



# Pre-Viking and early Viking Age sacrificial place at Viidumäe, west Saaremaa

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## INTRODUCTION

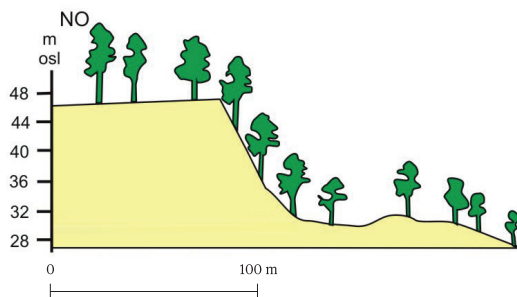
In spring 2014 archaeologists received information about a possible archaeological site from within the former Kihelkonna parish in west Saaremaa, at Viidumäe, where a number of archaeological finds, especially dress pins had been found. A surface survey trip there convinced us that the site probably had been an offering place. Unfortunately, the scientific value of the place had been seriously damaged by several groups of illegal users of metal detectors. Still, later inquiries have provided us with some information and photographs, enabling us to reach at a tentative interpretation. The pictures and information have been obtained through personal connections, and with no charge.

In May 2014 the site was investigated with the help of a metal detector. The works continued in summer of the same year, when small-scale archaeological excavation, as well as additional survey with metal detector, was carried out in the course of three days. Most of our detector finds were iron artefacts, although some bronze items were also recorded. Many more artefacts of bronze and silver had probably been found by illegal detectorists, as indicated by hundreds of small, filled up pits at the site, as well as by dozens of pictures we have seen so far. Finds by archaeologists are stored in the archaeological collections of the Institute of History, Tallinn University (AI 7281).

## THE LOCATION

Viidumäe is renowned as a nature reserve in west Saaremaa, and is, among other things, known for its far-flung and conspicuous moraine sea cliff on the island, indicating a shoreline dating from the Ancylus Lake period. The place is under protection as Laasma Mäepea wooded meadow, and is regularly tended by the team of Viidumäe Nature Reserve.

Nowadays a wetland stretches at the foot of the perched marine terrace (Fig. 1). In the Iron Age, a small lake may already have filled up the former sea bed facing the palaeo sea cliff.



**Fig. 1.** The former sea cliff at Viidumäe. Landscape profile (based on Ratas & Rivis 2002, fig. 20).

**Jn 1.** Endine mereklint Viidumäel. Maastikuprofil.

Drawing / Joonis: Marika Mägi

Viidumäe is situated at the distance of four or more kilometres from old, presumably pre-historic villages that are marked by burial grounds and archaeological finds (Lümända and Vedruka). The closest present-day villages are Liiva and Audaku 2 km from the site. However, on the top of the cliff there has been a single farmstead Mäepea, now used as summer house. East from the Viidumäe site about a 10-km-broad zone void of arable lands starts, separating Kihelkonna parish from the rest of Saaremaa.

There are thus only few and small arable lands in the nearest vicinity of the Viidumäe site, which is presumably the reason why no archaeological evidence was known from the surroundings so far. The location at the distance of a few kilometres from inhabited sites, as well as the beautiful and unusual look of the cliff with wetland and meadows at its foot suggest the interpretation of the site as a sacral place (see e.g. Bradley 2000). This presumption was confirmed by archaeological finds.

## THE DISTRIBUTION OF FINDS

On the slope and near the foot of the cliff light-yellow sand was found everywhere right below the turf. All finds had been stuck into the sand and came into light from the sand surface or a few centimetres below it. It suggests that the cliff, in the time when it was used as a sacrificial place, was not covered with trees and bushes as it appears today, but instead lay barren and sandy. The light yellow and steep cliff could, accordingly, have been an even more impressive site in prehistory than now (Fig. 2). The sand layer could be observed as far as 7–8 m from the foot of the cliff. At an even lower level, around the wetland, the surface consisted of gravel covered with a thin layer of turf.



