the churches used by traders and following the same notion, in a sense,

the earliest churches in Finland have also been regarded as having been private or proprietary churches (in Latin *ecclesia propria*, German *Eigenkirche*). According to Professor Markus Hiekkänen, local men of power would thus have built and maintained small wooden churches for the groups of farmsteads where they lived, these churches being private and reserved for members of their families, important allies, and, for example, merchants and traders. The construction of a private church thus did not require the existence of an actual parish (Hiekkänen 2010: 342–344; 2014: 14–16; see also Haggrén 2005: 22–24).

The main problem is that no remains of such early churches have yet been found. Their archaeological invisibility has been explained by, among other reasons, the small size of these buildings, their light construction, and their location in a village toft along with other buildings. Owing to other land use, small wooden churches among other settlement would thus have completely disappeared. Furthermore, these churches would not have been discovered since there were no burials around them, and a separate burial site would have been located further away outside the village (Hiekkänen 2014: 15). Inhumation cemeteries dating from the period of possible private churches, that is, mainly from the Crusade Period and the Early Middle Ages, have been archaeologically investigated to some degree for over 100 years. Since churches were not built in connection with inhumation cemeteries, such buildings could thus not have been revealed in excavations of the latter. Hiekkänen (2014: 15) has assumed that burial sites and churches were not combined until the 13<sup>th</sup> century when parish organisation and parish churches were established.

It has been suggested that small wooden churches began to be built in Finland after the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Their construction, according to this information, would have continued until the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Hiekkänen (2014: 16) claims that there could have been up to dozens of churches of this kind in the regions of south-western



Finland, Satakunta, and Häme (Tavastia), perhaps even more than a hundred. As in the case of separate burial sites, the private churches were not abandoned until the founding of parishes during the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Notions regarding the private churches were mainly based on the spread of Christianity and the development of the church in the neighbouring regions of Scandinavia. But without concrete archaeological data, it has been impossible to assess the nature of the ecclesiastical system or to unequivocally confirm the suitability of this model to conditions in Finland. Despite this, the notion of private or proprietary churches can be considered as a model accepted in contemporary research on churches of the early missionary period.

Along with the churches maintained by merchants and the private churches built before the parish system became established, small churches were also used by villages or localities. Archaeologist Juhani Rinne outlined, for example, the overall picture of a missionary district consisting of small churches in the archipelago of south-western Finland and Åland and the northern parts of south-western Finland, which would already have had a regular network of parishes before the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Pirinen 1955: 56–57; Rinne 1932: 109–132, 148). There were large numbers of small village churches in this area, which were regarded as dating from the Middle Ages. However, it has not been possible to present any concrete evidence for this, and the interpretations concerning the village churches – at least in the form presented by Rinne – can be regarded as outmoded.

#### 4 Lost and forgotten wooden churches

Finnish research on old churches has mostly focused on the stone churches built towards the end of the Middle Ages. These so-called grey stone (or fieldstone) churches were built on the Finnish mainland mostly in the Late Middle Ages, mainly in the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The stone churches in the Åland Islands

are given somewhat older dates at present to the period from 1270 to 1400 (Hiekkänen 2014: 24). Research has paid very little attention to the early wooden churches that preceded the stone churches almost everywhere. Of course, this is partly due to the limitations of the research material. Early wooden churches have been discussed briefly in general terms in research on stone churches, among other contexts (e.g. Hiekkänen 2014: 16–19; Rinne 1941: 30–31).

As researchers do not have access to any concrete information on churches used by traders, private churches, or the early village churches, nothing definite can be said about the oldest churches. It is likely that in the missionary period, by the 1150s at the latest, a church was built at least in Nousiainen in south-western Finland. Nousiainen was also the site of Finland's first episcopal see before it was moved to Koroinen in the 1230s, or soon thereafter. The precise location of the church in Nousiainen is not known, but it is assumed to have stood at the site of the later stone church of the locality (Hiekkänen 2003: 26; Oja 1977: 46–47). According to both historical research and solid elements of folklore, Henry (Henrik), the missionary bishop of Finland, was buried in Nousiainen Church. Medieval sources, however, do not mention this church until after 1232 (REA 8). This oldest information naturally does not refer to the stone church erected in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 3), but to one of its predecessors, most likely a smaller building made of wood.

