



The re-discovered hill fort in Alaküla, Tartumaa County

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2019 Andres Vindi from the University of Tartu re-discovered a long lost hill fort in Alaküla village in Võnnu parish, Tartumaa County. The site lies 20 km south-east of Tartu, 6.6 km south-east of Roiu village, 2.9 km south-east of Uniküla crossroad, ca. 300–400 m east of Lootvina–Uniküla road and 400–500 m north-east of the Kolli (Ala-Kolli) farmstead (Fig. 1: 1). The stronghold site on a high hill called Kõrgemägi (Eng. ‘high hill’) and/or Kirikumägi (Eng. ‘church hill’) was first mentioned by Lemming Rootsmäe, who studied the toponyms of Võnnu parish in 1968 (Rootsmäe & Rootsmäe 2016, 388–389). The researcher noted signs of a moat and a rampart on the north side, and a cultural layer was found in several places, especially on the western slope, in the depth of ca. 40 cm (Rootsmäe 1972, 159). According to his data, there once was a spring-based small lake with fresh water at the south-eastern foot of the hill and several big stones were told to have been removed from the plateau.

As the description of the site was vague, the first two attempts to find it had failed – in 1994 due to the lack of proper maps, in 2008 due to the wrong location of the toponym *Kõrgemägi* on the Estonian Basic Map. The third attempt, based on the digital height maps of the Estonian Land Board indicated the rampart and lead to the monument.

THE HILL FORT

The stronghold was situated on top of a north–south directional ridge, located on the border of cultivated lands and a large area of pine forests called Mõldripalu. The eastern and southern side of the ridge are steep and high (over 20 m). The lower part of the western slope, facing the present-day open landscape, is smoothly slanting, but its upper part is steep and



Fig. 1. The location of Alaküla and Kõivuküla hill forts. 1 – Alaküla, 2 – Kõivuküla.

Jn 1. Alaküla ja Kõivuküla linnamäe asukoht.

Map / Aluskaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet

of 5–6 metres relative height (Fig. 2). Here the slope seems to have been artificially steepened. In the north the hill fort plateau is separated from the rest of the ridge by a ca. 10 m long and low sand rampart and two moats behind it. The present depth of the first moat is ca. 2 m from the level of the plateau and its width is ca. 16 m. The second moat, located north of a small, strongly eroded and ca. 2 m wide plateau is as deep and ca. 12 m wide.



Fig. 2. View of Alaküla hill fort from the west. The stronghold was on top of the hill, in a forested area.

Jn 2. Vaade Alaküla linnamäele läänest. Linnus asus mäe tipus, metsaga kaetud alal.

Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk

The plateau of the hill fort is 100 m long, flat and horizontal in the middle part, gradually broadening towards the south. As the edges are unclear and smoothly slanting, its width is hard to define. In the northern part it is around 20 m, but in the broadest place, ca. 15 m before its southern end, the plateau is ca. 35 m wide. In total, the size of the plateau can be estimated to be ca. 2300–2500 m². On the south-western corner of the hill fort there is a lower triangular flat area ca. 15–20 m in diameter and with a horizontal surface, about 3 m below the main plateau.

The rampart with the relative height of up to 0.5–0.6 m on its inner side, presently cut and damaged by a path, exists only in the northern end of the plateau. Originally, the sand rampart was higher, but it has greatly been destroyed by erosion caused by ploughing. The hard damages of the rampart were clearly indicated by core drilling which showed a ca. 80 cm thick layer of eroded sand on top of original ground in the distance of ca. 7 m from its foot.

The south-eastern part of the main plateau is bordered in the east by a lower, ca. 4 m wide road-like zone which begins near the southern end of the ridge and can be observed for

ca. 40 m (Fig. 3). This area, bordering with its outer side on the steep hill slope, begins ca. 1 m below the edge of the upper plateau near its southern end, falling gradually towards the north. The end of the structure remained unclear: the place has been destroyed by a 3 m wide east–west directional bulldozer-made road for forest machines which cross-cut the slope and was bordered on both sides by ca. 1.5 m high rampsarts.

The trench

On most of the plateau no traces of a cultural layer could be observed. Drilling indicated a buried intensive occupation layer near the south-western end of the road-like lower plateau in the depth of 20–50 cm. This area was chosen for a bigger, T-shaped trench of 9 m² (Figs 3–4). The main trench (7 × 1 m) began on the sloping edge of the main plateau and ended on the edge of the steep and high hill slope. In the area where drilling showed an intensive cultural layer, a crossing extension (2 × 1 m) was added to it. All soil from the trench was sieved on 5 mm eye meshes.