**Fig. 2.** View to the sacrificial site from top of the cliff.

**Jn 2.** Vaade ohverdamiskohale järsaku pealt.

Photo / Foto: Marika Mägi

In 2014, 58 items of metal finds were recorded by archaeologists, dating mainly from the period 600–900 AD. Some items were also dated to the 20th century, and one, a 13th-century penannular brooch (AI 7281: 23), was found several hundred metres eastward from other finds, next to an old village road. Finds were documented and marked on a map. It should be noted here, however, that it was often complicated to measure the exact location or level of some finds, especially those that had been stuck into the steep slope.

All finds appeared out of any closer context, that is, without any detectable cultural layer around them. The only exceptions were two arrow-heads and a single nail found together with human bones (see below). Most finds were made of iron. Neither our investigations nor information gained from the illegal detectorists mention ceramics that thus seem to have been absent at the Viidumäe site. Most finds lay 10–15 cm from the present-day surface. An exceptional arrow-head (AI 7281: 48) was found in diagonal position in the depth of 25 cm, clearly indicating that it had been shot and thus driven into the ground.

Finds were concentrated in two clusters (Fig. 3). Such a distribution may have been caused by present-day conditions (as it was easier to use a metal detector in areas free from bushes or trees), or by the fact that mainly (smaller) iron items were left to the site. It was also nearly

impossible to study the rather big area of the site with the same intensity in only a few days. The clusters of finds can, therefore, be accidental, but may also refer to certain areas of ritual activity. The latter presumption is especially interesting, because of the number of arrow-heads clustered right around the finds of human bones.

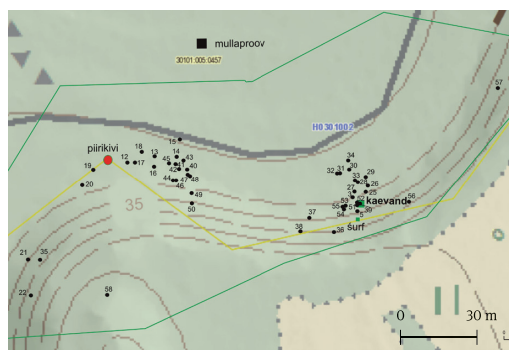
The area of the sacrificial place is estimated to have measured about 1.5 ha (Fig. 3). No cultural layer was detected anywhere. It seems, according to the number of pits dug by illegal detectorists, that most finds were concentrated to the western half of the cliff in this area.

The most common finds were arrowheads, represented by 26 items or fragments (Fig. 4). In addition, there were some fragments of knives, a boat rivet, and some spearheads. Two out of four spearheads (AI 7281: 6 and 9), both fragmented, were found next to pits, dug by illegal detectorists and had probably just been cast aside (Fig. 5). A fragment of a scramasax should also be mentioned among the weapons; according to the pictures we have at our disposal, more such scramasaxes had been found before archaeologists arrived.

Finds of bronze and silver were, according to our information, mainly stuck into the sandy ground of the cliff. The most conspicuous jewellery found by archaeologists were half a bracelet with thickening ends (AI 7281: 58) and the head of a triangular-headed pin, decorated in early Nordic animal style (AI 7281: 22). Other bronze finds consisted of chain fragments and probable belt fittings (Fig. 6).

## HUMAN BONES

Approximately in the middle of the investigated area, at the very foot of the cliff, we registered a cluster of uncremated, but merely fragmentary human bones from several individuals (Fig. 7). Gnawing marks of rodents observable on a number of bones



**Fig. 3.** Distribution of finds and trial excavations at the Viidumäe sacrificial site.

**Jn 3.** Leidude levik ja proovikaevand Viidumäe ohverdamiskohal.

Drawing / Joonis: Marika Mägi



**Fig. 4.** Arrow-heads from Viidumäe.

**Jn 4.** Nooleotsi Viidumäelt.

(AI 7281: 26, 38, 28, 37, 25.)

Photos / Fotod: Marika Mägi



**Fig. 5.** Spearhead found in one of the pits dug by illegal detectorists.

**Jn 5.** Ühest ebaseaduslike metallidetektoristide kaevatud august leitud odaots.

(AI 7281: 9.)

Photo / Foto: Marika Mägi



**Fig. 6.** Bronze artefacts from Viidumäe.

**Jn 6.** Pronksasju Viidumäelt.

(AI 7281: 22, 3, 40, 58.)