It has been concluded, however, that in the early stages of a parish there was a wooden church either at the site of its later stone church or near it. A continuum of several churches at the same site has also been regarded as typical. Many medieval parishes are mentioned in written sources, for example, already in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but the time of construction of a locality's stone church, which is often still in use today, has later been placed in the Late Middle Ages. This means one or several wooden churches must have existed before the stone church was built. In research, however, this preceding stage is often bypassed by



Figure 3. The medieval stone church of Nousiainen was built in the 1420s or 1430s. It is likely that there had previously been one or several wooden churches at the site. Photo: J. Ruohonen.

noting in general terms that the parish had, or may have had, a wooden church prior to its stone church (e.g. Hiekkanen 2003: 24; 2014: 18–19). Discussion concerning the related details, such as the precise ages of the churches, their number prior to the stone church, or their precise location in relation to the later churches, is unfortunately rare.

There are, of course, reasons for the small number of studies. Detailed information on medieval churches in Finland is highly limited, since the old wooden churches that have survived to the present were not built until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The wooden churches built in the Middle Ages have been destroyed through numerous events of warfare and fires or dismantled to make way for a new church of wood or stone, or they have decayed after being abandoned or over time.

The medieval wooden churches have been destroyed completely. Only some wall timbers from the old wooden churches have survived that were recycled as building material for later churches of stone (e.g. the churches of Espoo and Karkku: see Hiekkanen 2014: 256, 428; Palmroth 1963). The longest-surviving wooden church built in the Middle Ages, the late-15<sup>th</sup>-century Church of Salo or Saloinen in Ostrobothnia, was destroyed in a fire in 1930. It was fortunately documented thoroughly before the fire (see e.g. Pettersson 1987). The value of the longest-surviving churches, and churches in general, for research has suffered from the fact that these buildings have undergone many changes over the decades.

Since no wooden churches of the period in question have survived in Finland, our conception of medieval wooden churches is mostly

based on indirect information, and concrete data on them is very rare. There are hardly any direct written sources on the details of wooden churches that have survived from the Middle Ages. Even diffuse information on these churches of the period in general mainly refers to late medieval parish churches, the centres of local congregations, which were built mostly in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The technical details of the appearance of the oldest churches are also shrouded in mystery. Highly fragmentary information permits the conclusion that they were made of coniferous timber using the corner-joining technique. There is not a single reliable observation from Finland of the stave churches that were common in Scandinavia (Hiekkänen 2014: 16; on wooden churches in northern Europe, see e.g. Ahrens 1982).

## 5 Early investigated wooden churches

Archaeological research is the only way to acquire more detailed information about the wooden churches of the missionary period and the Middle Ages. It should be noted, however, that very little archaeological research has been carried out at these sites. Moreover, many medieval church sites were investigated at a time when hardly any attention was paid to structural details or the contexts of finds, for example in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By contrast, recent archaeological research of the 1990s and 2000s is in a class of its own in its attention to details. As a whole, information acquired from these sites varies and is of uneven quality.

Before the fieldwork at Ristimäki in Ravattula in Kaarina, remains of Finland's oldest wooden churches had also been excavated in south-western Finland, namely at Sontamala in Nousiainen and Koroinen in Turku. At both locations, the construction of the oldest churches was dated approximately to the 1230s, that is, already to the time of the establishment of parish organisation.

It has been interpreted from documentary sources that the first bishop's church was in



Figure 4. At least two wooden churches of different ages stood at the site of the bishop's church in Koroinen in Turku – archaeological observations of the buildings; below – suggested reconstruction of the two church stages. Drawing according to Kronqvist 1948: 11 Abb. 5.

Nousiainen, from where it was moved after 1220 to Koroinen in Rântämäki (later Maaria Parish, present-day Turku). Excavations were carried out at the church site in Koroinen by Hjalmar Appelgren and Juhani Rinne between 1898 and 1902. Their observations suggested that the first church at the site may have been built in the 1230s and was destroyed by fire already in the 1250s or 1260s. It was replaced by a new and larger wooden church with a choir part of stone, which stood at the site until the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (Koivunen 1979; 2003; Kronqvist 1948: 11–12; Rinne 1941:44–58; it has also been suggested that the stone foundation of the choir was a later memorial chapel, see Hiekkänen 2014: 185–186) (Fig. 4). Archaeologists of the University of Turku are currently conducting a research project of the Koroinen area, which includes a thorough analysis of the material that was excavated over a century ago.

