THE KOHTLA WEAPON DEPOSIT: PRELIMINARY RESULTS

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2013 metal detectorists Mikhail Stadnik and Eduard Kessel reported a find of tens of iron artefacts in Kohtla Vanaküla, Lüganuse municipality, Ida-Viru County. A month later archaeological fieldwork was carried out at the site (Fig. 1). With the help of local metal detecting club Kamerad and several volunteers a week of excavations resulted in a small trial trench and several hundred test-pits. From those hundreds of artefacts were revealed, making the Kohtla deposit the largest Iron Age weapon find in Estonia, which was also nominated as the find of the year in 2013 by the National Heritage Board. This article introduces the preliminary results of the excavations and post-excavation work and draws some tentative conclusions about the role and importance of the Kohtla deposit.

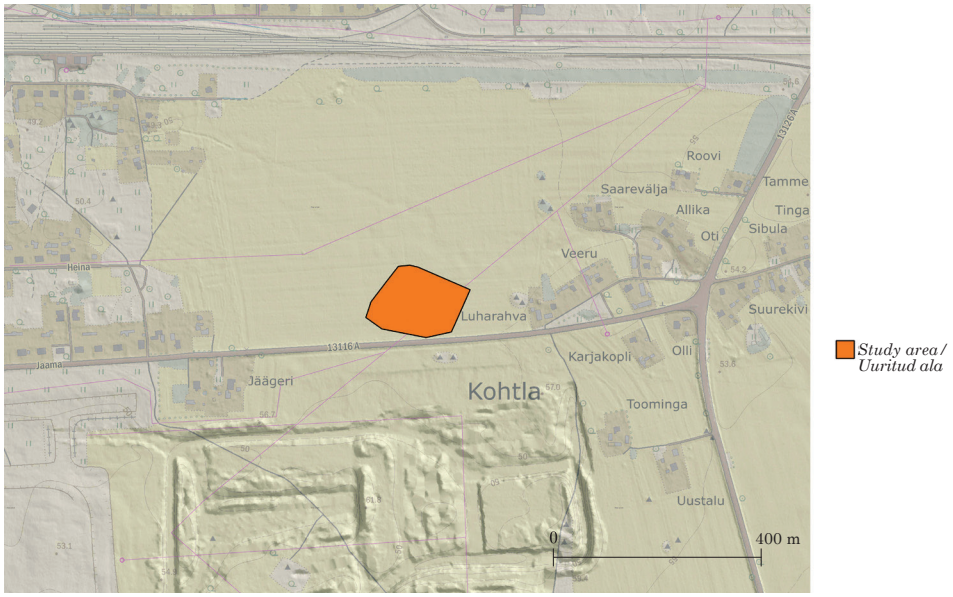

Fig. 1. Location of the Kohtla sacrificial site on the Estonian Land Board map.
Jn 1. Kohtla ohverduskoha asukoht Maa-ameti kaardil.
Map / Kaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet, Andres Kimber

FIELDWORK

The main goals of the archaeological fieldwork carried out after the initial discovery in September 2013 were as follows:

1. unearth and document the objects of the initial deposit still left in the ground;
2. document the context of the find;
3. estimate the total distribution area of *in situ* and scattered artefacts;
4. determine the general character of the site.

The fieldwork was carried out by 20 volunteering archaeologists and archaeology students from the University of Tartu and the National Heritage Board, and 12 local metal detectorists from the detecting club Kamerad.

We started with an intention of using a grid based survey method, which has been used previously for re-excavating and localising hoard finds in Scandinavia (e.g. Östergren 1989) and Estonia (Tamla *et al*. 2011). The plan was to mark down a larger area around the known scattered artefact findspots and check the area with detectors both criss-cross and diagonally in order to make sure that all the finds were discovered. Since the finder had located his initial finds with coloured sticks and those had been mapped during the preliminary survey by the team of the National Heritage Board, we had a rough estimation of the main distribution area of the artefacts (Fig. 2).