Photos / Fotod: Marika Mägi



**Fig. 7.** View to the trial excavation, where human bones were uncovered, from the north-west.

**Jn 7.** Vaade inimluude leiukohale ja proovikaevandile loodest.

Photo / Foto: Marika Mägi

indicated that the bones must have been laying exposed on the surface during some time before they were buried in a ditch. Human bones were also detected in some other trial pits in the same sector of the sacrificial site, suggesting that there originally have been several ditches or pits filled with human bones, or just piles of bones on top of the ground. We uncovered only one such cluster.

The size of the oval ditch filled with human bones measured 200 cm (NW–SE) × 50 cm (NE–SW). The uppermost layer of this area was grown through by roots of trees and bushes nearby. At a depth of 15–20 cm the soil turned sandy, and the first bones came into light (Fig. 8). The depth of the ditch had been about 40 cm below the surface at that time. Since some bones were recorded on top of the sandy soil right outside the ditch, it may be presumed that the bones originally formed a regular pile. The uppermost human remains had decayed completely or were removed by wild animals.

Bones of different individuals were found so tightly packed that the flesh must have decayed, before the bones were collected to the ditch. Although the find material at Viidumäe in general consisted of quite luxurious items (provided we include those artefacts only known and documented to us through photographs), no real grave goods came into light together with the skeletal material. The only finds consisted of a big nail, an arrowhead and a fragment of yet another arrowhead (AI 7281: 2, 51 and 39 respectively), resembling other arrowheads found in the vicinity. These items should accordingly rather refer to the cause of death, than to grave goods for the Afterlife. <sup>14</sup>C analysis from some of the bones gave a calibrated result 669–865 AD (with 95.4% probability).<sup>1</sup>

The skeletal remains of at least ten individuals were estimated during preliminary analyses of the fragmentary and mixed

<sup>1</sup> Poz-67813, 1260±30 BP, calibrated with OxCal v4.2 (Bronk Ramsey 2009); using IntCal13 atmospheric curve (Reimer *et al.* 2013).

osteological material. Initial morphological analyses and some occasional measurements of bones (Garmus & Jankauskas 1993; Buikstra & Ubelaker 1994; Bass 2005) demonstrated the presence of male and female remains. Most likely five of the individuals interred on the site belonged to males, and the presence of two female skeletons is also plausible. Amongst the osteological material remains of at least three children were found; the age estimations conducted so far indicate that the youngest child buried in the ditch died around the age of seven. Further thorough analyses of osteological material will specify the number of buried individuals and their age at death; also the preliminary assessment of biological sex needs confirmation.

The skeletal remains demonstrate some edged-weapon injuries. The most remarkable is a horizontal cut to a frontal bone, above its left eye orbit. The stroke came from the left side and a blade had stopped in the middle of the frontal bone. Another blade wound was demonstrated on one maxilla (upper jaw). The vertical slash of a blade (from top to bottom) cut a piece from the left maxillary bone; the slash plausibly also removed part of the nose. The third blade wound was found on the medial side of the right occipital condyle (occipital condyle of cranium is in contact with first cervical vertebra); the injury is considered characteristic to decapitation (Larsen 1997, 132; Symes *et al.* 2001, 421). There are other possible *peri mortem* injuries that need further investigation.

## PRELIMINARY INTERPRETATIONS

Viidumäe is particularly noteworthy because 8th – 9th century archaeological evidence on Saaremaa is very limited, consisting mainly of a few finds on the hill forts of Pöide and Asva, as well as recently excavated 8th-century ship burials at Salme, 20 km from Viidumäe. The latter is, however, interpreted as burials of warriors from central Sweden (Peets *et al.* 2011; 2013). In addition, some stone cist graves excavated in the 19th century by amateur-archaeologists were also dated to the 7th – 8th centuries (Mägi 2002, 125–126).

The distribution of finds over quite a big area at Viidumäe suggests a sacrificial usage of the site. This hypothesis is confirmed by the natural uniqueness of the site, the steep cliff and wetland. It is nearly impossible to imagine the cliff and wetland at its foot having been used for profane purposes, for instance for a settlement or a burial ground. The character of the site, lack of proper grave goods connected with any of the skeletal remains, as well as special injuries on some of the bones suggest that the human bones found at Viidumäe may in fact be remains of human sacrifices.

