

ARHEOLOOGILISED  
VÄLITÖÖD  
EESTIS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
FIELDWORK  
IN ESTONIA

2006

Koostanud ja toimetanud  
*Ülle Tamla*

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*Esikaas:* 2006. a Palutaja külast avastatud aardes sisalduv  
hõbedatud hoburaudsõlg.

*Cover:* Silver-plated penannular brooch from Palutaja hoard,  
discovered in 2006.

*Tagakaas:* Krõllid Palutaja aardest.

*Back cover:* Silver beads from Palutaja hoard.

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# ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT HELME CASTLE

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In August 2006, small-scale archaeological investigations took place at Helme castle. The work was carried out by the Museum of Viljandi and directed by the present author. The main aim was to determine the nature of the cultural layer, which has deposited in the castle, to obtain data regarding the existence of a prehistoric hill-fort at the site, and to date the construction period of the stone fortifications.

Until then, no archaeological investigations had been carried out at the castle. The main reason for the hypothesis about a Late Iron Age hill-fort at the site is the relatively small size of the plateau (110 x 70 m), and the shape of the medieval castle, the buildings of which follow the edge of the plateau. In addition to that, only a few hill-forts are known in the surroundings (Tõrva Tantsumägi, Pikasilla Leerimägi, Härgmäe, Vooru).

Data regarding the construction of the stone castle is also scarce. The castle is mentioned in written sources only in 1412. However, usually the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup>