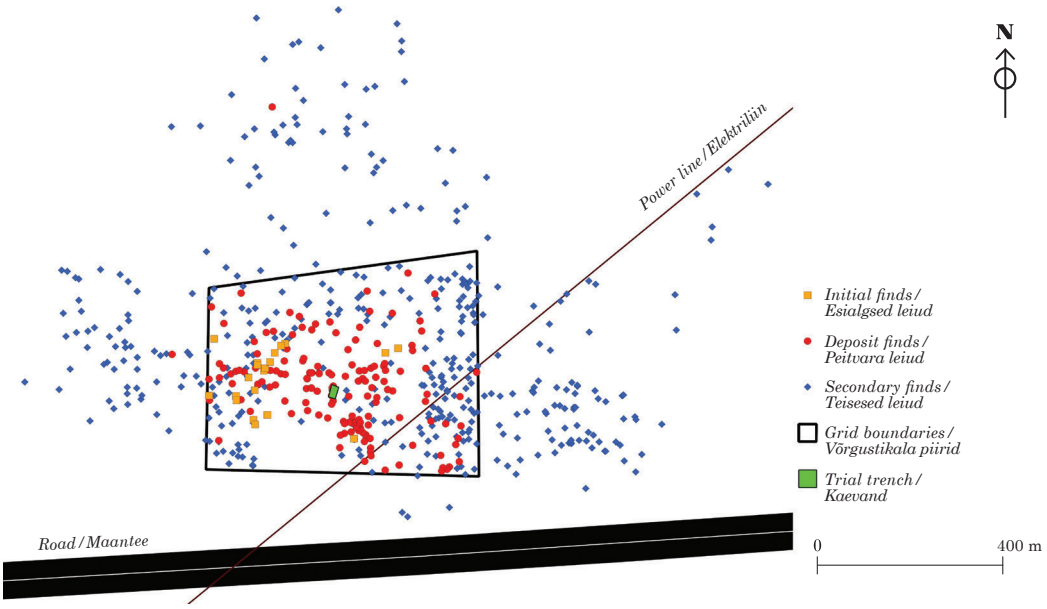

Fig. 2. Distribution map of test-pits and the trial trench excavated in 2013.
Jn 2. 2013. a välitööde käigus kaevatud prooviaugud ja proovikaevand.
Map / Kaart: Andres Kimber

A larger grid of 50 × 75 m was created around it (Fig. 2). Four detectorists coupled with an archaeologist were situated within a 10 m wide strip to start checking the area lengthwise. All the signals were checked with a test pit and identified in cooperation between detectorists and archaeologists. If possible, the finds were left *in situ*. Artefacts were located with a Trimble R8 GNSS receiver. Archaeological finds were photographed, described and removed; more recent metal objects were described and removed. Already in the first minutes of the survey it became clear that signals were unexpectedly numerous and we might be dealing with a much larger deposit than initially presumed.

In one particular region towards the centre of the estimated core area of the find the detector signals became particularly abundant. Therefore it was decided to make a small test-trench in the hope of locating the undisturbed core area of the deposit. Based on detector signals an area of 2 × 3.5 m was measured in. The upper turf layers and first centimetres of soil were removed with a shovel. The first finds were unearthed already some 10 cm from the ground level and thereafter the excavation continued with trowels. By the end of the first day we had managed to make a rough clean out of the first artefact layer of the deposit that included axes, spearheads and several sickles. It was evident that the objects were located in several layers and had been preserved in their initial position (Fig. 3). The excavations of the trial trench were continued in the following days.