The thin layer of dark forest soil was followed by 10–15 cm of yellowish brown sand which had eroded from the main plateau, probably, as a result of long-term ploughing. In the upper and lower ends of the trench smooth transition to intact loam took place in the depth of ca. 25 cm from the ground surface. In the middle part of the trench a ca. 3 m wide zone of dark soil, with upper and lower edges parallel to the edge of the hill fort plateau (Fig. 4), appeared in the depth of ca. 30 cm. The upper part of its bottom, slightly slanting towards the hill slope, was cut into intact mineral soil until the depth of 55 cm from the present-day ground surface (35 cm from the bottom of the eroded sand) (Fig. 5). As the depression was dug into slanting ground, its bottom was cut for ca. 25 cm into the ground in its lower, southern edge. The area, especially its bottom, was filled with an intense dark occupation layer which



Fig. 3. Locations of the trench, test pit and road-like zone on Alaküla hill fort.

Jn 3. Kaevandi, šurfi ja teesarnase platoo asukohad Alaküla linnamäel.

Map / Aluskaart: Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet, additions / lisandused: Greta-Krislin Lutter



Fig. 4. Bottom of the main trench on Alaküla hill fort.

Jn 4. Alaküla linnamäe kaevandi põhi.

Photo / Foto: Heiki Valk



Fig. 5. The south-western (a) and north-eastern (b) profiles of the main trench. In the north-eastern profile the place of the cross-cutting extension can be observed.

Jn 5. Tranšee edela- (a) ja kirdeprofiil (b). Kirdeprofiilis on näha kaevandi ristuva kõrvalharu koht.
Graphics / Graafika: Ragnar Saage

continued also in the perpendicular extension of the trench. In that area the soil contained some heat-cracked pieces of granite stones (diameter of 5–7 cm) indicating a small fire-place. Evidently, the depression area refers to a building.

Dark sooty soil brought up by moles could locally be observed also at the south-western edge of the main plateau, between the central path along the hill top and the triangular south-western lower plateau. Since trial core drilling in the area indicated the most sooty soil until the depth of 0.7–0.8 m, the layer was first suggested to originate from a charcoal pit. A trial trench (1 × 1 m) revealed intensively black sooty soil which stretched until 45–50 cm from the ground. In one corner of the trench the sooty layer contained charcoal pieces and some fire-cracked stones (diam. 5/6–10 cm) from a hearth. Under it, the sooty layer reached the depth of ca. 65 cm, forming a conical pit, possibly for baking. The stratigraphy of the trial pit, but also in its surroundings, as shown by drilling, seems also to refer to some building(s) the bottom of which was deepened into the ground.

The finds

The finds (TÜ 2743: 1–390) are mainly limited to sherds of hand-made pottery (Figs 6–7) – small, highly fragmented and picked mostly from the sieve. The assemblage involves 685 tiny fragments (incl. 45 from rims) with wall thickness of mostly 6–8 mm. The pottery is of uneven surfaces and contains rather coarse stone rubble, with grains mostly of 1–1.5 mm, and in rare cases of up to 5 mm in diameter. The sherds are of light brown, greyish brown or pinkish colour, fragments with dark outer surface are not numerous. The inside of the vessels was



Fig. 6. Pottery fragments from Alaküla hill fort.

Jn 6. Savinõukilde Alaküla linnamäelt.

(TÜ 2743: 1355, 203, 225, 291, 313, 291, 326, 266.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas



Fig. 7. Pottery fragments from Alaküla hill fort.

Jn 7. Savinõukilde Alaküla linnamäelt.

(TÜ 2743: 186, 93, 273, 20, 191, 173.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas

mostly black or dark brown, the section of the sherds often revealed two layers of different colour. The assemblage contained neither fragments with polished surfaces, nor any with penetrating holes at the rim. The profiles of the vessels (Fig. 6) were simple.

The most noteworthy find was an iron penannular brooch (diameter 8×7 mm) with narrow rolled ends (Fig. 8). It was found from the very bottom of the cultural layer inside the supposed building on intact soil. Some similar finds gained from south-eastern Estonia have



Fig. 8. Iron penannular brooch from Alaküla hill fort.
Jn 8. Rauast hoburaudsõlg Alaküla linnamäelt.
 (TÜ 2743: 350.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas

been dated to the end of the first and beginning of the second millennium AD (Aun 1992, 64–65), but such brooches are surely of earlier origin. In the Semigallian areas they appear in the 6th/7th centuries, in eastern Latvia since the end of the 7th century (LA 1974, 159 and table 41: 6). In western Estonia they are dated to the 8th–9th centuries (Pauts 1995, 27) and such date has been noted in Estonia also on a broader scale (Tvauri 2012, 135). The find from Alaküla, considering the lack of typical Viking Age pottery makes it possible to shift the date of such brooches earlier also in south-eastern Estonia. In addition, fragments of two other iron artefacts (: 180, 328) were found.