The church of Koroinen was an episcopal church, and its details are not comparable with contemporary or even later parish churches. A church of the latter type was discovered in 1920 at Sontamala (sometimes mistakenly

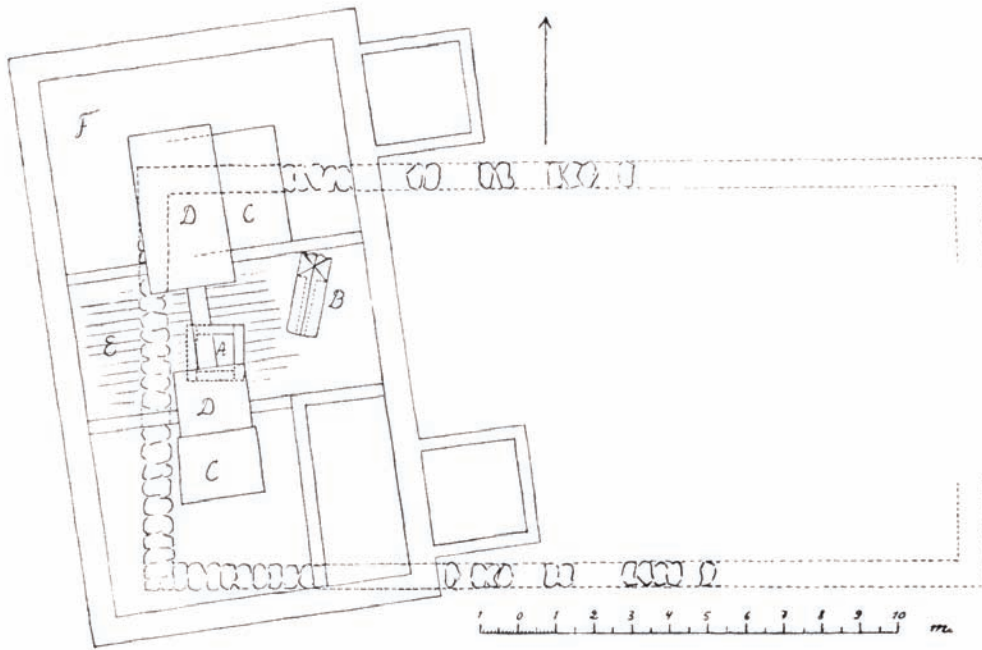


Figure 5. Plan of an early ecclesiastical building at Moisio in Sontamala, Nousiainen. The east-west-oriented stone foundation is of a wooden church built approximately in the 1230s. According to Rinne 1932: 51 Fig. 12.

spelled ‘Santamala’) in Nousiainen. When the new main building of the Moisio (En. *Manor*) farm was being built on a small hill, the construction work revealed the stone foundation of a building dating from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, human bones, and a large hewn grave-stone. After being discovered, the site was archaeologically investigated in the same year by Juhani Rinne (1932: 49–55). Based on the revealed stone foundation, the structure was interpreted as a rectangular church, with a western end 11.5 metres wide (Fig. 5). The church had been made of wood and its foundation consisted of natural stones piled without mortar. The eastern part of the building could not be investigated, but Rinne assumed that the church had measured roughly 22 m along the east-west axis, possibly longer if it had had a separate choir. He dated it to the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, linking it to the episcopal church of Nousiainen, where Bishop Henry, among others, is claimed to have been buried (Rinne 1932: 42–72). This interpretation has later

been rejected, and at present the remains are regarded as those of the church of the medieval parish of Sontamala, possibly built in the 1230s (e.g. Hiekkänen 2014: 16; see also Salo 2000: 101–110).

A large cemetery and a church site were investigated at Liikistö in Ulvila in the 1930s. Archaeologist I. Kronqvist, who directed the excavation, assumed that the discovered smaller stone structure belonged to a wooden church of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, while the larger one next to and partly overlaying it was part of the stone church of Ulvila, which had been left unfinished in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Kronqvist 1948: 13–15). Later excavations in the 2000s have disproven this interpretation, and it has now been suggested that the site was that of the wooden church of the rural parish of Ulvila, founded possibly in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but by the 14<sup>th</sup> century at the latest (Hiekkänen 2014: 266; Jäkärä 2007). The larger stone structure has been interpreted as the remains of a later building in secular use.



The other archaeologically investigated remains that have been unequivocally interpreted as wooden churches date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century at the earliest. For example, the site of the oldest parish church in Kemi was excavated in the early 1980s at Valmarinniemi in Keminmaa in Ostrobothnia. There may have been two chronologically consecutive wooden churches at the site: the first one may have been in use from the 1320s to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the following church until the end of the 1510s (see Koivunen 1982; Paavola 2003). Also at Hamina in Ii, some 65 km south-east of Keminmaa, the site of the oldest church of the locality has been excavated. The small excavation revealed the burnt remains of two churches of different ages. The first one was possibly built in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and the site was not finally deserted until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Kallio-Seppä 2011).

