



Archaeological monitoring at Võnnu – a pottery production site and locating the early church

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019 new sewage treatment pipes were installed on the small hillock in south-east Estonia, where St Jacob's church of Võnnu stands. This allowed studying the vicinity of the church to a large extent for the first time as due to the constructional reasons the width of the 160 m long trenches reached even 3 metres (Fig. 1A–B).

The earliest building of Võnnu church was probably founded already in 1232–1236 (Körber 1826, 5; Rumma *et al.* 1925, 504). Since then the church has been rebuilt several times and the main building with three naves and three bays was completed by 1361. At the end of the 18th century the main building was extended 20 m to the west and a tower was added. A century later the eastern part of the main building was demolished and a large transversal part was built by 1871 (Alittoa 1999, 93; Kreem 2010, 141). Probably the latter phase of building is marked by large rocks, mixed with charcoal and fragments of bricks on the southern side of the church-hill. Apparently, the unused remains of the building activity were used as a fill to flatten the original slope and extend the area of the hill. As none of the rocks or bricks had signs of lime mortar, the layer does not mark any of the demolishing phases.

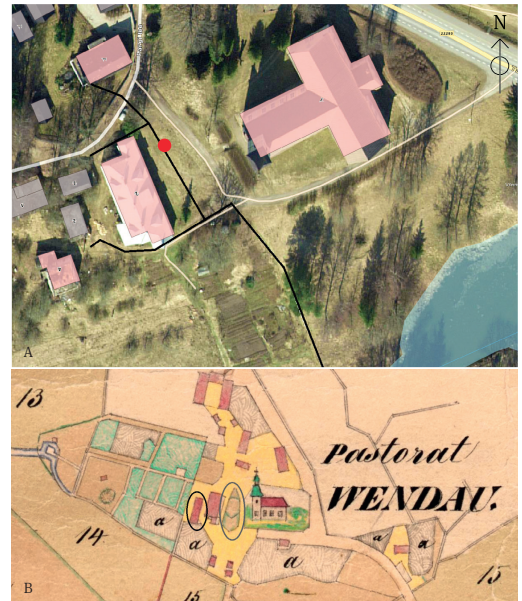


Fig 1. A – Map of trenches at Võnnu, the pit with waste production is marked in red, B – map of Võnnu from 1865. The 18th–19th century pastorate is marked with a black circle and the green spot where settlement pits were found with a grey circle.

Jn 1. A – Võnnu kiriku ümber kaevatud kraavide plaan. Keraamikapraaagiga sissekaeve on märgitud punase ringiga, B – Võnnu kaart 1865. aastast. 18.–19. sajandi pastoraat on märgitud musta ringiga ning haljasala, mille alt asulajate seonduvad sissekaevad leiti, halli ringiga.

Map / Kaart: Tõnno Jonuks (A), RA, EAA.3724.4.1338 (B)

Previously two bracelets have been found from the vicinity of the church, one of them dated to 1050–1100 AD and associated with a Final Iron Age (cremation?) cemetery (Valk 2017, 118). One of the bracelets was found from a gravel pit, south-east of the church in the 1960s, suggesting also the location of the possible cemetery (*ibid.*). However, no further evidence has been found to prove the cemetery at the site.

The results of current studies can be divided in two – the 18th century pastorate and an occupation layer since the Viking Age (800–1050 AD).

PASTORATE

In 1760 the parsonage burnt down according to the History of Võnnu parish by Eduard Philipp Körber and a new building was constructed for the parson (Körber 1826, 16; Meerits 2003, 31). The new building, also marked on the map from 1865 (RA, EAA.3724.4.1338) (Fig. 1B),



Fig. 2. Excavated doorway of the semi-basement floor of Võnnu pastorate.

Jn 2. Võnnu pastoraadi poolkeldrikorruse ukseava.
Photo / Foto: Tõnno Jonuks

was a long and narrow structure. The width of the building – six metres – is the length of an average log. During the past decades, the preserved construction has been several times defaced without being recorded in the archive of the National Heritage Board, but for the most part the contour was still possible to follow. In addition, an originally vaulted doorway, simply designed but carefully finished, was found connecting two semi-basement rooms. No special floor pavement was recorded. Most of the walls looked rough, suggesting quick work and not a very experienced mason (Fig. 2).