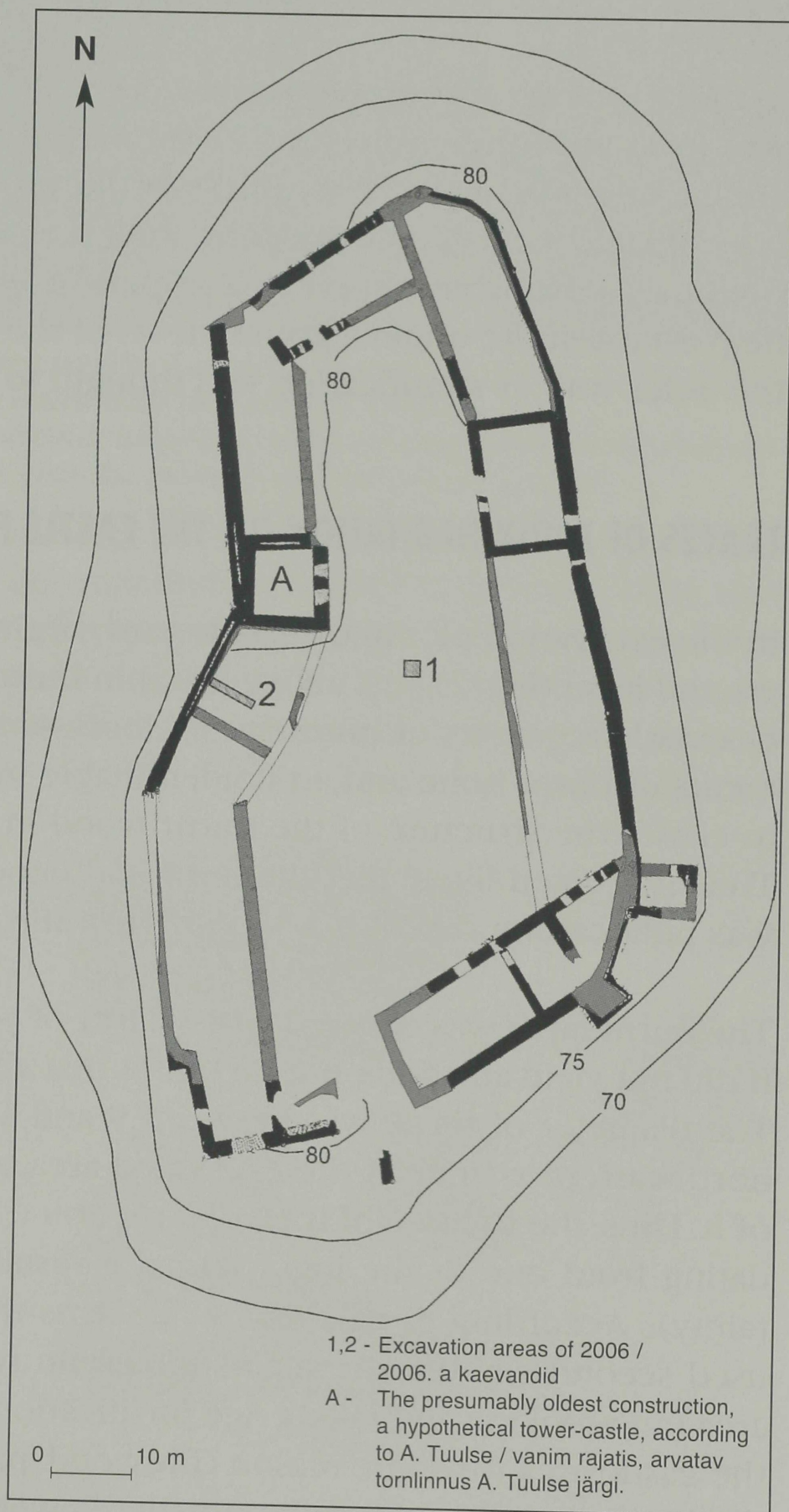


Fig. 1. Plan of the Helme castle of Teutonic Order (according to K. Aluve).

Jn 1. Helme ordulinnuse plaan (K. Aluve järgi).



century (Löwis of Menar 1922, 64) or the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Tuulse 1942, 77) has been considered the period of their construction. Only Tuulse has considered the possibility that the castle was not built in one stage, he suggested the tower in the western wall of the castle (Fig. 1) might be the oldest (*ibid*). Data of its later construction history is also scarce, only the period of its destruction is certain – in 1659 a Swedish officer Glasenapp blew the castle up with gunpowder when forced to retreat (Löwis of Menar 1922, 64).

In 2006 two excavation plots were erected (Fig. 1: 1, 2). The first one (2 × 2 m) was located in the castle yard, in the vicinity of the tower which, according to Tuulse, might belong to the earliest fortifications. The second excavation (4 × 1 m) was situated next to the western wall, in an area next to pit, which was interpreted as a probable test pit or a sniper's position during WW II. It was meant to help establish the original ground level of the hill, and the construction period of the outer wall, as stratification was thought to have been preserved in the profile.

## TRACES OF EARLY HABITATION ON THE CASTLE PLATEAU

In the excavation plot in the castle yard, virgin soil was reached ca. 105 cm below ground level (Fig. 2). Just above it, a thin burnt layer was traced, which contained charcoal, fragments of burnt stone, sooty sand, and a very small number of fragments of burnt bone and an unidentifiable iron object (VM 11161: 34). Attempts to clarify the structure of the burnt wood in the layer gave no concrete answer. Thus it seemed likely that the layer had deposited during burning. The charcoal was radiocarbon dated to AD cal 1210–1288<sup>1</sup> (with 68,2% certainty).

The burnt layer was covered with a layer of yellow sand, being up to 20 cm wide. It did not yield any finds, but on top of that, three parallel logs (?) could be traced. The diameter of these was between 9 and 12 cm, and they were located in the north-eastern corner of the excavated area, and continued to the north and east of it. Thus, the full size of the construction (?) could not be traced. A radiocarbon dating from one of the logs yielded a result cal AD 659–885<sup>2</sup> (with 95,4% certainty). According to that dating, it seems that at least one of the logs has been used secondarily, but it remains uncertain whether it originates from the castle area (a Pre-Viking and Viking Age fortification is possible), or has been brought to the castle area for some reason (firewood, pavement, etc). From the sand next to the logs, a few wheel-thrown potsherds were collected. The only rim sherd may

<sup>1</sup> 768±61 BP (TIn 2959), calibrated with OxCal v4.0.3.

<sup>2</sup> 1264±58 BP (TIn 2957), calibrated with OxCal v4.0.3.



be dated to the period from the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> until the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, according to parallels (Tvauri 2000, 104–105).

It can be concluded that the earliest strata which have deposited in the castle area, in the territory investigated, originate from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is by no means certain whether this dating can be applied to the

whole castle, but the existence of log remains from Pre-Viking and Viking Ages leads to the question whether a part of the castle area might have been used (fortified?) during that period. The narrower northern part of the castle could be one possibility. The question whether the burnt layer unearthed just above virgin soil originates from the construction of a medieval (wooden?) castle, remains also unanswered, as the area investigated was small and the nature of the burnt layer could not be determined. The almost total absence of finds from that period indicates, however, that the construction was not completed.

