



## Follow-up excavations on the Ahli grave-field

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### INTRODUCTION

The Ahli grave-field ‘Kalmumägi’ on the land of the Uha farm in Kiviküla, Lääne County, was discovered in 1986 after the northern part of it was heavily damaged during road construction and levelling works in 1981–1985, undertaken by the former ‘Külvaja’ kolkhoz (Mandel 1986). Larger stones were removed to be crushed, most of the cultural layer on the central part of a natural limestone elevation was pushed towards the western and northern edges of the grave-field, forming a 60 m long and ca. 1–2 m high rampart. Rescue excavations were conducted by Mati Mandel in the summer of 1986 – in total 192 m<sup>2</sup> of the disturbed grave-field was excavated, as well as a part of the rampart, gathering most of the out-of-context finds from it (Mandel 1987, 369–370; 2003, 61–64). Among the 500 find numbers ornaments and belt fittings clearly dominated, while the damaged area contained relatively few weapons and parts of horse equipment, compared to other graves of the similar type from western Estonia. 95 numbers of heavily burnt human bones were collected. Based on the finds the Ahli grave-field was then dated to the 7th–13th centuries AD.<sup>1</sup>

Neither sieving nor metal detectors were used during the 1986 excavations, resulting in leaving many smaller finds and fragments of burnt bones undetected. During the initial excavations it remained unclear whether there was an undisturbed stone setting of the grave-field under some parts of the rampart. Already in 1998, some casual metal detector finds from the excavated soil-heaps collected by the author of the present paper indicated the need to completely re-examine the ground, in order to collect the remainder of the finds and bones.<sup>2</sup> As no major ground works had been carried out on the premises since, the soil-heaps had remained largely intact until the 2020s, when the south-western parts of these heaps were slightly levelled by timber transport and heavy farming machinery had passed over the stone setting of the grave-field. In 2023 it was decided to start sieving the heaps and tidying up the surroundings of the excavated area. Also, the maximum reach of the grave-field needed establishing.

<sup>1</sup> The finds of 1986 are stored in the Foundation of Haapsalu and Läänemaa Museums in Haapsalu (HM 8045: 1–500 Arh). The bone material is currently unavailable.

<sup>2</sup> Kept in the archaeological collection of the Estonian History Museum, together with some earlier finds from the surroundings of the Ahli grave-field (AM A 645: 1–10).

## SIEVING

An area at the edge of the surrounding field, directly behind the rampart was selected for placing the four sieves (Fig. 1). First, the ground was surveyed with a metal detector, which yielded 29 finds from a heavily disturbed layer. Probably the edge of the grave-field had earlier reached here, but due to extensive ploughing, stone removal, and erosion only 10–15 cm of rough gravel had remained on an otherwise sloping limestone elevation. The landowner provided machinery to carefully remove the uppermost turf layer from the rampart and removed the sorted stones and soil after sieving. In total a 25 metres long stretch of ca. 4–5 metres wide and approximately a metre high rampart on the western and north-western side of the grave-field was sieved, resulting in an excavated area of ca. 130 m<sup>2</sup>. Already in the beginning it became obvious that there are (undisturbed?) remains of the stone setting under the soil-heaps, in a narrow stretch between the edge of the field and the area excavated in 1986. The rampart on top of it was removed for sieving, but the stone setting itself was not fully cleaned. During the last days of the dig an area was reached where the stone setting suddenly ended. Further studies are needed to determine whether such patches of stone setting have also survived under the northern part of the rampart.



Fig. 1. Sieving of the rampart.

Jn 1. Mullavalli sõelumine.

Photo / Foto: Heikki Pauts

## THE FINDS

Altogether 427 find numbers<sup>3</sup> were gathered, mostly small fragments of copper alloy and iron objects which were overlooked during the 1986 excavations. Large groups of spiral tubes, small rings, formless melted fragments, potsherds, etc. were grouped together under the same find numbers, individually recognizable objects were registered separately. Some larger objects (fragments of spearheads, sword pommels, etc., see Fig. 2) found by sieving came from the deepest layers of the rampart – it is possible that these in fact originate from the turf

<sup>3</sup> HM 9224: 1–427 Arh.

layer that once covered the stone setting, as it was impossible to distinguish the turf layer from the rampart during the excavations. A bone comb dated to the 12th–13th centuries (Fig. 2) probably comes from a similar context – so far only small burnt fragments of such double composite combs have been found from stone graves (Luik 1998, 136). In total 34 glass beads or their fragments were collected, as well as 31 belt plaques with a cross motif, two cross-shaped pendants, other small intact ornaments and a large number of fragments. Compared to the eight silver objects found in 1986, in total 21 items of silver were gathered in 2023, including belt fittings, parts of penannular brooches and other ornaments. Among the finds were two Abbasid coins (809 and 931 AD) and one minted in Cologne (Archbishop Adolf I, 1194–1204).<sup>4</sup> The sieving also yielded the earliest find from the Ahli grave-field until now – an equal-armed brooch of Scandinavian type, dated to 520–550 AD (Fig. 3, Jørgensen 1994, 532–533).