This building had been depreciated by a century later and in the mid-19th century a new, the present pastorate was built. It is not known when and how the old building was demolished and this fieldwork recorded no signs of fire. It is likely that only the basement walls were stone constructions and the main floor was a log building. It is thus possible that the main part of the old building, which was not properly made already originally, was taken apart and removed.

THE OCCUPATION LAYER AND FILLED PITS

A 35–65 cm thick occupation layer consisting of black soil was recorded in the area between the church and the modern pastorate – an area that has been a green spot for at least 200 years (see Fig. 1B). The thick layer looked homogenous and visually no intermediate layers could be located. At the same time the lower horizon of the layer consisted in some parts of recent debris (bricks etc.), suggesting at least some digging activity in the area. A similar layer extended also westwards and Late Iron Age – medieval potsherds were collected west from the present pastorate, indicating that the settlement covered at least all of the southern part of the hillock.

The earliest dated objects – hand-made potsherds (e.g. TÕ 2818: 16), three finger-rings (Fig. 3: 1, 2; TÕ 2818: 107), a fragment of a bracelet and another of a neck ring (Fig. 3: 6) and three little bells (Fig. 3: 3, 4) – represent the Viking and the Final Iron Age. The Middle Ages is represented by a collection of pottery. Two signet rings (Fig. 4: 1, 2) from the 16th–17th century, found at the southern side of the hillock, differ from each other by design but both have a depiction of a quadruped, possibly a horse, carved on the ring shield. Previously three signet rings have been collected from the site, all with a round disc but with different images (ÕES 352; 962: 1, 6). 40 coins were found, mostly from the late 15th century until nowadays. Eight coins (TÕ 2818: 67, 72, 73, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82) dated earlier than 1561, but were also in circulation at the end of the 16th and early 17th century. Fifteen coins were schillings minted by the Swedish rulers in Riga, including a counterfeit coin. Six coins were $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ öre copper coins minted in Sweden. Russian coins from the 16th – 17th century were found six, including three copper coins from 1654–1663. Only two 18th-century Russian copper coins were found.

There are multiple reasons why coins appear in medieval churchyards. As grave goods coins are represented more numerous since the Early Modern Period (Valk 2001, 57–58; Muižnieks 2012, 718). Beside this, coins have also been deposited in churches and churchyards as offerings for various reasons (Johanson & Jonuks 2015). A large collection of coins may also indicate at some market held at the church (see Valk & Kiudsoo, this volume). As only single medieval coins were collected from the vicinity of Võnnu church and churchyard, it is possible that a medieval market was also held there but the exact place was located somewhat further in the north, where roads from other villages met.

The previous collection of finds was gathered by using a metal detector from the uniform black soil. In addition, eight filled pits were located below this layer. Some of the pits were rather small, just 25–65 cm in diameter and only 30 cm in depth, while the largest extended to 120 cm in diameter and up to 170 cm in depth. It was mostly filled with black soil, including also thin layers of sand with a concentration of smaller stones in the bottom. The fill of all pits contained a number of potsherds, both hand- and wheel-made pottery was represented, domestic mammal bones, and in one case also bones of perch and chicken¹. The variety of represented sherds suggested that the depressions were filled intentionally or were buried



Fig. 3. Late Iron Age finds from Võnnu. 1–2 – finger-rings with a widening middle part, 3–4 – rumbler bells, 5 – fragment of a bracelet, 6 – fragment of a neck-ring.

Jn 3. Noorema rauaaja leide Võnnust. 1–2 – laieneva kesk-keermega sõrmused, 3–4 – kuljused, 5 – käevõru katke, 6 – kaelavõru otsanupp.

(TÕ 2818: 105, 106, 113, 114, 127, 60.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas



Fig. 4. Signet rings from Võnnu depicting a quadruped animal.

