

Small-scale excavation of Alatskivi hill fort

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INTRODUCTION

On the northern bank of Alatskivi Mõisajärv, earlier Alatskivi River, lies a hill that is state protected as a hill fort (No. 12767 in National Registry of Cultural Monuments; Fig. 1). In 2017, archaeological trial excavations were conducted there that revealed new information about that site. This article describes the site and its surrounding landscape in the light of the new data gathered during the excavation.

An alternative hypothesis about the hill fort in Alatskivi will be given in this article. For that purpose written sources and historical maps of the area will be described, analysed and combined with the results of the archaeological excavations of Alatskivi hill fort in 2017. Some landscape surveys of the closest vicinities of the hill fort were also conducted to receive a better understanding of the 17th century estate landscape of this area.

It should be noted that the term *hill fort* is used for the site under discussion, because it is under heritage protection as a hill fort, but the actual function of the site is unclear.



Fig. 1. Map of the hill fort and the closest vicinity mentioned in the article. Red circle: Alatskivi hill fort, yellow circle: old estate/Vanamõisa site, lilac circle: present day new estate, blue circle: Peatskivi Iron Age hill fort.

Jn 1. Linnamäe ja selle lähiümbruse kaart. Punane ring: Alatskivi linnamägi, kollane ring: vana mõisakoht/Vanamõisa katastriüksus, lilla ring: uus e tänapäevane mõis, sinine ring: rauaaegne linnamägi Peatskivil.
Map / Kaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet, additions / täiendused: Krista Karro

ALATSKIVI IN WRITTEN SOURCES UP TO THE 17TH CENTURY

Alatskivi is the central settlement unit in the former Kodavere parish (see e.g. Karro 2010). The best agricultural soils of the area can be found in the villages to the west and north-west from Alatskivi: Peatskivi, Päiksi, Kuningvere, which explains the continuous existence of the centre in that area during the Iron Age and historical times. The chapel was also established in Alatskivi in the 17th century, but the parish church was in Kodavere settlement unit at least in the 15th century (1443) (Stryk 1877, 70; Ederma & Jaik 1939; Kodres 1999), maybe even earlier. According to Stryk (1877, 71) a chapel was in Alatskivi already during the era of the bishopric of Tartu. The parish and the church were then named *Kotever*.

Alatskivi became the location of what is believed to have been the oldest estate of Kodavere parish. The first mentioning of this estate was in 1601 as *Allesskiue* (Roslavlev 1967, 8). Before that, Kodavere parish is believed to have been called by the name of Soopoolitse and its derivations *Soblitz*, *Sobolitz*, etc. (Tarvel 1968; Roslavlev & Salo 2007). However, the usage of that place-name is complicated and confusing. The first Swedish land audit from 1601 (Roslavlev 1967) already mentions Alatskivi, but the one from 1584 does not mention any estates at all in that area, including Soblitz or its derivates.

Still, it seems to come up in several publications that Alatskivi estate was named Soblitz in the 16th century (e.g. Hagemeister 1837, 123-124; Pirang 1930, 39; Ligi 1961, 355), but the source of this information is rather vague. Namely, Axel von Gernet (1978 (1895), 14–15) mentioned that the bishop of Tartu already distributed land for estates, but no place names were recorded. Pirang (1930, 39, see also Rumma et al. 1925, 199) has written that Alatskivi estate was initially connected to Elistvere estate (probably had the same owner), but was nationalised and added to the estate of Warbeck (Uue-Kastre) under the Polish power (see also Stryk 1877, 71). After the area was connected with the Swedish kingdom, the estate was rented out to one of the officials of the Swedish king in 1627. This story is repeated with small differences in many sources. However, according to Roslavlev there was no estate in that area before 1601, just a watermill in a place called *Alaminski* in 1582, which he considers to be later Alatskivi. Of course, there is always a possibility that the medieval estate was destroyed in the Livonian War (1558–1583) and did not exist during the Polish times any more (oral remark by H. Valk(TÜ)). In 1519, dorff Allenkull under Seplisz has been mentioned, but it seems to be a name of a village rather than an estate (RA, EAA.5392.1.41). The only publication that refers to Alatskivi as an estate (Gut), is Hagemeister (1837, 123), but the mentioning is more like an introductory sentence to the forthcoming genealogical narrative and lacks a source reference. Therefore, combining the information from different publications, it is possible that there was initially a village and a watermill in Alatskivi, and these belonged to Elistvere estate at that time. After the beginning of the 17th century and the Swedish rule an estate of Allesskiue has been mentioned (Roslavlev 1967), and this is probably the predecessor of the estate that we know of, but on the opposite side of the river, on the same side as the hill fort excavated in summer 2017.