A church site and cemetery discovered at Kyrksund (En. *Church Strait*) in Hiittinen (Swe. *Hitis*) in the archipelago of south-western Finland were also excavated in the 1930s. They were dated at the time to as early as the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century (Nordman 1939; Pirinen 1955: 55). Further research in the 1990s failed to provide any support for such an early date; for example, of the many coins found in the chapel building, the oldest ones can be dated to no earlier than the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Ehrnsten 2015: 173). There are, however, many other finds from the area pointing to activities predating the church, such as a trading site (Edgren 1996).

In eastern Finland, in what was formerly known as Swedish Karelia, parishes were organised somewhat later than in western Finland, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century. In the areas ceded to the Soviet Union after World War II, it has been possible to carry out archaeological excavations of church sites only in Viipuri (Swe. *Viborg*, Ru. *Vyborg*) (e.g. Hiekkanen 2014: 544–551).

The oldest and best-known remains of a church in eastern Finland are at Kappelinmäki (En. *Chapel Hill*) in the village of Kauskila in Lappeenranta. With reference to the place name

and local tales, bones were already found at the site in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and oral tradition claimed that a church had stood there. The first excavations were already carried out in the 1950s, but the actual church site and its adjacent cemetery were excavated in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first church at Kappelinmäki was most likely built in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, possibly around the year 1325, and it was the church of the congregation of Lappee Parish (Laakso 2015: 37). According to Laakso, the archaeological data shows that the first church was destroyed in a fire possibly during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after which the second wooden church was built at its site. It was abandoned in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century or by the 17<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, when the centre of the congregation moved to the town of Lappeenranta (Swe. *Villmanstrand*) on the shore of Lake Saimaa. The furnished graves that were found show that the wooden church was built in the middle of an early Christian inhumation cemetery (Laakso 2015).

## 6 Churches beneath and next to churches

Earlier churches in the same location are often mentioned in connection with many churches and church sites. There are often stories, for example, of older remains, such as parts of a stone foundation, that have remained under the floor of a wooden or stone-built church. As mentioned above, archaeological excavations have provided indications of older wooden churches of this kind, for example at the episcopal church of Koroinen in Turku and the parish church of Kappelinmäki in Lappeenranta. In some cases, the interpretations cannot be regarded as completely unequivocal because of the indefinite nature of the observations. The dating of these earliest churches raises further issues. Since the stone churches of Finland were mostly built as late as in the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century, the older remains of churches found under them might only date from the previous century and not from the Early Middle Ages.

For example, archaeological excavations at the remains of the wooden church of Hailuoto

Island in Ostrobothnia, which was built in the 1620s and burned down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revealed the remains of an earlier, probably medieval, wooden church under its floor (Paavola 1988: 9–34). The archaeological observations show the earlier wooden church to have been considerably smaller than the later building. Its structural details, however, remain unresolved, because burials under the floor of the new church until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century had almost completely destroyed the oldest structures. Lumber from the older church, possibly built already in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or in the 15<sup>th</sup> century at the latest, may have been used for the later wooden church.

Investigations of a few stone churches have revealed traces of older wooden churches at their sites. For example, the remains of the stone foundation of a small wooden church (approx. 12.5 x 8 m) were discovered in 1969–1970 from under the floor of the stone church of Finström in the Åland Islands. As the stone church is now considered to have been built in the 1440s, the small wooden church is from an earlier stage (Hiekkanen 2014: 366–368; cf. Ringbom 2010: 68–69). With reference to archaeological data, it has also been suggested that the stone church of Lemland was built in the 1290s on the site of an earlier wooden church (Ringbom 2010: 106; Hiekkanen 2014: 400–401). Despite research, the precise ages of these possible buildings preceding stone churches have not, however, been established.

The observed remains of the churches can mainly be regarded as coinciding with the history of congregations in the parishes concerned. There are no definite or reliable observations of earlier churches of the missionary period, but it must be noted that finds of older artefacts from beneath the floors of several churches point to some kind of continuity of use at these sites. Data of this kind, however, is not direct evidence of ecclesiastical buildings having existed at the site. It may also be a question of continuity, for example, in choosing a suitable burial site. This would mean that, for example, older coins found under churches could be from a previous, early or pre-Christ-

tian, cemetery and in some cases also from the layers of a dwelling site. Individual finds from under churches are thus not evidence of older church buildings but of other use, in most cases a cemetery. Structures of church buildings would need to be found at these sites to prove the existence of older churches. Even where structural features associated with churches are not found, dated graves nonetheless indicate a continuity of cult practices in terms of use as a cemetery. This issue has been discussed for over 70 years and the material that has been obtained cannot be regarded as unequivocal (e.g. Cleve 1948: 80–82; Hiekkanen 2010: 335–337; Pirinen 1955: 58).