Fig. 3. The trial-trench with the first layer of finds. View from the north-east.
Jn 3. Proovikaevand esimese leiukihiga. Vaade kirdest.
Photo / Foto: Andres Kimber

After completely unearthing the first layer of the artefacts we started to remove and document the objects. Each artefact was given its own ID number that was placed on it for detailed photographic documentation. Each numbered object was recorded with a total station, described and removed. This work was done by 1 m^2 grid at a time. After the removal of the first layer, the second layer of artefacts was cleaned out and the same documentation procedure followed. If the artefacts were in a fragile and fragmented, but identifiable position, they were removed in a block with soil in order to maintain their shape. Several blocks were also taken from the evident conglomeration of fragile artefacts, where several items laid on top of each other sometimes partly entwined. By the end of the excavations we had recorded over 500 numbers of artefacts in at least four layers in the trial trench.

At the same time with excavating the trial trench the grid area and its surroundings were continuously surveyed with metal detectors and digging test pits accordingly. It was decided already at the end of the first day that the grid method in its strict sense is not suitable in the context of this find. First of all, by the end of the first day we had covered only one third of the grid area and even that only lengthwise, which meant that in the unexpectedly high concentration of finds the method turned out to be too time consuming. Therefore it was decided to check the grid area only lengthwise to make a rough estimation of the distribution of the scattered finds ploughed out of the main concentration area unearthed in the test trench. Additionally, in the regions close to the test trench where the archaeological finds in test pits became very abundant and detector signals were dense it was decided not to intrude the surface anymore. Those signals might indicate artefacts left in the ground during the initial deposition and not scattered due to ploughing, as is most likely the case with the artefacts further away from the main concentration area. It is also likely that there is more than one concentration area of the deposit and the finds unearthed in a test trench form only one part of the whole deposit. Therefore, disturbing the context with single test pits without opening larger trench areas would damage the initial context of the artefacts still possibly *in situ*.

In the final stage of fieldwork when surveying the grid area lengthwise was finished, we also checked the field around the grid in order to estimate whether we have reached the edges of the deposit. Detectorists and archaeologists identified detector signals and all the items were recorded with the GPS, described and removed. Only two clearly archaeological items from the deposit were discovered outside the grid area (Fig. 2), which indicates that the main concentration of the deposited find is indeed located within the grid region, its central part is around the test trench and several artefacts have been removed from their initial position as a result of ploughing and other agricultural activities. As a result we were able to determine the total distribution area of the deposit and designate the borders of the site.

FINDS

The preliminary fieldwork in September 2013 resulted in over 600 working hours. Altogether 578 test pits were dug (see Fig. 2), from which 195 yielded archaeological finds. From the trial trench the total of 505 find numbers were recorded. However, it has to be emphasised that these numbers are only tentative and the exact number and

Fig. 4. Selection of iron artefacts from Kohtla. 1 – sickle, 2, 3 – spearheads, 4 – socketed axe, 5 – shafted axe.
Jn 4. Valik esemeid Kohtlast. 1 – sirp, 2, 3 – odaotsad, 4 – putkkirves, 5 – varreauguga kirves.
(TÜ 2309.)
Photo / Foto: Kristiina Paavel, Taisi Juus

classificatory groups of objects will be determined as a result of the currently ongoing post-excavation work. Additionally, since several artefacts were taken up in blocks, which are still to be opened in laboratory conditions, the final numbers of items might change slightly.

Despite those complications it is possible to give a preliminary overview of the objects concealed at Kohtla. The largest group of finds is beyond doubt sickles. The number of sickles totals over 200 (Fig. 4: 1) and they seem to belong mostly to the mid-1st millennium AD (Laul & Tõnisson 1991). However, due to the general character of this find group the state of preservation of sickles is the worst and fragmentation is very high. There are over 100 objects determined as iron artefacts without further details since it was difficult to determine those in the fieldwork conditions. The second largest find group is evidently spearheads with around 100 items in total whereas quite different types are represented (Fig. 4: 2, 3). Spearheads are also from around the mid-1st millennium AD including possibly some earlier examples (Tvauri 2012, 189ff). The third larger group is axes with over 70 specimens. It is worth pointing out that the vast majority of axes are the so-called socketed types, shafted axes (all with a narrow blade) form a clear minority (Fig. 4: 4, 5). All these axe types might be dated to the Middle Iron Age, including the Migration Period, rather than the Roman Iron Age (for comparisons see Lang 2007, 140–141; Tvauri 2012, 123–125). It is worth pointing out that the socketed types are not as common in Estonian archaeological material as the shafted ones (Tvauri 2012, 123–125), but the former type of axe is very widespread in the western and north-western Balts' region (Tautavičius 1978, fig. 63).