DISCUSSION, CONTEXT AND CONCLUSIONS

Since the re-discovered monument is located directly on the border of two large landscape and cultural zones – those of pine forests and arable lands cultivated at least since the Roman Iron Age –, its hinterlands remain somewhat unclear. The upper course of the Mõrajõgi River falling into the Emajõgi River, a major water route, lies ca. 1.5 km north-west of the stronghold. Although the closest Roman Iron Age *tarand* graves are situated 4–5 km northwest of Alaküla hill fort, in Uniküla and Ignase villages, and ca. 6 km north-east in Hammaste, no finds indicate the Roman Iron Age use of the site.

In the second half of the first millennium AD most typical burial sites in the eastern part of south-eastern Estonia were sand barrows which represent a broader cultural phenomenon of that time – the so-called Pskov group of long and round barrows (Aun 1992, 85–137; 2009, 104–106; Tvauri 2012, 269–274; Mihkailova 2014, 5–21). The nearest group of such barrows, one of the northernmost south of the Emajõgi River, lies 4 km south of Alaküla hill fort – in Lootvina village.

The closest hill fort is Kõivuküla Aagemägi (Valk *et al.* 2012, 27–31), lying ca. 7.4 km north-west, also on the high bank of the Mõrajõgi River (Fig. 1: 2). This site has quite similar pottery (however, vessel rims sometimes have penetrating holes there).¹ Although Alaküla hill fort lies on the fringe of the area of barrows and pine forests, the brooch find rather refers to attachment to the region of old agricultural landscapes – such jewellery items are not known from the Pskov group of barrows at all (Mikhailova 2014).

The size of the plateau refers indirectly to large hinterlands of the stronghold, but the sporadic occurrence of occupation layers shows that most of the fort area was not inhabited. Patches with an intensive cultural layer referring to house remains indicate however, continuous and seemingly intensive occupation by a limited number of households. The uniform character of pottery suggests that occupation traces come from a rather limited time-span once in the second half of the first millennium AD. Judging by the penannular brooch the site might originate from the 8th or 9th centuries.

¹ A radiocarbon date from the site (Tln 3360) gave the result 1645±75 BP (95.4%; cal. 247–570 AD) which seems too early for such pottery.

The second half of the first millennium AD is the high time of hill forts in south-eastern Estonia. The strongholds are of small size, as a rule, located at rivers or streams falling into the rivers. In this context the hill fort of Alaküla seems somewhat exceptional, considering both the big size of its plateau, and distance from the Mõraoja stream. The short-term use of the site is, however, characteristic for strongholds of the era, referring to the dynamic character and instability of social relations.

Discovery of the hill fort in Alaküla has provided new information about sites of central meaning in the eastern part of south-eastern Estonia in the second half of the first millennium AD. Being located on the border of two cultural and landscape zones – those of pine forests and cultivated landscapes – further excavations on Alaküla hill fort might shed new light upon social and cultural relations in the contact area of two populations of different cultural backgrounds.

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ALAKÜLA KÕRGMÄGI – TAASAVASTATUD LINNUSEKOHT

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2019. aasta varakevadel leidis Andres Vindi üles linnamäe, mis asub Tartust 20 km kagus Võnnu kihelkonnas Alakülas. Mõldripalu nimelise männimetsamasasiivi ja põllumajanduslike kultuurmaastike piiril, Ala-Kolli talust 400–500 m kirde pool (jn 1) paikneva muistise esmaavastaja on Võnnu kihelkonna kohanimede uurija Lemming Rootsmäe, kes mainib 1968. aastal Kõrge- ehk Kirikumäeks kutsutud künkal otsavalli, samuti laiguti esinevat kultuurkihti. Kaks varasemat katset ebamäärase asukohakirjeldusega linnamäe taas üles leida (1994 ja 2008) ei andnud tulemusi kaardimaterjali puudulikkuse tõttu.