A later church could also have been built next to its predecessor. Owing to the intensive use of churchyards, there are few surviving structures, and other remains of these older churches are limited, meaning that dimensions, not to mention details of construction, cannot be unequivocally defined from them. It has not always been possible even to establish the precise orientations or locations of buildings, since the stones of their foundations could have been cleared when the new church was built, or at the latest when new graves were dug at the site.

Based on various tales and items of oral tradition, there would also have been early churches at sites that were abandoned later, and where no later construction took place. Memories of this kind can be reflected in place names pointing to ecclesiastical activities (e.g. Finnish microtoponyms with the prefixes *kirkko* [En. *church*], *kappeli* [En. *chapel*], and *risti* [En. *cross*]). Place names, however, are often ambiguous and by no means always refer to actual church buildings or even ecclesiastical activity. They may be associated, for example, with journeys to church, land owned by the church, or even large glacially transported boulders vaguely resembling churches that acquired mythical features. The dating of names is also difficult in many cases, and often completely impossible. Names, however, can allude to ecclesiastical buildings or cemeteries. This is still far removed from identifying loca-

tions, because completely abandoned church sites were often cleared into fields or pasture, and stone settings or other stone structures close to the surface could have been removed.

There have been some attempts at archaeological surveys of abandoned church sites as indicated by vague and indefinite historical sources, local tales, and place names, but systematic fieldwork in this area still remains to be done. In most cases, the localisation of churches has not produced the desired results, since the investigated areas were far too large, or there were simply no churches or chapels in the area (e.g. at Kello in Haukipudas, see Sarkkinen 1995). In some cases, however, this work has been successful (e.g. at Valmarinniemi in Keminmaa and Kauskila Kappelinmäki in Lappeenranta mentioned above; also Vehmaa Laitinen Kappelinmäki, see Taivainen 2006). In most cases, a church has been indicated by finds of bones associated with a cemetery or churchyard, detailed local stories or place names, or sometimes by historical maps. The discovered church buildings are often not very old, dating mainly from Early Modern Times or at the most from the end of the Middle Ages, although exceptions must also be taken into account.

## 7 Remains of belfries and stone fences

The remains of buildings interpreted as related to ecclesiastical activities have been revealed at two inhumation cemeteries dating from the transition of the Crusade Period and the Early Middle Ages: Myllymäki, Moisio, in Nousiainen and Ristinpelto at Sauvala in Lieto. These remains have not been interpreted as actual churches, and instead archaeologist Nils Cleve regarded them, with reference to comparative foreign material, as the remains of church bell trestles or belfries (Cleve 1952: 161–166).

Approximately 150 inhumation graves dating mainly from the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries have been excavated in 1902, 1949–1950, and 1973 at Ristinpelto (literally *Cross Field*)

in Lieto. Most of the dead were buried without grave goods and the cemetery can be regarded as completely Christian. The location had been badly disturbed by the quarrying of sand, but Nils Cleve's archaeological excavation in 1950 revealed remains suggesting a small building in the middle of the preserved area. Eight stone-lined postholes indicated a square structure measuring approximately 7 x 7 m (Fig. 6). Cleve's interpretation of a bell trestle or belfry has been accepted with almost no reservations (e.g. Purhonen 1998: 123–125; cf. Hiekkanen 2010: 332; Jäkärä 2006).

It has also been suggested that the structure found at Ristinpelto was the foundation of an early church, but it lacks all the features of the choir that was typical of the period. Although the sand on the eastern side of the area bounded by the postholes was exceptionally dark, no artefacts indicating a building were found at this location. Also local stories mention a 'nuns' church' at the site (Cleve 1952: 161–166; Jäkärä 2006). The name of the location *Cross Field* most likely refers to a memorial cross that stood there until recent years (Fig. 7).

Ristinpelto was also surrounded by a fence of piled stones, the remains of which can still be seen in places in the terrain (Cleve 1952: 160). A fence is generally regarded as the boundary of a Christian churchyard, but its association with the cemetery cannot be regarded as completely certain, since in later fieldwork, inhumation graves have also been discovered beyond the stone fence. Nor is the age of this structure known, and it has also been regarded as associated with later, completely secular, activity in the area of the village (Hiekkanen 2010: 333).