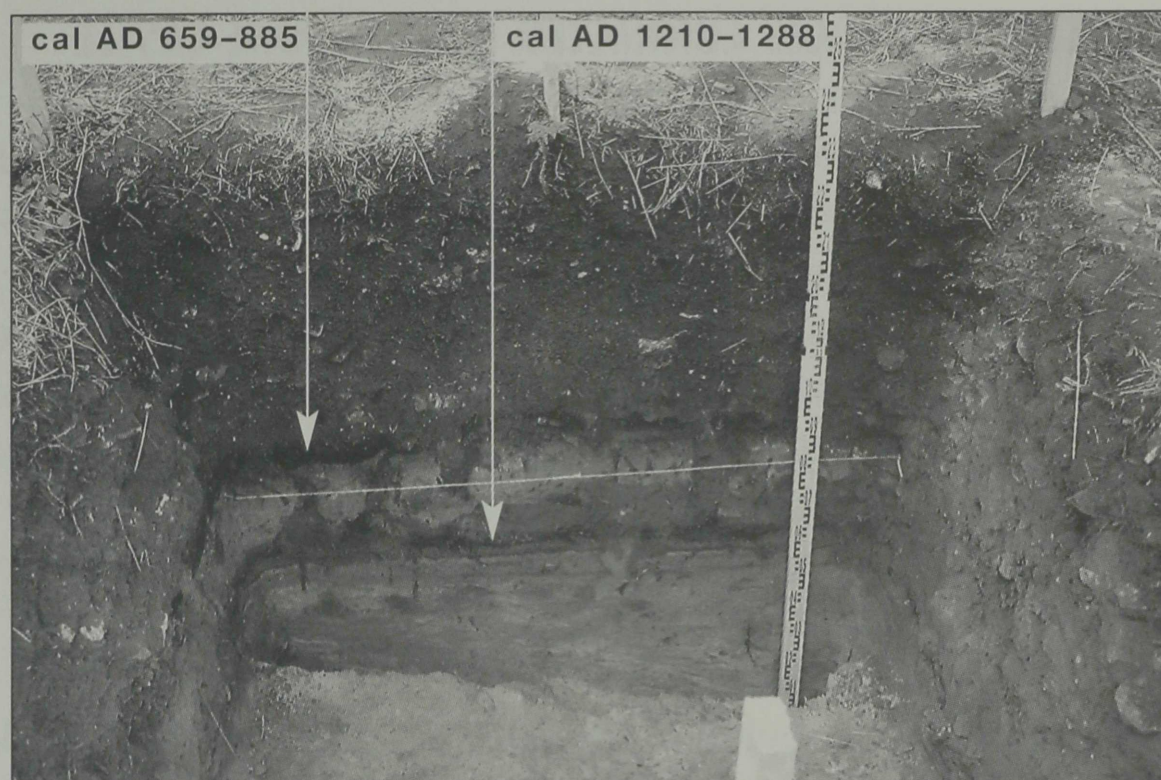


Fig. 2. Eastern profile of excavation area 1, with two layers of charcoal, dated with radiocarbon analysis.

Jn 2. 1. kaevandi idaprofiil, millel on markeeritud kaks radioaktiivse süsiniku meetodil dateeritud põlengukihti.



Fig. 3. Finds of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century from excavation area 2. 1 - whetstone, 2 - fragments of pot-like stove tiles and 3 - clay pipes.

Jn 3. 16. sajandi lõpu ja 17. sajandi leide 2. kaevandist.

1 - luisu katke, 2 - ahjupottide ning 3 - savipiipude katked.  
(VM 11161 : 57, 55, 54, 49, 45, 46, 47.)



## HABITATION TRACES CONNECTED TO THE STONE CASTLE

Above the second layer of burning, the cultural layer consisted mostly of greyish brown sand, which yielded four levels of small granite stones (8 cm in diameter on average). It seemed that the stones did not form well-placed pavements, but were rather used for levelling the castle yard, and placed quite loosely without any supporting sand level. Of the very limited finds (mostly fragments of window glass and iron nails), the fragments of pot-like stove tiles might refer to a 16<sup>th</sup>-century dating. The uppermost 20 cm of soil seems to have been formed (or placed for levelling?) during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as three bullets for guns, as well as modern glass sherds, were found.