Mostly tiny fragments of ceramics were gathered from the sieves, larger and recognizable pieces represented types of handmade pottery typical to the contemporary material from cemeteries in western Estonia. In total almost 7.2 kg of small, fragmentary burnt bones were collected from the sieves – an analysis of this out-of-context material will be carried out after the whole rampart has been sieved, in combination with the bones gathered during the 1986 excavations.

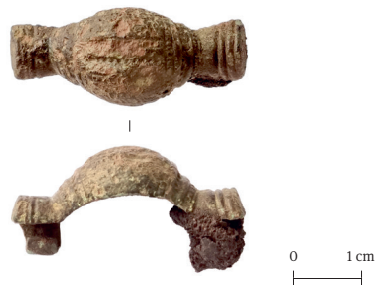
### SURVEY OF SURROUNDINGS

In addition to sieving, a metal detector survey was carried out in order to help establish the actual reach of the Ahli grave-field. In 1986, only four 50 × 50 cm trial-pits were dug into the surroundings to determine the approximate area of the grave-field. In 2023, based on visual examination of the surface and edges of the two main pathways crossing the central area of the protected monument it became obvious that the stone setting reaches much further than originally thought. Dark soil, holding packed stones, showing occasional fragments of burnt bones and finds indicates the presence of a rich cultural layer of the grave-field.

Detector signals HM2, 26, 127, 128 and 131 from the ploughed field to the west and north-west of the grave-field (Fig. 4) yielded typical grave goods from the 11th–13th centuries: fragments



**Fig. 2.** A sword pommel and a bone comb.  
**Jn 2.** *Mõõga käepidemenupp ja luukamm.*  
 (HM 9224: 187, 182 Arh.)  
 Photo / Foto: Heikki Pauts



**Fig. 3.** An equal-armed brooch.  
**Jn 3.** *Võrdhaarne sõlg.*  
 (HM 9224: 427 Arh.)  
 Photo / Foto: Heikki Pauts

<sup>4</sup> Coins were identified by Ivar Leimus (AM).



**Fig. 4.** Metal detecting helped to identify finds that were essential for establishing the reach of the grave-field. The inner red line marks the current border of the monument, the outer red line shows the current protection zone.

**Jn 4.** Detektorisignaaside abil kalme piiride otsimiseks välja kaevatud leiud. Sisemine punane joon tähistab praegust kaitsealuse mälestise piiri, välimine praegust kaitsevööndit.

Mapping / Kaart: Andres Rüdja, Estonian Land Board / Maa-amet



**Fig. 5.** An intact burial complex HM220 in situ.

**Jn 5.** Matusekompleks HM220 in situ.

Photo / Foto: Heikki Pauts

of jewelry and belt fittings. Three more signals from the southern part of 'Kalmumägi' were chosen for lifting the objects. All of those (HM 134, 220 and 221) yielded horse bits dating from the Late Iron Age, HM220 providing evidence of the original stone setting of the grave-field (see below). The precise locations of the pits were mapped with a professional GPS-device (Leica Viva GS15) of the Estonian Land Board. As a result, a more precise understanding of the area emerged, helping to alter the necessary protection measures and borders of the monument. Large areas of the ca. 9000 m<sup>2</sup> grave-field have been disturbed in the course of times, but its central, southern, and south-western parts have remained mostly untouched, possibly reaching even further than detected.

A detector signal (HM220) indicated an intact burial complex (Fig. 5), which was unearthed and thoroughly excavated in a pit of 1 × 1 metres. The cremation burial in

the depth of 15 cm, partly covered and surrounded by stones, comprised of horse bits, a knife, an axe with a punched cross-shaped decoration on both sides of the blade (Fig. 6), a fragment of a scythe, a bent spearhead, a penannular brooch with a finger-ring and some belt fittings. Several large sherds of coarse hand-made pottery and burnt bones were found in the direct surroundings of the metal finds, the soil and the bottom layer of natural gravel being extremely sooty in the southern half of the pit. This possibly indicates the edge of a cremation site – similar sooty patches, approximately 2–3 metres in diameter, were also discovered during the 1986 excavations. The burial complex can be dated to the 12th century.