The other structure regarded as the remains of a belfry was discovered at Myllymäki in Moisio, Nousiainen. During the 1930s, archaeologist Helmer Salmo excavated the Myllymäki cemetery area on several occasions. It was the location of a Crusade Period inhumation cemetery that was in use at least until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to late cremation burials and finds of postholes reinforced with stones. Here, too, the postholes form a structure of almost square plan, mea-

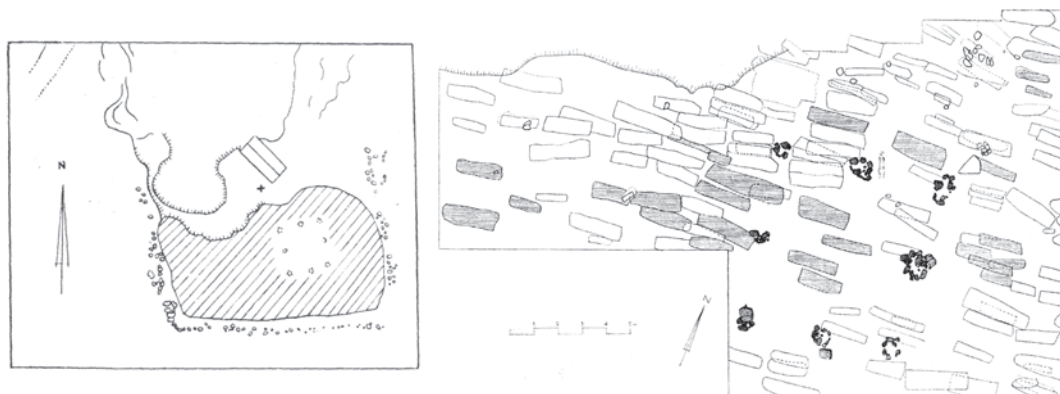


Figure 6. On the left is an overall plan of the cemetery of Ristinpelto in Lieto with the archaeologically excavated area marked with hatching. The fence delimiting the area can be seen on the western, southern, and eastern sides. The detailed plan on the right shows the stone-lined postholes in the middle of the cemetery. According to Cleve 1952: 162 Figs. 1 & 3.



Figure 7. The place name Ristinpelto, meaning Cross Field in English, most likely refers to a wooden cross that stood at the site of the inhumation cemetery in this location. According to legend, the dead will rise from their graves if there is no cross at the site. Shown here is the cross renewed in the 1990s at the location of the presumed belfry at Ristinpelto. Photo: J. Ruohonen.



suring approximately 11.5 x 12 metres (Cleve 1952: 164–165; Salo 2000: 118–134) (Fig. 8).

## 8 A changing view of matters – the church at Ristimäki in Ravattula

Based on the above cross-section of Finland's oldest churches and related history of research, the early church discovered in excavations at Ristimäki in Ravattula has provided – and will provide – a great deal of new material on inhumation cemeteries of the transition from the Iron Age and the Middle Ages and their structural features. Although this article presents the preliminary results of excavations, a reappraisal of the early history of the church in Finland will become necessary especially once the research project has come to an end.<sup>1</sup>

When the excavations at Ristimäki in Ravattula began, the site was not associated with any earlier observations, archaeological finds, or oral tradition indicating a cemetery – not to mention a church. The place name was the only clue to possible past activity involving a cemetery or a church. Finnish place names with the prefix *risti* (*cross*) are, however, ambiguous, since they can just as well refer, for example, to a junction of roads, a boundary marker hewn on a stone, or topographic forms. There are hundreds of place names with this prefix and no comprehensive study of them has yet been carried out from an archaeological perspective (e.g. Aspelin 1902; Ruohonen 2012).

Excavation results from the past few years show that the church at Ravattula was a relatively small wooden building on a stone foundation. It consisted of two interconnected rooms: a nave measuring roughly 6 x 6 metres in the western part and a smaller choir (about 4 x 3.5 m) on its eastern side (Fig. 9). The main altar was in the choir when the church was in use. The church was of the so-called narrow choir type, and it was in keeping with typical northern European models down to its floor plan, although local building practices were most likely followed. The church had a floor of planks and the walls may have been made with the corner-

joining technique. The possible threshold stones suggest that the door was on the long southern side near the south-western corner.

In addition to the dating and the narrow choir, a few other features of the church in Ravattula differ from later medieval churches in south-western Finland. These include, for example, its orientation, which is turned some 20 degrees counter-clockwise from east-west. This orientation corresponds quite precisely to that of the inhumation graves discovered at the site. In addition, the stone foundation was of natural stones laid without the use of mortar. Nor were there bricks in the structures or glass in the windows.

Large numbers of archaeological finds were recovered from the church site, but this material is quite one-sided. The actual building is indicated by hundreds of forged iron nails found within the stone foundation and near it. Individual finds from the church include a fragment of a padlock and an iron handle that were probably parts of a chest kept in the church. A few finds of clay beads and belt fittings may come from destroyed graves located next to the church.