Regarding more exquisite finds two hoe blades should be mentioned. Hoes are rather rare finds in Estonian Early and Middle Iron Age archaeological material (Tvauri 2012, 99) and parallels to the Kohtla hoes are found in the Semigallian archaeological material dating from the 5th – 10th century AD (Griciuvienė 2005, 133).

Fig. 5. Selection of rarer artefacts from Kohtla. 1 – strike-a-light stone, 2 – head of the cross-bow fibula.
Jn 5. Valik haruldasemaid esemeid Kohtlast. 1 – tuluskivi, 2 – ambsõle pea.
(TÜ 2309.)
Photo / Foto: Kristel Roog

An interesting find is a sharp-pointed oval strike-a-light stone (Fig. 5: 1). Although this find group is more frequent in the Estonian Iron Age context, such finds are usually found as stray finds and in burials (Tvauri 2012, 88). The Kohtla example is the first of the kind documented in the context of weapon deposits in Estonia, whereas similar items have been discovered in the famous weapon finds in Latvia, e.g. Kokmuiža I and II, and Vecmokas deposits (Urtāns 1977, 138–145, 150–153). Another find with Baltic parallels is the head of a large bronze cross-bow brooch (Fig. 5: 2). Its central part is decorated with stylised animal head terminals and the side ends with poppy-head terminals. Such a type is not widespread in Estonian material and is characteristic to the western Baltic tribes, especially related to elite males, during the Middle Iron Age (Tautavičius 1996, 213–214), but also in first half of the Viking Age (Bliujienė 1999, 107–108, fig. 39; Griciuvienė 2005, 83). The brooch is thus particularly noteworthy, because chronologically it belongs to a slightly later period than most of the other artefacts in the Kohtla deposit. This brooch is so far also the only item in the whole find that does not belong to the group of weapons and/or tools.

DATING OF THE FIND

Regarding the chronology of the find one can first of all rely on the artefacts. For some objects, like sickles, our typology and chronology has several gaps due to small amount of such finds and their unreliable find context. In this sense, the Kohtla find provides an important input to the development of those chronologies in the future. However, for the other objects such as spearheads and axes the work has been rather elaborate. Based on similar finds in Estonia and its neighbouring countries the vast majority of weapons belong to the first half of the Middle Iron Age, i.e. 5th – 6th/7th century AD. However, there seem to be some later inclusions as well, e.g. the above-mentioned brooch. It is also necessary to keep in mind that some of the iron artefact groups have a very wide chronological sequence ranging to several centuries.

In addition to artefact chronology we were also able to collect some organic matter for AMS dating during the excavations. The samples were analysed at the Queen's University Belfast ^{14}CHRONO Centre, United Kingdom. Two samples taken from the

wooden particles under the final layer of artefacts gave a date of 1935±29 BP[1] and 1934±31 BP[2], cal 95.4% (2 sigma) 4–128 AD (relative area under probability distribution 1) and 0–131 AD (relative area under probability distribution 0.998) accordingly.[3] Thus the lowermost organic substance under the deposit is several centuries earlier than the overall artefactual material. However, it has to be kept in mind that these results give a date of when the particular tree was fallen and its relation to the deposited artefacts is indirect providing the time after which the depositional action must have taken place. One cannot exclude the possibility of long-term (re)use of wood and thus an old-wood effect might come under question here. We know that the wood itself is most likely birch.[4] Thus the old-wood effect of up to 100 years cannot be completely excluded, although unfortunately we could not determine the region of wood from which this sample comes from.