Jn 4. Pitsatsõrmused neljajalgse looma kujutisega Võnnust.

(TÕ 2818: 57–58.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas

¹ Identified by Eve Rannamäe (TÕ).

naturally with the black occupation layer and thus the pottery fragments do not date the pits. However, at least two of the shallow pits were clearly recent, as suggested by wood remains and redware sherds.

The most interesting was pit number 8 – a 130 cm wide and 90 cm deep conical depression, part of which extended out of the trench and is still preserved at the site. The depression was filled with black soil, charcoal, burnt stones and heavily burnt soil. No metal finds were found, despite careful testing with metal detector. Only two fragments of burnt bone were found. The most interesting was a large collection of potsherds. As the majority of the pit was filled with soil, it seems most likely that this was a waste pit, where pieces of unsuccessfully burnt ceramic vessels were deposited.

Altogether 106 fragments of wheel-thrown earthenware pots were gathered from the depression that, according to rim fragments derive from at least six different vessels (Fig. 5). Almost all sherds had been bloated in heat, were distorted or cracked. This is typical pottery production waste, which happens when the firing temperature rises too quickly.



Fig. 5. Pottery production waste.

Jn 5. Praaksavinõude killud.

(TÜ 2818: 158, 204, 220, 200.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas

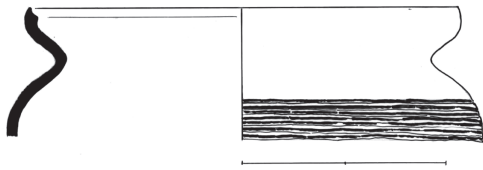


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of a ceramic vessel according to a fragment from pit no 8.

Jn 6. Sissekaevest nr 8 leitud savinõu servakatke põhjal tehtud rekonstruktsioonjoonis.

(TÜ 2818: 206.)

Drawing / Joonis: Andres Tvauri

All vessels belong to the subtype 3: 2 of the wheel-thrown earthenware of north-western Russian origin (Fig. 6). The subtype has a characteristic rim, the upper edge of which is bent, forming a welt or a concave surface in its inner side. The decoration of the pots of this subtype consists of deep lines, dragged with a stick on the upper part of the shoulder (Tvauri 2005, 48–53). This kind of vessels was widely used in the town of Pskov and the Pskov region in the 12th and the 13th century (see Beletskij 1983; Harlashov 1994, 69). Also in Estonian territory, in the northern part of the historical Tartu and Viljandi counties the subtype 3: 2 of wheel-thrown pottery was widely spread in the second half of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century.

Among the pots of the subtype 3: 2 of the north-western Russian origin there are two varieties both in the Pskov region (Kil'dyushevskij 2002, 10–11 and fig. 3: 4–16) as well as in Estonia. Vessels of the first variety of this subtype do not have a neck part and the shoulder smoothly transfers into a rim. The waste fragments from Võnnu derive also from these vessels. Similar pots have been found from the inhumation cemeteries of Küti and Pada in Viru county (Tvauri 2000b,

fig. 6: 1, 2) and hill forts of Viljandi in Viljandi county, Peatskivi, Saadjärve and Otepää in Tartu county (Tvauri 2005, 48–53, fig. 25: 3–8). These sites were in use during the 12th century and in the first quarter of the 13th century. The second variety of the subtype 3: 2 is characterised by a clearly distinguished neck part between the welt and the shoulder. This kind

of vessels has been produced in a pottery kiln discovered in Viljandi which has been dated to the middle of the 13th century (Tvauri 2000a, fig. 1: 1). The sherds of these pots are numerous also in the occupation layer discovered in the area of the Botanical Gardens of the University of Tartu and dated to the middle and the second half of the 13th century (Tvauri 2000a, fig. 7: 1–4). However, the lack of the later, shouldered subtypes of 3: 2 type vessels allows to date the pottery kiln in Võnnu to the late 12th century or to the first quarter of the 13th century.