Linnusekoht asetseb põhja-lõuna-suunalise kõrge loodusliku seljaku 100 m pikkusel otsaplatool, mille põhjaots on u 20 m, lõunaots kuni 35 m laiune. Mäe ida- ja lõunanõlv on väga järsud, läänenõlv lauge ja pikaldase tõusuga (jn 2) ning näib ülaosas olevat 5–6 m kõrguses kunstlikult järsustatud. Põhja pool piiritleb 2300–2500 m² suurust linnuseõue siseküljel kuni 50–60 cm kõrgusena säilinud liivast vall, mis

on künni toimel õuele laiali valgunud. Vallist põhja pool algab linnuseplatoo suhtes u 2 m sügavune ja 16 m laiune vallikraav, millele väikseks erodeerunud ümara vaheplatoo (tipu laius vaid u 2 m) taga järgneb teine, umbes sama sügav ja lai, kitsast seljakut lõikav kraav. Mäe kaguserval kulgeb künkaplatoost veidi madalamal 3,5–4 m laiune põhja suunas tõusev teetoline tasane astang, mis seljaku lõunaotsas sulab kokku linnuseplatooga.

Kultuurkihti esineb vaid üksikute laikudena, suuremal osal mäest see puudub. Platoo lõunaotsa, paikadesse, kus mullapuur näitas intensiivset kultuurkihti, tehti 9 m² suurune T-kujuline kaevand ja 1 m² suurune šurf (jn 3, 4). 7 × 1 m mõõtmetega põhitranshee kaevati mäeplatoo servaga risti ja sellele lisati 2 m pikkune ristuv laiend (jn 4). Transhee ülaots paiknes õueplatoo serval, alaots aga järsult langeval mäenõlval.

Kaevandis koosnes pinnase ülaosa 20 cm ulatuses õhukesest kamarakihist ja künni tagajärjel kõrgemalt erodeerunud liivmullast, mis sisaldas veidi savinõu-

kilde. Sujuv üleminek looduslikule puutumatu mineraalpinna peale toimus tranšee üla- ja alaosas praegusest maapinnast u 25 cm sügavusel. Teetaolise astangu mõttelisel pikendusel joonistus välja u 3 m laiune tumeda kultuurkihiga täidetud süvend (jn 4), mille üla- ja alaserv olid paralleelsed mäeservaga. Süvendi tasane, kergelt mäenõlva poole kaldus põhi (jn 5) ulatus linnuseplatoo poolses servas kaevamiseelsest maapinnast u 55 cm, künnierosiooni eelsest maapinnast 35 cm sügavusele. Alumises servas ulatus süvendi sissekaeve, tulenevalt kaevamisaegse maapinna langusest, looduslikku pinnasesse u 25 cm võrra. Süvendist, mis ilmselt kujutab endast hoonepõhja, leiti väike põlenud kividega tulease.

Kaevamistel saadi vaid lihtsat, ebatasaste pindadega küllaltki ühetaolist käsitsikeraamikat, mis sisaldas üsna jämedat kivi purdu (jn 6, 7). Hoonesüvendi põhjast, kultuurkihi alaosast leiti rauast, rullotstega hoburaudsõlg (jn 8).

Mäe edelaossa, piki seljakut kulgevast jalgteest lääne poole tehtud šurfis oli kultuurkiht üldiselt 45–50 cm paksune. Šurfi ühest nurgast leiti tulease, mille all olev teravneva põhjaga süvend, arvatav küpsetusauk, ulatus kuni 65 cm sügavuseni.

Alaküla linnamägi asub kahe suurema maastikutsooni piiril: lääne ja suures pildis ka põhja poole jäävad Ugandi kultuurmaastikud rooma rauaaja kalmetega, ida ja lõuna poole aga liivakad maad ja männimetsad, millega seostuvad I aastatuhande II poole pikk- ja ümarkääd. Lähimad kivikalmed paiknevad 4–5 km põhjas ja loodes Unikülas ja Ignasel ning 6 km kirdes Hammastes, lähimad käädad aga 4 km lõuna pool Lootvinas. 1,5 km kaugusel loodes voolab Mõrajõgi, mille äärde, linnulennul 7,4 km kaugusele jääb ka naaberlinnus – Kõivuküla Aagemägi. Selle dateeringud viitavad hilisele rooma rauaajale ja/või rahvasterännuajale.

Arvestades õueala suurust, võis Alaküla linnuse tagamaa olla üsna ulatuslik. Üksnes laiguti paiknev kultuurkiht viitab vähesele püüasustusele, keramik ühetaolisus aga üsna lühiajalisele ja tõenäoliselt ühekordsele kasutusele. Arvestades vähestes hoonekohtades oleva kultuurkihi intensiivsust, näib linnamägi olevat olnud püsivalt asustatud.

Paiknedes agraarsete kultuurmaastike ning pikk- ja ümarkäädaste metsarahva eluruumi piiril, võiks Alaküla linnamägi esindada kahe erineva kultuuri- ja elatustaustaga rahvarühma kontaktala.