The other two charcoal samples were taken from the third layer of artefacts, at the same relative level with each other on the two sides of compact sickle-pair deposit, at the distance of *ca.* 10 cm from each other. Those gave the result of 1781±30 BP[5] and 1767±25 BP[6], cal 95.4% (2 sigma) 205–333 AD (relative area under probability distribution 0.809) and 210–346 AD (relative area under probability distribution 0.968) accordingly. Although with a very broad time span due to the flat calibration curve in the area, here too the dates are slightly earlier than the most of the artefact groups. However, being so well correlated with each other and found in the lower layers of the deposit in relation to the pair of sickles evidently deposited together it can be that we are in fact dealing with some earlier depositional practices and earlier items in the find as well. The latter is especially worth considering in the context of insufficient chronological sequences of sickle finds. Hopefully further detailed analysis of both sickles and spearheads sheds some additional light to their more precise chronology.

As a result of artefact chronology and AMS dates obtained so far it seems most likely that in the case of the Kohtla find we are facing a depositional site with long-term and repeated use. Its starting point might be somewhere towards the Roman Iron Age as indicated by the AMS dates. Most of the iron objects belong to the Migration Period and first centuries of the Pre-Viking Age. The most recent objects belong to the Viking Age. It must be emphasised that these results are only tentative and future studies of the material as well as further AMS dates will soon shed some additional light to the chronology of the Kohtla deposit.

FIND CONTEXT

Currently the Kohtla deposit is located in an ordinary field and dry land context that does not strike the eye with anything particular. However, a closer look at the surroundings and historical maps indicates that the area has been under serious land improvement and mining activities. The latter in particular has heavily influenced the environment in which the objects are now. Namely, it is evident in the historical maps that the area has been a wetland, a marshy area often flooded due to nearby, but now dried out rivulet. The earlier maps from the 18th century clearly map an active rivulet

[1] UBA-24557.
[2] UBA-24560.
[3] Calibrated according to Reimer *et al.* 2013, software CALIB REV7.0.0 (Stuiver & Reimer 1993).
[4] Identified by Regino Kask (EMU).
[5] UBA-24558.
[6] UBA-24559.

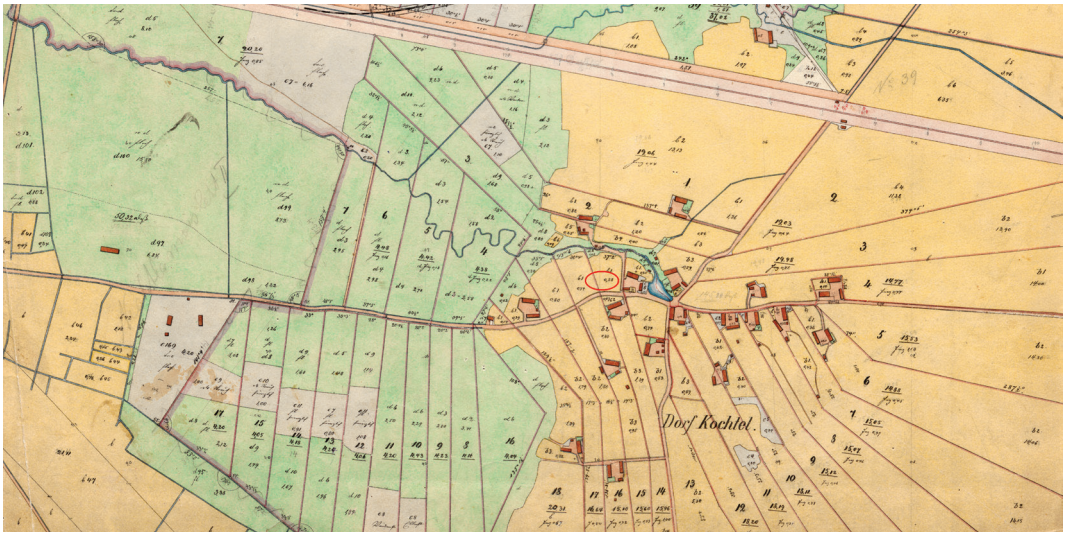

Fig. 6. A map of the area from the 19th century with the river and spring. The location of the deposit is marked in red.
Jn 6. Piirkonna kaart 19. sajandist koos jõe ja allikaga. Peitvara leiukoht märgitud punasega.
(EAA 3724-4-1599-16.)