Human sacrifices near a big temple in Old Uppsala, central Sweden, are described by Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus. Although the earliest of these writings can be dated no earlier than to the 11th century, the authors refer to pre-Christian, that is, Viking Age society.



**Fig. 8.** Human bones in an oval pit, view from the north.  
**Jn 8.** Inimluud ovaalses lohus, vaade põhja poolt.  
 Photo / Foto: Marika Mägi

According to Adam of Bremen, nine men were sacrificed every ninth year, and their bodies hanged in a grove which was adjacent to the temple (Adam of Bremen, IV: 26–27). 11th-century German historian Thietmar of Merseburg mentioned that 99 humans, horses, dogs and other animals were sacrificed by Danes in Lejre in Zealand (Jørgensen 2014 and references). Although we cannot draw any direct parallels between ritual behaviour in pre- and early Viking Age Saaremaa and Viking Age Sweden or Denmark, the narratives can still be useful since they indicate that human sacrifices were known and practiced in adjacent areas by the Viking Age Baltic Sea.

Sacrificed humans, as well as single human bones have been found at several places in Scandinavia, where the theoretical discourse of sacrificial sites have been developed and concepts discussed since the beginning of the 1990s. Human sacrifices have played a role in activities detected in cult sites (or areas) connected with magnate's farms, the most famous of which might be Tissø. Human bones have also been found in sacrificial 'wells' at Trelleborg, by the cult site underneath the 10th-century fort (Jørgensen 2009; 2014).

In several cases, ritual or sacrificial places have been connected with steep cliffs. A sanctuary called Vi, at the foot of a cliff, is mentioned in Gutasaga, and is believed to have been situated in the present-day Visby on Gotland (Gutasaga, 2; Westholm 1985). Another well-known 9th – 12th century sacral place Arkona on the Vendic island of Rügen was described in some written sources (e.g. by Saxo Grammaticus, *Saxos Danmarks Historie*, XIV 39: 2). Arkona was an extraordinary high and steep cliff on sea-coast. Archaeological excavations there have uncovered several pits with sacrificed artefacts, as well as human bones, while in large areas a cultural layer was completely absent. No intact skeleton was found, yet some of the scattered human bones bore traces of violent death (Tummscheit 2006).

## SOME GENERAL REMARKS

Approximately during the same period, as the cult site of Viidumäe was in use, i.e. the 7th – 8th centuries, a remarkable alteration of the burial rites on Saaremaa took off. Right until the first half of the 7th century, there had been premeditated intermingling of inhumation burials accumulating in dead-houses of which the youngest known development of its kind was excavated at Lepna (Mägi 2005). The collective inhumations started to be replaced by individual cremations in stone circle graves at approximately the same time, the 8th century. The earliest stone circle graves excavated by modern archaeologists date, however, only from the 10th century (Mägi 2002, 39–44). Presuming that the warriors buried in Salme ships were foreigners, we must admit that we actually do not know which burial rites were practiced by the local islanders on 8th – 9th-century Saaremaa.

Stone circle graves that appeared on Saaremaa approximately at the same time, when ritual activities were practiced at Viidumäe, resembled a contemporary grave form on Gotland. The new grave form and burial custom coincided with changes in cultural spheres: the former intensive communication between Saaremaa and the eastern and south-eastern coast of the Baltic was replaced by close contacts between the islands of Saaremaa and Gotland, as well as with central Sweden (Mägi 2006).

Findings at Viidumäe offer several indications about the beginning of this cultural shift. Weapons that archaeologists found at Viidumäe in 2014 consisted mainly of arrowheads, spearheads and scramasaxes, most of them belonging to the same types as the so-called 'Scandinavian', or central Swedish, objects found at Salme. As they occurred together with

very local jewellery, they were probably also used by local Saaremaa inhabitants – in the same way as later the 10th – 11th-century ‘Scandinavian’ weapon types were completely adopted on the Estonian islands. Particularly remarkable at Viidumäe was the number of arrowheads – numbering 26 found by archaeologists – that seemed to indicate a sort of ritual, in course of which arrows were shot. Similarly, nearly a hundred arrowheads were found at Salme, and a great deal of those was found in close proximity with ship rivets. Showers of arrows had been shot at the boards of the ship, which has been interpreted as a sign of battle (Peets *et al.* 2013). However, an alternative interpretation could be that the arrows were shot in the course of a ritual, similar to the presumably local rituals at the Viidumäe site.