A group of finds of broader interest to researchers consists of some twenty silver coins and coin fragments recovered from within the area of the church. The coins are concentrated on the eastern side of the nave and the western side of the choir space. The uniform area of finds suggests that coins may have been placed on the altar or the boundary of the choir as offerings, from where they dropped accidentally under the church; naturally, some of the coins could also have been dropped on the floor or placed on purpose between the floor planks by churchgoers. The coins identified so far are mostly from Gotland and Svealand (Sweden) and were struck between the late 12<sup>th</sup> century and the early 1220s.<sup>2</sup> No artefacts of a definitely ecclesiastical nature were found, which suggests that the moveable items and fixed furnishings were removed from the church when it was taken out of use.

Finds of burnt clay, hand-turned pottery and melted bronze are associated with human

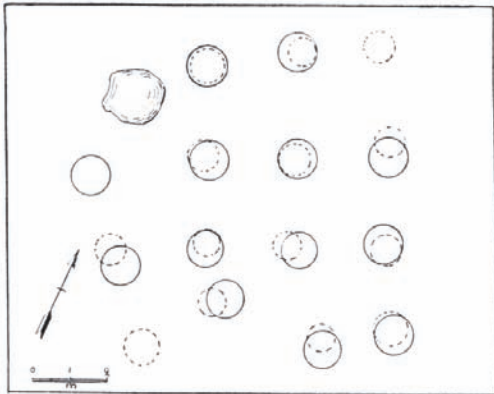
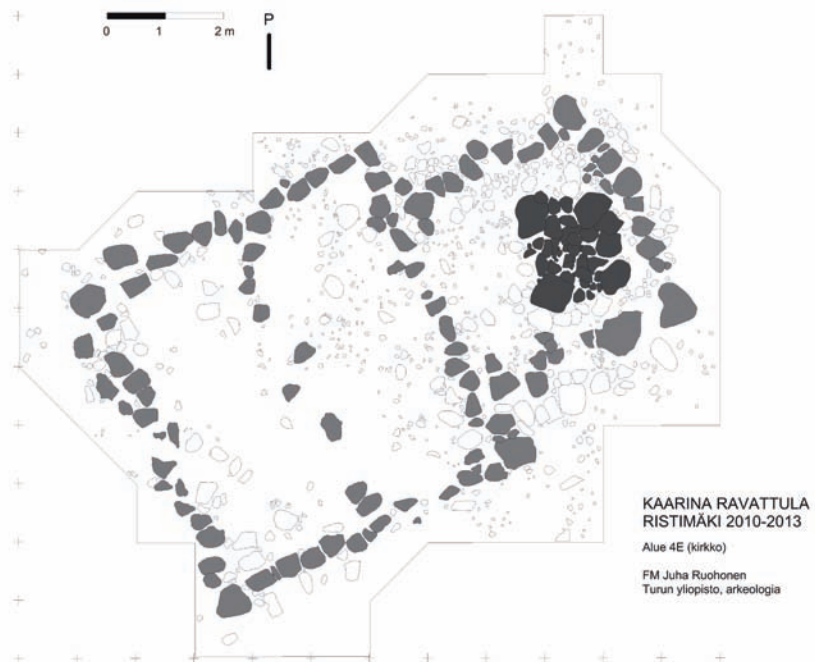


Figure 8. The foundation of a belfry at Myllymäki, Moisio, in Nousiainen. The stone-lined postholes are in the northern part of the inhumation cemetery at the site. Drawing according to Cleve 1952: 164 Fig 5.

activity predating the church at the site. The church was preceded by an older wattle-and-daub structure of light construction, which left several kilograms of fired clay daub. The building may be several centuries older than the church, and further interpretations relating to it are not called for at this stage of the research.

Figure 9. Plan of the church at Ristimäki, Ravattula, in Kaarina, based on excavations carried out in 2013–2014. Source: Ruohonen 2014.



The excavations at Ristimäki also revealed the stone foundation of a churchyard fence. This low structure of piled stones continued unbroken and surrounded the whole of Ristimäki hill, enclosing a churchyard over 1300 square metres in area. The archaeological data shows that the fence was built around the same time as the church. The discovery of the stone fence at Ristimäki also suggests that the above-mentioned fence at Ristinpelto in Lieto was of the same date as the cemetery.