(Fig. 6), which starts from a larger spring in the old village of Kohtla Vanaküla (Eng. Old Kohtla). The rivulet is still marked in the 19th century map and seen on Czarist Russia and later 1940s maps. Nowadays all that is left from the rivulet is its drained bed still evident in the Lidar maps. Indeed the toponym of the farm – Luharahva (Eng. Meadow farm) – on which the site is located also indicates its possible water-related character. Local older inhabitants also remember that as late as the first half of the 20th century the field used to be wet and often a flooded area that was very difficult to walk through.

The environment was considerably changed as a result of mining activities in the second half of the 20th century. Those works were carried out all around the site, the closest mine being just some dozen meters across the Vanaküla–Kohtla road. Also some drainage ditches were dug in the field area at a later stage. As a result, the water level in the region was disturbed and lowered considerably, the rivulet dried out and the water meadow turned into a solid dry field. Although currently there are no clear indicators of the location being a watery context, it can be presumed that the Kohtla deposit was concealed in a watery environment. The oldest data we have about the environment at the moment are Modern Era maps, but it is planned to start the environmental studies in the area to draw some further conclusions about the prehistoric conditions with the help of geology and detailed landscape reconstructions.

PRELIMINARY INTERPRETATIONS

The Kohtla find is not unique in the sense that the practice of depositing iron artefacts, with special emphasis on weapons, spreads throughout the Baltic Sea region during the Iron Age. The earliest Iron Age weapon deposits emerge in Scandinavia already in the Pre-Roman Iron Age with the Hjortspring find being one of the most famous

(Randsborg 1995; Crumlin-Pedersen & Trakadas 2003). In the following periods the tradition of hiding weaponry and tools in the watery conditions, mainly bogs and lakes, reaches its climax providing the famous examples of Vimose, Nydam, Illerup and several others in Denmark (Ilkjær 2003). In all of those, the use of the same location for several centuries can be seen. All these finds have been interpreted as remains of a one-time ritual activity, most likely a sacrifice with strong military connotations.

The same tradition can be followed in the eastern Baltic region from the 5th century AD onwards (Bliujenė 2010; Oras 2010). The most famous Iron Age weapon deposits in the Baltic countries are Kokmuiža I and II deposit (Urtāns 1977, 138–145) in Latvia. The first one with its nearly 1300 artefacts is so far the largest of the kind in the whole Baltic region. The eastern Baltic deposits follow the same trends as in Scandinavia: mainly consisting of iron artefacts, large inclusion of weapons, and concealment in water related environments, mainly marshy areas and bogs.

In Estonian context the Kohtla find has several parallels from the Middle Iron Age. The Alulinn deposit with its nearly 100 iron objects of which the majority are weapons is located just some kilometres from the Kohtla find. Another similar discovery is the Kunda weapon deposit also found in the north-eastern region of Estonia. There are also some finds in central Estonia like the Igavere and Rikassaare finds (Mandel & Tamla 1977; Tamla 1995). Since the aforementioned Alulinn and Kunda deposits include artefacts from a rather long time-period covering several centuries, it seems that this particular tradition of concealing iron objects in watery conditions throughout several centuries is a kind of a coastal tradition, characteristic especially to the north-eastern region of Estonia.