Among the pottery waste of Võnnu there are two base fragments with a ring-shaped mark (Fig. 7). This is an imprint of the incision carved into the potter's wheel made of wood. Vessels with marks on their base can be found among the Slavic or Slavic-style wheel-thrown pottery everywhere in their distribution area but their meaning is not known (see Tvauri 2005, 62–65 and the references therein). Very similar base fragments with ring-shaped incision have been found from Tallinn (Russow *et al.* 2017, 169), the hill forts of Tartu (Tvauri 2005, fig. 40: 2) and Otepää (AI 4036: III O 111, 125). Unfortunately these finds cannot be more exactly dated. Also the ring-shaped mark on the base of the vessels is one of the most widespread among the Slavic-style wheel-thrown pottery.



Fig. 7. Bottom mark on a sherd among the production waste from pit no 8.

Jn 7. Põhjamärk ühel praaksavinõu killul. (TÜ 2818: 159.)

Photo / Foto: Jaana Ratas

DISCUSSION

To summarise the fieldwork at Võnnu it can first be concluded that a settlement had been founded on this hillock probably during the Viking Age (800–1050) or Final Iron Age (1050–1250). In the course of this fieldwork no *in situ* preserved constructions were located from this period, but several finds from the occupation layer prove the inhabitation of the site. The current fieldwork did not offer any proof for the possible Late Iron Age cemetery (see Valk 2017, 118 in more detail). This does not exclude the possible cemetery somewhere on the eastern slope of the Võnnu church-hill, but it also raises an interpretation that the Late Iron Age settlement extended across the whole hill.

The pottery kiln in the village was most probably in use at the end of the 12th or the very beginning of the 13th century. The production output is exactly the same as the pottery in Pskov, indicating at close relations. It is not known if the potter had immigrated from Pskov or was a local who had learned the skill of pottery in Pskov. This rich collection of bloated ceramic sherds from the late 12th–early 13th century is the earliest indication of production of the pottery of north-western Russian origin in Estonia. The pit where the pottery fragments were collected was most likely a waste-pit and not related with production activity. A similar collection of bloated pot-sherds has also been found from the Lohkva settlement (Roog & Jonuks 2012), indicating at a village pottery kiln at the time of the Livonian Wars (1558–1583).

The occupation layer and the waste of pottery production suggest that the Võnnu church was built within the one-time village. There has been a brief discussion about the locations

of churches in the beginning of the Middle Ages in Estonia. The earliest Estonian stone constructions of churches mostly date from the 1230s and onwards. Three main locations have been pointed out in the discussion. According to the most traditional interpretation, churches were built at sacred sites to give a new and Christian meaning to previous sacred places (e.g. Mägi 2002, 156). This is by far the most favoured interpretation in popular understanding and it coincides with historical records already from the very beginning of Christianity. The motif of Christian missionaries cutting down pagan sacred forest and consecrating it by building a chapel or a church is beloved already since the times of Gregory the Great encouraging the Christianisation of England in the 6th century. The same narrative is followed by St Willibrord in cutting down the sacred oaks in Frisia and St Boniface doing the same in Hesse, Germany. According to the chronicle Henry, a similar event took place on a beautiful hill on the border of Viru and Järva counties. However, as Alexandra Sanmark notes (2004, 47), historical sources only rarely confirm such practice and instead of reflecting historical facts such narratives should be seen as projecting Bible events. Moreover, there is currently no knowledge of how a sacred site from pre-Christian times should be visible in archaeological records and thus such a connection is difficult to prove.

Another interpretation emphasizes connection between churches and the Late Iron Age cemeteries (Valk 2017). The view of the link between early churches and previous cemeteries is currently dominating (Valk 2017; Laakso 2017) and stands on better ground. Archaeological fieldwork or occasional finds prove that the Final Iron Age finds and cremated bones can be found from many Estonian churchyards (Valk 2017 in more detail). However, as demonstrated by the female inhumation from Viru-Nigula churchyard (Tamla 1993) and a recently studied cemetery in Valjala (Mägi *et al.* 2019) the Final Iron Age jewellery was also used in the first half of the 13th century in local burials. This raises the interpretation that many of the Final Iron Age jewellery actually originate from the early burials from the 13th century churches. Thus, the suggestion that churches were built on previous cemeteries is possible indeed, but needs further evidence than the few Final Iron Age finds.