The quoted sources also reveal that the original estate on the northern bank was divided between two owners in the middle of the 17th century (Rumma *et al.* 1925, 199), which probably caused the establishment of the new estate on the southern bank. All that was finally left of the old estate was the name of the cadastre unit $-Vanam\tilde{o}isa$ – 'the old estate'.

¹ The materials of Oleg Roslavlev, who has researched and published Polish and Swedish land audits, were consulted in Estonian National Archives, because Polish materials from the 16th century concerning that area were lacking from Roslavlev's publications.

According to the maps, the northern bank of the river was in use as a horse paddock (*häst haga* on the 1688 map, Fig. 2). The top of the hill seems to have been used as a field. A drawing by Johann Christoph Brotze (Hein 2006, 358)² also shows that there was a field and a well in 1800.

NATURAL CONDITIONS OF THE ALATSKIVI AREA

It seems that the settlement centre of Alatskivi has been more or less at the same place throughout the Iron Age. It has been closely connected to the Alatskivi River and connected lakes in the area. The river is small but has played an important role through the history of the area. Its headspring is situated northeast of Kokora, which was also a separate estate from the 18th century, then it continues to Lake Mustjärv, passes the prehistoric (i.e., 11th-12th-century) hill fort in Peatskivi and flows into Lake Peipsi north from Rootsiküla. The river was impounded probably in the 16th century for the watermill to work. In the 18th and following centuries the lake also served as the central lake of the estate park. The lake bottom has been deepened, which makes it quite hard to say where exactly the original riverbed was.



Fig. 2. Alatskivi in 1688. Fragment of the 1688 map. Red circle: Alatskivi hill fort, yellow circle: old estate / Vanamõisa, lilac circle: new estate.

Jn 2. Alatskivi 1688. aastal. Fragment kaardist. Punane ring: Alatskivi linnamägi, kollane ring: vana mõisakoht / Vanamõisa katastriüksus, lilla ring: uus mõis. Map / Kaart: RA, EAA.308.2.76, p. 1 Additions / Täiendused: Krista Karro

The Iron Age centre lied in Peatskivi next to the Alatskivi River, which is about one kilometre northwest from the present Alatskivi. Peatskivi hill fort has been excavated in the 1960s and 1970s, and according to the results, most of the find material dates back to the 11th century, the defence ramparts were also built at the end of the first or the beginning of the second millennium. The hill fort was neglected in the 12th century (Aun 1974). The field to the south of the hill fort was also used for some kind of human activity, probably as a market place. It may have been possible to approach the Peatskivi site from Lake Peipsi by boat.

Climatic conditions must have radically changed the amount of water in the Alatskivi River. Presently we see a small river in a deep bed, but there was probably more water in the 12th century, even as much as sufficient for river boats (Teigelake 2003). It has also been established that the climate cooled quite rapidly around the 12th century (Sillasoo *et al.* 2009), which played an important role concerning the local routes of communication. If it was impossible to reach Peatskivi hill fort along the Alatskivi River after the 12th century, it was neglected. At first sight, it seemed that a new hill fort was established in Alatskivi.

² Brotze claims that the hill fort present in the drawing is the hill fort of Peatskivi, which is a few kilometres upstream the Alatskivi River. However, considering the setting of the plateau of both sites, it is quite clear that the hill fort on the drawing of Brotze is Alatskivi hill fort, the one in the heart of the Alatskivi estate. There is nothing reminiscent of a well on the plateau of the hill fort in Peatskivi.

ALATSKIVI HILL FORT

First impressions of the characteristics and location of Alatskivi hill fort referred to the assumption that this was the location of a new Late Iron Age / Medieval (13th–14th century) centre and/or a trading site. According to historical maps (RA, EAA.308.2.68, p. 1) the estate was earlier on the northern bank of the Alatskivi River and moved to the southern bank some time later, which was probably about the time when the part of the river passing it was turned into a lake.