Worth of a closer look is also jewellery, notably some triangular-headed pins, one of which was found by archaeologists (AI 7281: 3). It was shaped as Viking Age pins, and its decoration resembled later leaf-shaped decoration, as it was characteristic to certain dress pins of Saaremaa mainly in the 10th century (Mägi 1997). However, the decoration of the early Viking Age triangular-headed pin at Viidumäe clearly represented Nordic Animal Style, although a comparatively simple variant of it. Photographs of other finds from Viidumäe suggested that similar early animal art had decorated several otherwise very local dress pins (Jets & Mägi in press).

The existence of similar weaponry and the adaptation of Scandinavian Animal Style art by local warriors suggest that the 8th century was the period when a shared culture within a martial social sphere, so characteristic for the northern Baltic Rim in later centuries, started to take shape. The monitoring of this process in Estonia is complicated due to shortage of finds and sites belonging to this period. The finds of Viidumäe are therefore of high importance, enlightening these formerly ‘dark ages’. However, the picture could have emerged as much clearer, if only all information to be gained from this exciting new site had been obtained by archaeologists right from the start.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## EELVIIKINGI- JA VARAVIIKINGIAEGNE OHVERDUSKOHT LÄÄNE-SAAREMAAL VIIDUMÄEL

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2014. aasta kevadel jõudis arheoloogideni teave Viidumäe arvatavalt juba pikaajaliselt rüüstatud muistise kohta. Koha inspekteerimise käigus leitud sajad kinniaetud augud ning viimaste lähikonnast saadud peamiselt rauast leiud osutasid, et tõenäoliselt oli tegu 7.–9. sajandisse kuuluva ohverdamiskohaga. Lisaks sellele, et kusagil polnud võimalik tuvastada kultuurkihti, on koht ka looduslikus mõttes ebataavaline – järsk vana klint, mille jalamil praegugi veel liigniiske ala, võimalik, et kunagine järv.

2014. aastal võeti Viidumäel ette väikeseulatuslikud proovikaevamised ning ala uuriti metallidetektoriga. Saadi 58 leidu (AI 7281). Lisaks õnnestus hankida rida fotosid ilmselt Viidumäelt pärit leidudest, kuigi leide pidi tegelikult olema kordades rohkem.

Viidumäe lähiumbruses puuduvad ulatuslikumad põllumaad; vanad, arheoloogiliste muististega ümbritsetud külad Lümanda ja Vedruka jäävad vähemalt nelja kilomeetri kaugusele. Viidumäest ida suunas algab u 10 km laiune viljatute maade vöönd, mis eraldab Kihelkonna kihelkonda ülejäänud Saaremaast. Muinasajal oli seega tegu asustamata või väga vähese asustusega alaga, kust mingeid arheoloogilisi leide seni teada polnud.

Enamik leide tuli välja kas otse järsaku pealt või selle jalamilt. Järsakul algas kõikjal tänapäevasesst maapinnast 15–20 cm allpool hele liiv, mille peal või milles mõne cm sügavusel leiud paiknesidki. Võib arvata, et koha kasutusajal, kui sellele torgati ohverdatavaid esemeid, oli järsak paljas ja liivane ning seega veelgi imposantsem kui tänapäeval.

Enamik värvilisest metallist leide, otsustades kinniaetud aukude järgi, oli tulnud järsaku pealt kallakult. Järsaku jalamil leidis peamiselt väikesi rauast esemeid, eelkõige nooleotsi, mis ilmselt polnud metallidetektoristide huvi äratanud. Saadi ka nelja odaotsa katked, neist kaks juba lahti kaevatud august või selle kõrvalt. Lisaks võib mainida skramasaksi (üheteralise mõõga) tükki. Pronksleidudest on märkimisväärseimad kolmnurkpeaga nõela pea ja jämenevate otstega käevõru poolik. Tähelepanu väärib ka keraamika täielik puudumine.