However, there are several aspects in which the Kohtla deposit is special and stands out from the rest of the iron artefact deposits in Estonia and the whole of the eastern Baltic. Firstly, it is by far the largest Iron Age wealth deposit in Estonia. Considering that our fieldwork was carried out in limited conditions in terms of both time and areas excavated, it is highly likely that there are more artefacts to be unearthed in Kohtla and the total number probably exceeds the estimated 500–700 at the moment. Secondly, the Kohtla deposit is a special case for Estonian and indeed the whole of the eastern Baltic archaeology, since so far all such finds have been discovered by laymen during agricultural activities or peat cutting. We usually have only limited documentation about the finding circumstances, context, detailed position of objects *in situ*, etc. This find provides a unique opportunity to excavate the deposit, sample its different context features and document the depositional circumstances in detail according to the most recent developments in excavation and analyse techniques. Since the initial fieldwork was carried out as rescue excavations and preliminary studies, it is planned to set up a larger interdisciplinary research project and return to the site in the following years in order to study the Kohtla depositional site more extensively as a problem-based research study.

CONCLUSIONS

The Kohtla deposit discovered in late summer of 2013 is the largest Iron Age wealth deposit in Estonia and the second largest of the kind in the whole eastern Baltic. The site is now a designated archaeological monument named as Kohtla sacrificial site

under state protection. It is a remarkable find for Estonian archaeology due to its rich find material and several rare artefacts, but also due to the unique situation where for the first time it is possible to excavate such a site using detailed and most recent documentation and analyse methods. Thus it also provides an excellent opportunity for developing specialist study techniques and methods for analysing similar sites, be it in Estonia or abroad, in the future. The find itself follows the general pattern of concealing iron artefacts, especially weapons, in water-related contexts as seen in the case of numerous other Iron Age weapon deposits in the eastern Baltic as well as Scandinavia. The Kohtla find provides important new and more nuanced information not only about the Iron Age ritual practices, but also foreign contacts, economy and new input to the development of artefact typology and chronology in the whole Baltic Sea region. Therefore the Kohtla find is a very important new archaeological discovery that interest archaeologists not only in Estonia, but across the Baltic Sea area and even further.

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KOHTLA RELVALEID: ESIALGSED UURIMISTULEMUSED

Ester Oras ja Aivar Kriiska

2013. a augustis avastas harrastusdetektorist Mihhail Stadnik koos Eduard Kesseliga Ida-Virumaal, Lüganuse vallas, Kohtla Vanakülas muinasaegse raudesemete leiu (jn 1–2). Kuu hiljem toimusid paigas arheoloogilised päästekaevamised, mille käigus tuvastati Eesti suurim rauaaegne raudesemetest koosnev peitvara, mis tunnistati Muinsuskaitseameti poolt ka 2013. a leiuks.

Välitöödel oli mitu eesmärki. Esmalt sooviti tuvastada, kui palju esemeid oli veel maapõue jäänud. Samuti sooviti täpsemalt dokumenteerida leiu konteksti ning hinnata peitvara juurde kuuluvate raudesemete levikuareaali. Välitööde laiem eesmärk oli täpsustada leiu üldist iseloomu ning tõlgendusvõimalusi.

Kokku üle 20 vabatahtliku ning 12 otsinguklubi Kamerad liikme abiga kontrolliti esialgsete leidude lähipiirkonda. Selleks mõõdeti esmaste leidude kontsentratsiooniala ümber 50 × 75 m võrgustik, mida kontrolliti detektorite abil ühes suunas. Signaali andnud esemed dokumenteeriti ning mõõdistati GPS-tahhümeetri abil. Lisaks jätkati esialgse võrgustikala pikisuunas kontrollimise lõpetades sellest väljapoole jäänud piirkondade uurimist, et kontrollida võimalikku leidude levikut ja määrata muistise piiride koguulatus kaitse alla võtmise eesmärgil.

Võrgustiku keskosas ilmnes eriti rohkete detektorisignaalidega ala, mida võis eeldatavalt pidada algseks peitvara asukohaks. Selle oletuse kontrollimiseks rajati kõnealusesse piirkonda u 2 × 3,5 m proovikaevand. Kaevandis ilmnes kokku neli kihti raudesemeid (jn 3). Leiud võeti üles kiht-kihi ja ruudu haaval, iga ese sai oma identifitseerimisnumbri ning need dokumenteeriti pildistamisega *in situ* ja mõõdistati tahhümeetriga. Kompaktsemad esemegrupid võeti üles ka monoliitidena.