It soon became evident that the second excavation plot was actually situated within a building. *Ca.* 170 cm from the ground level, an opening (embrasure?) was reached in the outer wall of the castle. The uppermost layers also yielded several levels of small granite stones, the placement of which did not show any well-planned pavement either. As the sandy layers were unstable, it became impossible to reach the floor level of the room, seemingly at least 0,7 m deeper than the lower edge of the embrasure. However, the uppermost layers yielded more numerous finds (Fig. 3), mostly from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A signet ring, with the stylised depiction of a bird on the shield, could be pointed out. Similar rings are quite numerous in South Estonia during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Valk 1991, 190–192).

As indicated by the layers of sand and greyish soil, from which the finds (fragments of clay pipes included) were collected, it seems that the room investigated had been filled during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It would seem more plausible to believe it took place before 1659, when according to written sources (Löwis of Menar 1922, 64) the castle was blown up by gunpowder.

## CONCLUSIONS

The investigations of 2006 unearthed a burnt layer just above the virgin soil, which may be dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, its origin, and a dating of the stonewalls could not be asserted. A log, dating from the Pre-Viking and Viking Ages, according to radiocarbon analysis, leaves open the possibility of a construction (fortification?) of that period, situated at the plateau, but somewhat away from the area excavated in 2006. Most of the depositions recorded originate from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.



### **Acknowledgements**

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## ARHEOLOOGILISED UURINGUD HELME LINNUSEL

Arvi HAAK

Viljandi muuseum korraldas 2006. a augustis esimesed teadaolevad arheoloogilised uuringud Helme ordulinnusel. Kahe 4 m<sup>2</sup> suuruse kaevandiga, millest üks paiknes linnusehoovis ning teine läänemüüri siseküljel (jn 1), sooviti saada ülevaade hoovikihtide ladestusest, samuti määrata kivilinnuse rajamisaega ning hankida infot võimaliku muinaslinnuse eksisteerimise kohta mäeplatool. Kirjalikes allikais on Helme linnust esmakordselt mainitud alles 1412. aastal, kuid varasemad uurijad on kivilinnuse ehitusajaks pidanud 13. sajandi teist poolt või 14. sajandi algust.

Linnuseõuele rajatud kaevandis (jn 2) ilmnes, et maapinnast 105 cm sügavusel, vahetult looduslikul aluspinnal on sütt, kivipurdu ning üksikuid põlenud luid sisaldav põlengukiht, mis dateeriti radioaktiivse süsiniku meetodil 68,2% tõenäosusega kalendriaastatesse 1210–1288 pKr. Põlengule kuhjatud liivakihil paljandusid kaevandi nurgas kolme põlenud palgi jäänused, millest ühest kogutud radiosüsinikuproov andis kalibreeritult tulemuseks kalendriaastad 659–885 pKr. Samast ladestusest kogutud 13. sajandi lõpust kuni 15. sajandi alguseni dateeritavad kedrakeraamika killud ning ülalesitatud radiosüsinikuproov ei luba nimetatud ladestust 13. sajandi lõpust varasemaks dateerida. Seega tuleb oletada, et mingil põhjusel kasutati ehituseks varasemat puitu.

Ehkki kivilinnuse rajamisaega ei saanud 2. kaevandi ebaõnnestunud asukohavaliku tõttu määrata, seostub enamik kultuurkihi ladestusi kivilinnuse eksisteerimisajaga. Nii linnusehoovis kui ka läänemüüri juures asunud hoones, mille sisemusse rajati 2. kaevand, avastati neli väikestest maakividest prügituskihti, mis ei olnud selgesti eraldatavad ega polnud rajatud ka liivapadjale. Kivide vahelt ja alt koguti mõned 16. sajandi teise poole ja 17. sajandi leiud: ahjupottide katked, piibuvarred (jn 3), aknaklaasi killud ning pitsatsõrmus. Seevastu keskaegne leiuaines oli äärmiselt napp, piirdudes kohalike savinõude üksikute kildudega.

Eelviikingi- ja viikingiajast pärit söestunud puidujäänuste (palk?) leidmine ei luba muinaslinnuse olemasolu Helmes täielikult välistada. Ehkki hoovikaevandis muinasaegseid ladestusi ei leitud, pole võimalu, et varasema elutegevuse järgi võiks avastada linnuseplatoo kitsamas põhjaosas või vastupidi, lõunaserval. Looduslikul liival paljandunud põlemisjäljed lubavad oletada mingit 13. sajandi puitrajatist linnuseplatool (puidust kindlustused?). Sama ajajärgu leidude peaaegu täielik puudumine lubab arvata, et toona linnusel ei elatud ning ilmselt polnud ka rajatised selleks ajaks veel valminud.