The hill fort has been mentioned in several manuscripts and publications (e.g. Stackelberg 1845; collection of Ado Grenzstein's manuscripts (EKLA f. 38, m. 10, p. 291); Tiitsmaa 1921 and others: see Tõnisson 2008, 294). The hill fort is 9–10 m high, surrounded by a ditch from the south and east (around 0.5-5 m deep, 3-7 m wide), which at first sight seems to be manmade. However, the depth of the ditches depends on the height of the land forms around the hill fort. In places where siding land forms are low, the ditch also is about 0.5-1 m deep from the lower side, while the other slope of the ditch is much higher, as high as the hill fort itself. The slopes of the hill fort are fairly regular. There are a number of large rocks in the slopes, randomly located. The measurements of the top are 70×40 m (for the measurements and description see also Tõnisson 2008, 293-294). In 1975 a small-scale excavation was done on the western edge of the plateau, where a tiny piece of pottery was found (AI 4842). The piece is of a small undecorated wheel-made vessel, which is of very typical local type of ceramics (same type as the one that was OSL-dated, see below).

There are several large holes on the hill top. The biggest in diameter is in the north-western corner (hole 1). It is of a slightly rectangular shape with roundish corners, about 10×15 metres. Its slopes are covered in stones of 10-20 cm in diameter. It seems that the stones have been placed there to stop the slopes from eroding. The second biggest is on the southern edge next to a present pathway leading off the hill (hole 2). There are other smaller and lower holes on the edge of the hill. It is possible that the smaller holes were dug there in the 20th century to search for treasures, but hole 1 and hole 2 have been on the hill longer than the others, because there is a thicker erosion layer at the bottom. Holes 1 and 2 will be analysed in more detail below.

About 7 metres from the western edge a tree was up-rooted during a storm, and dark charcoal-mixed soil with a few burnt stones was revealed between the roots. Some ceramics and a few broken bricks were found from the soil. The reach of the darker soil was quite small, only surrounding the roots. As the roots went quite deep and had probably mixed up the layer, it was not reasonable to make an excavation there. It is probable that there had been a fireplace, but definitely not a stone/brick house, because remains of building and demolition material surrounding it were missing. The tree had just started growing in the most ferocious soil.

The site does look like a hill fort. Its top is rather flat, the slopes are steep, surrounded by ditch-like features. But the excavations in summer 2017 do not support the hypothesis that the object in question is a hill fort.

EXCAVATIONS IN SUMMER 2017

In the spring of 2017, some coring was made to find out if and where there was any cultural layer on the hill fort (collected finds: AI 7740). The cores looked very similar to each other, revealing 10–20 cm of darker soil and a yellowish-reddish sand layer under it. This kind of sand is the natural bedrock layer in the whole Kodavere parish area, being more red in the

north and more yellow in the south of the parish. The darker sandy soil layer on top referred to a possible cultural layer across the top of the hill fort.

In the summer 1×1 m trenches were made on different locations of the hill: one on the western edge next to the fallen tree (trench 1), one in the centre in the vicinity of the modern fireplace spot (trench 2), one on the north-eastern corner (trench 3) and one at the bottom of hole 2 (trench 4). In addition to those trenches, some smaller, 30×30 cm test pits were dug on places where objects were found with the help of metal detectors (Fig. 3). A bigger trench of 1×1.5 m was dug at the bottom of hole 1 (trench 9).



Fig. 3. Locations of 2017 trenches. Blue diamonds: larger trenches 1–4 and 9, red circles: holes 1–2, lilac stars: find places of the 14th century crossbow bolt (1) and rumbler bell (2). Smaller test pits mentioned in the text have been marked with a red dot.

Jn 3. 2017. aasta kaevandite asukohad. Sinised rombid: suuremad kaevandid 1–4 ja 9, punased ringid: augud 1–2, lillad tähed: 14. saj ammunooleotsa (1) ja kuljuse (2) asukohad. Tekstis mainitud väiksemad šurfid on märgitud punaste täppidega.