So a third option, a church built in a village as demonstrated by the example of Võnnu, should also be considered. There are also other examples where a church is built in the middle of villages (e.g. Viru-Nigula) suggesting the involvement of local nobility in choosing the site for a church in the early 13th century (Johansen 1933; Tamla 1993; Mägi 2002). Locating the church in the village would also correspond to the purpose of churches in the medieval societies – the church was intended for the living community, while the dead members of the congregation eventually formed the cemetery around the church. Most probably the choice of such village depended on the importance and centrality, which also noted the potential of the site to become the centre of the future parish. Producing foreign-looking pottery in Võnnu is one of such characteristics that indicate the importance of the village during the Late Iron Age, which resulted in selecting this place for a church in the early 13th century and developing it into a parish centre in the Middle Ages.

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ARHEOLOOGILISED UURINGUD VÕNNUS – POTTSEPATÖÖ JÄÄNUSED JA VARASE KIRIKU LOKALISEERIMINE

Tõnno Jonuks ja Andres Tvauri

2019. aastal uuriti vee- ja kanalisatsioonitorustike paigaldamise tõttu Võnnu kiriku ümbrust (jn 1). Praegusest pastoraadist läänes leiti säilinud poolkeldri müürid. Välismüüre oli tugevasti lõhutud juba varasemate torupaigaldustega, paremini säilinud sisemüürist leiti lihtsa vormistusega ukseava (jn 2). Ilmselt on tegemist 18.–19. saj Võnnu pastoraadiga, mis ehitati põlenud eelkäija asemele 1760. aastatel.

Säilinud müüride korratu ladu viitab kiirele ja osalt ka lohakale tööle. 19. saj keskpaigaks oli pastoraat niivõrd amortiseerunud, et selle kõrvale rajati praegune hoone ja vana ilmselt lammutati.

Võnnu kiriku lääneküljel torustikukaevistest leiti asulakoha kultuurkiht ning kaheksa looduslikku liivakihti ulatuvat sissekaevet. Kultuurkiht on hilisemate kihtidega segunenud, kuid sisaldab rohkelt viikingi-

ajast kaasajani dateeritavaid leide savinõukildudest metallesemete katketeni (jn 3–4). Kõige märkimisväärsem oli sissekaeve nr 8, mis sisaldas suures koguses punsunud keraamikat, mis viitab kohapealsele savinõude valmistamisele (jn 5). Kõik nõud kuuluvad loodevenepärase lihtkedrakraamika alarühma 3: 2, mida iseloomustab sissepoole kaarduv nõgus võrik ning pulgaga tehtud sügavatest ja tihedatest rõhtjoontest dekoor öla ülaosas (jn 6). Sellised savinõud olid Pihkvas ja Pihkvamaal massiliselt kasutusel 12.–13. sajandil. Ka Eesti alal, ajaloolise Tartumaa ja Viljandimaa põhjaosas levis 3: 2 alarühma kedrakraamika 12. sajandi teisel ja 13. sajandi esimesel poolel laialdaselt.

Kuigi vaadeldavalt leiukohalt keraamikapõletusahju jäänuseid ei leitud, pole alust arvata, et valmis-
tuspraak oleks siia mujalt toodud. Vaadeldav leid on seni vanim kindel tõend loodevenepärase lihtkedrakraamiliste savinõude valmistamisest Eesti alal. Arvestades seda, et Võnnu savipotid on äravahetamiseni sarnased Pihkvamaa keraamikaga, on Võnnus millalgi 12. sajandi teisel poolel või 13. sajandi esimesel veerandil töötanud Pihkvamaalt pärit või seal õppinud pottsepp.

Seega ehitati Võnnu kirik 13. sajandi algul ilmselt suurde ja mõjukasse külla, millest sai ka kohaliku kirkukihelkonna keskus.