An estimated two to three hundred individuals were buried in the sandy soil at Ristimäki. There are graves all over the area enclosed by the fence, but there were no burials under the floor of the church while it was in use. So far, only approximately one tenth of the graves has been investigated. They are Christian inhumations, with the dead buried in coffins made of boards or dug-out logs, sometimes wrapped in furs or cloth. The finds from the graves consist mostly of coffin nails and ornaments of dress and other small items. The men's costumes mostly included a belt buckle and a sheath knife, while the women's costumes included various brooches and often glass beads and

personal ornaments of bronze. Less common artefacts from the graves were an individual spearhead and the fragment of a sickle. The oldest graves are presumably from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, that is, predating the construction of the church and the fence at the site. Burials continued without interruption into the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which may be the date of some of the unfurnished burials.

## 9 New finds – new interpretations

The church built in Ravattula in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century was at no stage a private church serving a limited group of users or a parish church serving a large area, but instead a building consecrated to the use of a small local community. At this stage of the research, it is still too early to consider who built and maintained the church at Ristimäki in Ravattula, and when exactly this happened. It appears, however, that there were many similar churches with churchyards in the nearby region, but also more extensively in south-western Finland. The closest parallel, both chronologically and in terms of its excavated cemetery, is Ristinpelto in Lieto some 3 km upstream along the Aurajoki River. It is possible that there was an actual church at this site in addition to the belfry, but it may have been completely destroyed in sand excavation before the archaeological excavations. On the other hand, it is also quite possible that the structure interpreted as a belfry could be the remains of an actual church. The same applies to the above-mentioned building remains at Myllymäki in Nousiainen. There are also strong indications of a church in connection with the inhumation cemetery of Ihala in Raisio, dating from the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g. Oja 1960: 47–48; Vuorinen 2009: 211–213).

Ristimäki is an example of how the remains of early wooden churches can also be found in cemeteries that have no connection with churches in oral tradition. Numerous cemeteries of the period have been excavated over the past 100 years, but rarely *in toto*. The excavated areas have often been quite small

and central parts of the cemeteries have mostly remained unexcavated. In these cases, the discovery of churches built on light foundations has often been completely random.

Research on the oldest churches in Finland specifically involves the history of wooden churches. This places restrictions on both studies and the interpretations of results. There are plenty of stories and tales about old churches and church sites, but as long as there are no concrete and unequivocal archaeological observations of actual buildings, we must speak only of separate ‘imaginary churches’.

It depends completely on future research whether more early ecclesiastical buildings of the missionary period or the early 13<sup>th</sup> century will soon be found. The materials for interpreting such structures are of better quality than previously, while opportunities for systematic research are perhaps poorer. It would nonetheless be necessary to carry out reassessments and comprehensive research also beyond the researcher’s desk.

But what was ultimately the fate of the church at Ristimäki in Ravattula? Coin finds thus far and radiocarbon dates (published in Ruohonen 2013: 436–438) suggest that the church and its cemetery fell out of use in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, or by the middle of the century at the latest. The abandonment of the site can be associated with major administrative reforms of the period. In the 1220s, ecclesiastical organisation began to be established in Finland, including, among other measures, the founding of parishes. The system of parishes soon evolved into an administrative network to which the small local churches of the missionary period – which were probably quite numerous – were no longer suited. Divine services were moved from Ravattula to the new parish church, which was most likely built in the village of Nummi, which became the centre of the parish of Kaarina. The remains of the oldest church in Nummi have not been found, but it should be mentioned that there was also an inhumation cemetery of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries next to this small village, and a small part of it has been excavated (see Asplund &

Riikonen 2007). No new church, however, was built at Ravattula, and over the years details referring to the old church were forgotten to the point that only the place name Ristimäki (*Cross Hill*) preserved a dim memory of it. The name may refer to a memorial cross that stood on the hill of a type that is known to have been erected during the Middle Ages at the sites of abandoned churches and churchyards.

## Acknowledgements

English translation by Jüri Kokkonen (M. A.). The author gratefully acknowledges financial support for the translation from the Finnish Antiquarian Foundation.

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## Notes

- 1 The information given in this section is based mostly on the related excavation report (Ruohonen 2014) and the author's articles in *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 4/2013 (Ruohonen 2013) and *New Visits to Old Churches: Sacred Monuments and Practices in the Baltic Sea Region* (Ruohonen forthcoming).
- 2 The most common coin type belongs to Lagerqvist's group LLXX, traditionally dated to 1140–1225 (Lagerqvist 1970). A detailed publication on the coins is under preparation. For additional information, see Ruohonen 2013: 436.

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Proceedings of the Finnish-Russian Archaeological  
Symposium

Helsinki, 19–21 November, 2014

Editors:  
Pirjo Uino & Kerkko Nordqvist

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