Map / Kaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet, additions / täiendused: Krista Karro

The soil in trenches 2 and 3 looked alike -ca. 15 cm of darker soil which blended into yellowish sand. The depth of the trenches was ca. 40 cm. There were neither artefacts nor pieces of brick or other building remains. Trench 4 at the bottom of hole 2 revealed a thicker layer of darkish soil (ca. 50 cm), but there were no artefacts, charcoal or building remains whatsoever. It seems that the thicker layer of soil was a consequence of erosion from the higher surface. It is possible to conclude from the appearance of the darkish soil that it is merely the result of ploughing at the top of the hill fort (see below).

The most interesting trench was no. 1, dug at the western edge of the hill, probably at the same area where Toomas Tamla and Evald Tõnisson had dug their test pit in 1975 as well (Fig. 3; Tõnisson 1975). Some result from there was expectable because of the vicinity of the probable fireplace. On the other hand, it was far enough from the mixed soil under the roots of the fallen tree, so the layers were *in situ* as much as possible. There were two barely separable layers under the turf. The upper one was more loose, the lower one was slightly thicker and darker (Fig. 4). Altogether the soil on the natural sand was some 20 cm thick. It contained some larger pieces of brick and pottery. One sample of charcoal was taken from the upper



Fig. 4. Trench no. 1, northern profile. Jn 4. Kaevand 1 põhjaprofiil. Photo / Foto: Krista Karro

part, one from the lower part. The samples were dated in the AMS laboratory of Poznan University. The first sample dated back to 1669–1780 cal. AD (95.4% probability)³, the second sample 1675–1778 cal. AD (95.4%)⁴. A piece of pottery was also dated with OSL (optically stimulated luminescence) method in the Silesian University of Technology, and the result of the last exposure to light was the year 1693.⁵ An interesting fact is that about half a metre to the south from trench 1 another small trench was dug, and there were no such layers present as in trench 1 (see Fig. 3).

Trench 9 was dug at the bottom of hole 1. The soil was much darker and thicker than in other trenches, even around the assumed fireplace, and this layer reached quite deep,

ca. 1 m, but there were no finds nor charcoal to date it. The only finds date from the 20th century. These objects were found quite deep, about 70 cm from the ground level. According to the drawing of Brotze there was a well at that place (Hein 2006, 357–358), and according to the finds from the trench it seems to be possible.

Smaller trenches were dug in different locations on top of the hill following metal detector signals⁶ (Fig. 3). Soil layers in those trenches were the same as on most of the hill fort (except trench 1), some metal artefacts were found, including a pre-modern bronze rumble bell and a 14th-century crossbow bolt (Fig. 5; according to personal comment by Ain Mäesalu (TÜ), August 2017). Close to the bolt, a cluster of 13 iron nails was also found, which might refer to a secondary use of the bolt, when it was accidentally lost together with the nails. All in all, it seems that the metal artefacts are just stray finds.

According to the fieldwork, it is possible to say that there is a small area of thin cultural layer on the western edge of the hill fort. Other parts of the top of the hill fort are covered with a ploughing layer formed as the result of farming in the 17th and 18th century, maybe even earlier (however, there is no material proof that it took place earlier, but the possibility cannot be excluded). A field has been shown on top of the hill on the 1684 map (RA, EAA.308.2.68, p. 1) and the 1800 drawing by Brotze.

The ditch-like features are not of the same depth in all sides of the hill. In the south and east there are quite high drumlins beside the hill in question, therefore the cavities seem to be deeper. In the north, the ditch is much lower, because natural features beside the hill are lower (see also the situation on the photo, Fig. 6). A similar ditch can also be seen heading south, to the lake. It is possible that the surrounding ditches are just a reminder of people using these as pathways for centuries to go to the horse paddock, to the field up the hill, or to the river/lake. The landscape there consists of several drumlins and it is much easier to walk between the hills than over them, so the lower ground between the drumlins had changed

³ Poz-96922; 140±30; calibrated with OxCal v4.2.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2018) using IntCal13 calibration curve (Reimer et al. 2013).

⁴ Poz-96555; 130±30; calibrated with OxCal v4.2.3 (as footnote 3).

⁵ GdTL-2962.

⁶ The digging of those trenches was carefully observed and the trenches were documented by an archaeologist.

in the course of walking. It should also be explained that the authors do not claim that the ditches were purposefully designed to be pathways, but they just took that form in course of being used as pathways. It is also not claimed that they became many metres deep in the course of walking, but the roundish bottom of the ditches formed in the course of walking and the depth depends on the siding land forms. Note also from Fig. 3 that the ditches do not form an enclosed rectangle around the hill, but the cavity in the north heads for the lake west of the hill.