Umbes leidude levikuala keskel järsaku jalamil paljandus inimluudega tihedalt täidetud lohk mõõtmatega 200 × 50 cm, mille sügavus oli 40 cm omaaegsest maapinnast. Luud olid kogutud lohku ja selle peal tõenäoliselt olnud kuhja juba luutükkidena. Mõnedel luudel olid jälgitavad näriliste hambajäljed. Igasugused panused luude juures puudusid, kuid leiti kaks nooleotsa ja üks suur raudnael. <sup>14</sup>C analüüsi dateeris luud kalendriaastatesse 669–865.

Esialgne fragmentaarse ja segatud luumaterjali morfoloogiline ja osteomeetriline analüüs näitas, et nende hulgas oli vähemalt viie mehe, kahe naise ja kolme lapse säilmed. Mõnedelt luudelt leiti surmaaegseid lõiketeraga tekitatud vigastusi. Kõige märkimisväärsem vigastus oli ühe laubaluu vasakul pool: horisontaalne lõök oli tabanud pead vasakult, lõikudes laubaluusse vasaku silmaava kohal; tera oli peatunud laubaluu keskkoahas umbes ninajuure kohal. Teine jälgitav vigastus oli põhjustatud lõiketera vertikaalse suunaga löögist, mis oli tabanud libamisi ülalõualuu vasakut poolt. Tõenäoliselt oli lõök eemaldanud nina või vähemalt osa ninast. Kolmandal luukatkel oli näha lõiketeraga tekitatud vigastus kuklaluu paremal põndal (kuklaluu põnt on otsees kontaktis esimese kaelalülga). Sellist vigastust seostatakse tavaliselt pea maha raiumisega. Edaspidise põhjalikuma analüüsi käigus ilmneb tõenäoliselt rohkem surmaaegseid vigastusi.

Koha kontekst ja seni analüüsitud säilmed võimaldavad oletada, et tegu oli inimohverdustega. Breemeni Aadam on Vana-Uppsala viikingiaegse templi juures kirjeldanud pidustusi, mille käigus iga üheksa aasta järel ohverdati muuhulgas üheksa meest, kelle kehad riputati puude okstele kõdunema. Lejre ohvrikohal olevat 11. sajandi allikate teatel ohverdatud iga üheksa aasta järel koguni 99 inimest. Mitmetest rituaalsetest kohtadest Skandinaavias on leitud neid andmeid kinnitavaid ohverdatud inimesi või üksikuid inimluid.

Mitmel pool on ohverdamiskohad olnud seotud järsakute ja klindiga. Eriti väärib tähelepanu vendide 9.–12. sajandi ohverduskoht ja tempel Arkonas Rügeni saarel, kus kultuurkiht puudub, siit-sealt on aga lohku-dest leitud nii esemeid kui ka tapetud inimeste luid.

Viidumäe ohverduskoht on eriti märkimisväärne selle poolest, et kuulub perioodi, millest Saaremaal muistised peaaegu puuduvad. 7. sajandi esimesel poolel matsid muistised saarlased oma surnuid veel kollektiivhaudadesse-surnumajadesse, kus eri inimeste luude tükid olid täielikult segamini. Umbes samal ajal hakkas arvatavalt aga levima ka uus, Ojamaa-pärane matusekombestik, mis nägi ette individuaalsed põletusmatused kiviringkalmetes. Varasemad Läänemere idakalda ranna-alade vahelised kultuurisidemed asendusid tihedate kontaktidega Saaremaa, Ojamaa ja Kesk-Rootsi vahel.

Viidumäe leiuvaines osutab selle protsessi algusele. Siit saadud relvad, eriti noole- ja odaotsad, kuuluvad samadesse tüüpidesse, mis Kesk-Rootsis või ka näiteks 8. sajandi laevmatustes Salmes. Erilist tähelepanu

väärib Viidumäelt leitud kolmnurkpeaga nõel, mis kuulub läbinisti kohalikku tüüpi, kuid on kaunistatud varase Skandinaavia loomornamendiga. Fotode järgi otsustades oli taolisi nõelu Viidumäel teisigi. Leiukoht osutab seega, et peamiselt sõjamehesfääri hõlmav Eesti rannikukultuuri skandinaavistumine, mis on arheoloogilises materjalis selgelt jälgitav alates 10. sajandist, sai alguse juba hiljemalt 8. sajandil.