Välitööde käigus kogutud materjali läbitöötamine ei ole veel lõpetatud, mistõttu on esitatud andmed esialgsed. Kokku tuvastati proovikaevandist ja üle 500 šurfist (jn 2) mitusada arheoloogilist eset, mille hulgas on ligi paarsada sirpi (jn 4: 1), üle saja odaotsa (jn 4: 2–3) ning üle 70 kirve (jn 4: 4–5). Erilisemate leidudena tuleb mainida kõplaid, tuluskivi ja ainsa ehetena suurt ambsõle peaosa (jn 5). Mitmed esindatud ehetest pole kohalikku päriolu ning nende lähimad paralleelid pärinevad peamiselt tänapäeva Läti ja Leedu alade arheoloogilisest materjalist.

Esemekronoloogia põhjal võiks suurema osa esemetest ajaldada keskmise rauaaja algusesse, s.o 5.–6. saj pKr. Nimetatud ambsõlg on mõnevõrra hilisem, selle dateering ulatub viikingiaja algussajanditesse. Esimesed AMS-dateeringud, mis tehti Belfasti dateerimislaboris, paigutavad raudesemete alla jäänud puitkonstruktsiooni aga 1.–2. saj pKr, eelviimases kihis tuvastatud söeosakesed 3.–4. sajandisse. Seetõttu ei saa välistada, et Kohtla peitvara on kujunenud kauaaegse ning mitmel perioodil aset leidnud tegevuse tulemusel. Kuigi tänapäeval on Luharahva talu põld tavaline kuiv heinamaa, siis varasemal ajal oli tegemist märgalaga. Sellele viitavad ajaloolised kaardid (jn 6) ja ka kaasaja reljeefkaart, millel on näha praeguseks kuivendus- ja kaevandustööde tulemusel täiesti kuivanud jõesäng. On tõenäoline, et nagu mitmete teiste sarnaste raudesemete leidude puhul, on ka Kohtlas tegemist kunagisele märgalale heidetud esemetega.

Kohtla-taolisi leide on Läänemere ruumis teisigi. Kohtla lähedalt on teada sarnased leiud Alulinnast ja Kundast. Eriti rikkalikud ja põhjalikult uuritud on samalaadsed, kuigi enamasti mõnevõrra varasemad relvaohverdused Taanis. Samuti kuuluvad Kohtlaga samasse ajajärku ning on oma üldiseloomult väga sarnased Läti Kokmuiža soiselt alalt linnamäe jalamilt leitud relvaohverdused. Arvestades nende leidude sarnast esemelist koostist, ajalist kuuluvust ja leiukeskkonda, on ilmselt tegemist laiemalt levinud muinasaegse peitmispraktikaga, mida seniste paralleelide ja tõlgenduste taustal võiks vaadelda kui omaaegseid ohverduskohti, kuhu heideti näiteks vaenlastelt ära võetud relvad jm väärisesemed.

Täname kõiki vabatahtlikke, kes Kohtla välitöödel osalesid. Eriline tänu kuulub otsinguklubile Kamerad. Samuti oleme tänulikud alljärgnevatele headele inimestele, kes andsid erilise panuse Kohtla välitööde edukaks toimumiseks: Mihhail Stadnik, Jaana Ratas, Kristiina Paavel, Taisi Juus, Andres Kimber, Kristiina Johanson, Tõnno Jonuks, Martti Veldi ja Liivi Varul. Abi ja heade nõuannete eest täname ka Kristel Kajakut ja Andres Vindit Tartu Ülikooli arheoloogia laborist, samuti Ulla Kadakat ning Kalle Merilaid Muinsuskaitseametist.