Of course, there are other possibilities to interpret the site. The naturally well-defended place could have been used as a short-term camping site during the Livonian (1558–1583) or the Great Northern War (1700–1721) and the slopes of the hill were dug steeper. The site could still have been a medieval unfinished fortification, which was later reused as something else, because, the fact remains, that the cultural layer is almost absent.

The closest vicinity of the hill fort was also studied in autumn 2017. Considering that the predecessor of Alatskivi estate did not lie on the hill fort, it was looked for from the closest surroundings. The most interesting potential site was the cadastre unit by the name of



Fig. 5. A 14th-century crossbow bolt found from the northern slope of the hill.

Jn 5. Linnamäe põhjanõlvalt leitud 14. saj ammunooleots. (AI 7740: 3.)

Photo / Foto: Tarvi Toome



Fig. 6. Cavities between drumlins that resemble a moat. Northern slope of the hill viewed from the east.

Jn 6. Oosidevahelised orud meenutavad vallikraavi. Fotol vaade idast põhjanõlvale.

Photo / Foto: Krista Karro

Vanamõisa. The present household of the farm is situated 200 m east of the hill fort, and the fields of the farm begin about 100 m north of the hill fort. This farm is marked by the name of Althof (same meaning as the Estonian Vanamõisa, 'old estate') on the map of Carl Gottlieb Rücker (RA, EAA.1393.1.80, p. 1). Following this reference, the remains of this farm (or old estate) were looked for from a site behind the present household. The site is a little higher from the surroundings with no trees growing there. According to the owner of the present farm, it has never been a field. The site was scanned with metal detectors, but nothing historical was found. The surface in the southern end of the site consisted of quite a thick layer of darkened sandy-clayish soil (ca. 50 cm), with natural reddish sand at the bottom. The north-western corner was somewhat more interesting, consisting of small (5–10 cm in diameter) stones mixed with sand under ca. 10 cm of darker soil. It is possible that the natural mineral bottom was different there or there has been some kind of a structure. According to historical maps, the 17th-century house seemed to have been situated next to the described site (Fig. 2; RA, EAA.308.2.76, p. 1). The 17th-century house marked on the map is probably the old estate, because it is at the same place as the Gamla Allaskiwi on the map of 1684, and the image of a house usually marks estates on Swedish-period maps (RA, EAA.308.2.68, p. 1). The flat site might have been a courtyard of the estate house in the 17th century, which would explain the

lack of finds. Unfortunately, there was a lot of metal trash deposited at the place, where the house itself probably had been, and thus trial excavations at the site were impossible.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the data gathered in 2017, it seems that Alatskivi hill fort does not date from the Late Iron Age or Medieval period, which was the preliminary hypothesis according to its location by the Alatskivi River, because the results of the excavations show that there probably was a fireplace on top of the hill fort. However, the find material (animal bones, pottery sherds, etc.) was very scarce, which would refer to a small group of people using the place. The scarcity of the finds makes the hypothesis of a military camp unlikely as well.

Furthermore, written sources refer to a possibility that there was no estate in Alatskivi in the 16th century (on the contrary to what seems to be a popular reference in later sources), just a village and a water mill (maybe even just a water mill), which was owned by the above mentioned Elistvere estate. The hill in question was located next to a probable ford on the Alatskivi River where a bridge was built (time is unknown). There was a field up the hill and a horse paddock west to the hill by the river. The cavities between the drumlins were probably natural, and using them for going to the paddock or to the estate a little further northeast from the river rounded their bottoms a little, which now seem as if they were man-made ditches. Cavities between drumlins are the most logical places to use for walking in this type of landscape. The southernmost (presently known) estate of the two became more important probably in the 17th–18th centuries and the old estate, *Vanamõisa*, diminished into a farm.

Brotze's drawing shows that in 1800 there was a field and a well on top of the hill, and according to a map from 1688, there was a horse paddock surrounding the hill fort. It is uncertain when the well was in use, but it is possible that the water was used by the people camping up the hill at a fireplace site discovered in the summer of 2017. AMS and OSL dating of find material also shows some human activity on the hill fort at around 1700–1800.

To conclude, it is uncertain whether there was an estate in Alatskivi before the 17th century, but it is quite certain that the estate was not a defended estate on the hill in question. The excavations did not reveal any cultural layer apart from one place on the western edge of the drumlin, which can be interpreted as a camping site with a fireplace. Based on the excavations of 2017, it can be claimed that the hill has never been used as a fort, but, of course, it is also possible that it was an unfinished hill fort.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by institutional research funding IUT (IUT 3-2) of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research.

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VÄIKESEMAHULISED KAEVAMISED ALATSKIVI LINNAMÄEL

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Alatskivi linnamägi paikneb Alatskivi jõe põhjakaldal, u 1 km Peatskivi muinasaegsest linnamäest kagu pool (jn 1). Enne 2017. aasta välitöid oletati, et Alatskivi linnamägi pärineb hilisrauaajast või keskaja algusest, olles Peatskivi linnuse järglane. Seda hüpoteesi toetas paiknemine Alatskivi jõe ääres, kohas, mis sobis laevatamiseks ka pärast veeolude muutumist 12. sajandil, mil Peatskivi linnamägi maha jäeti.

Alatskivi linnamägi on 9–10 m kõrge, selle platoo mõõtmed on 70 × 40 m. Linnust ümbritseb 0,5–5 m sügavune kraav (olenevalt kõrvalasuvate ooside kõrgusest), mis esmapilgul näib olevat inimtekkeline. Linnamäe nõlvadel on mõned suured juhuslikult paiknevad kivid. Linnamäe platool on kaks suuremat süvendit ning mitmeid väiksemaid. Süvenditest suu-

rim asub platoo loodenurgas ning selle mõõtmed on 10×15 m. Selle nõlvad on vooderdatud raudkividega. Suuruselt teine paikneb platoo lõunaserval. Väikesed sissekaeved on arvatavasti varanduseotsijate tehtud ning pärinevad ilmselt 19.–20. sajandist. Linnamäge mainitakse esmakordselt rahvapärimuses, millest on kihelkonnakirjelduse koostaja A. Tiitsmaa selle muistisena kirja pannud. Arhiiviallikate põhjal on teada, et linnamäel on 17.–18. sajandil haritud põldu ning platoo loodenurgas asus kaev, linnust ümbritsenud ala oli kasutusel hobustekoplina.

2017. aasta kaevamiste eesmärk oli välja selgitada linnamäe dateering, samuti kultuurkihi paiknemine ja selle iseloom. Selleks tehti linnamäele viis väikest kaevandit 4 × 1m ja lisaks 30 × 30 cm prooviauke;

vt jn 3). Lisaks kontrolliti kogu ala ka detektoriga ning võeti proove mullapuuriga. Selgus, et pealmiseks kihiks on 10–20 cm paksune tumedam pinnas, mille alla jäi kollakaspunane looduslik segamata mineraalpinnas. Väikestest kaevanditest oli huvipakkuvaim platoo lääneservale kaevatud šurf nr 1. Selles oli võimalik eristada kahte kihti, millest alumine oli ülemisest pisut tumedam (jn 4). Mõlemast kihist leiti punaste telliste tükke ning savinõude kilde. Kihtidest kogutud söeproovid andsid kalibreeritud dateeringu 1669–1780 ja 1675–1778 pKr. Üks savinõukild dateeriti luminestsentsmeetodiga aastasse 1693. Sellest kaevandist 6 m kauguselt oli murdunud puu alt saadud materjali, mis viitas võimalikule tuleasemele.

Võimalik, et siin oli 17.–18. sajandil paiknenud kerge hoone

Üks väikestest kaevanditest rajati kaevukohta. Midagi dateerivat sellest ei saadud. Ka detektoriga kogutud leiud olid hilised, pärinedes peamiselt uusajast. Vanimaks leiuks oli 14. sajandisse dateeritud ammunooleots (jn 5). Viimane leiti koos hiliste naeltega ning on võimalik, et see oli teiseses kasutuses.

Uuringute tulemused näitasid, et linnamäena kaitse all olevat kohta on kasutatud 17.–18. sajandil, mil siin oli põld. Varasemale elutegevusele viitavad leiud puudusid, seega on kaheldav, kas meil on selle objekti näol tegemist linnamäega.