**Fig. 6.** Punched cross-shaped decorations on the blade of an axe.

**Jn 6.** Puntsitud ristikujulised kaunistused kirve labal. (HM 9224; 223 Arh.)

Photo / Foto: Heikki Pauts

## CONCLUSIONS

The follow-up excavations in 2023 on the Ahli grave-field – one of the largest in western Estonia – provided valuable additional information about the finds and the reach of the stone setting, which helps to better understand the wealthy deposits of the local community who used the burial site during the 6th–13th centuries. Living only approximately 1.5 km from the coast, the prehistoric people of Ahli must have participated in exploiting the passing marine trade routes, as witnessed for instance by many fragments of silver ornaments and coins found from the grave-field. The finds from the sieving complete the material gathered during the 1986 excavations, enabling a more elaborate statistical and typological analysis of the grave goods from the largely disturbed north-western part of the monument. In 2024, the rest of the rampart in the northern part of the grave-field will be sieved and probable remains of the surviving stone setting underneath it will be mapped.

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## JÄRELUURINGUD AHLI KIVIKALMEL

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Lääne maakonnas, Ahli külas „Kalmumäe“ nime all all tuntud kivikalme avastati 1986. aastal. Tolleaegne kolhoos lõhkus masinatega selle põhjapoolse osa – suuremad kivid veeti purustajasse, looduslikult kõrgema künka keskosa lükatil lääne ja loode suunda 60 m pikkusse ja meetri kõrgusse mullavalli ning osaliselt ka põhja-kirde suunas kulgeva põllutee täiteks. Samal aastal toimunud avariikaevamistel uuriti Mati Mandeli juhatusel läbi lõhutud alale jäänud kalmekivistiku riismed ja osa mullavalli lükatud kalmekihist. Kuna nendel kaevamistel ei kasutatud veel mulla sõelumist ega metallidetektorit, siis oli ootuspärane, et kõiki väiksemaid leide ja põletatud luid ei leitud. 1998. aastal avariuuringute säilinud mullahunnikuid detektoriga kontrollides tekkis mõte, et leiumaterjali täielikkuse tagamiseks oleks vaja korraldada lisa-uuringud, mille käigus tuleb kogu muld uuesti läbi sõeluda. Kalme piiride määramiseks kaevati 1986. aastal neli 50 × 50 cm šurfi, millest saadi leidudena vaid üksikuid savinõukilde ja põlenud luid, seega vajas täpsustamist kogu teadaoleva kalme ulatus. Ebaselgeks oli jäänud küsimus, kas kuhjatud mullavalli all on samuti säilinud võimalik puutumatu kalmekivistik. Nende probleemide lahendamiseks alustatigi 2023. aastal järeluuringuid.

Sõelad paigutati kalmest lääne poole jääva põllu serva (jn 1). Künnapiirist 6–7 m kaugusele ulatuvat ala kontrolliti eelnevalt metallidetektoriga, sest varem ulatus kalmekiht ilmselt ka siia. Pikaajalise kündmise, kivikoristuse ja erosiooni tulemusena on kalmekiht nüüdseks praktiliselt kadunud, jättes alles vaid 10–15 cm paksuse kruusakihi, mis asub otse ühtlasest paest aluspõhjal. Pinnasest korjati detektori abil välja 29 numbrit leide. Maaomaniku ekskavaatoriga kooriti ettevaatlikult mullavalli katvat paksu mätta ja juurte kihti ning eraldati rootoriga sellest muld, mis samuti läbi sõeluti. Valli all, praktiliselt kogu kaevatud ala ulatuses paljastus puutumatuna säilinud osa kalme kivistikust, mille pealmist kihti siiski täielikult välja ei puhastatud. Sellise meetodiga kaevati läbi 25 m pikkune, keskmiselt 4–5 m laiune ja meetri kõrgune lõik mullavallist, kaevatud ala suurus oli 130 m<sup>2</sup>. Kas kivistiku jäänuseid leidub ka kalme põhjaosas oleva valli all, peab selguma jätkuva sõelumise käigus – sealne mullavall jäi 1986. aastal läbi uurimata, kuna sinna lükatud kalme kultuurkiht oli kaetud kruusa ja suurte kividega.

Kaevamistel koguti 427 numbrit leide, põhiliselt väikesed katkendid. Mõned suuremad esemed pärinevad ilmselt mullavalli all olnud puutumatuna säilinud kalmekivistiku ülemisest horisondist, kuna

nendevahelist piiri oli kaevamise ajal keeruline eristada. Sellised leiud olid näiteks kaks odaotsa tippu, mõõga nupp koos käepideme katkendiga ja põlenud kahepoolne luukamm (jn 2). Sõelale jäi muuhulgas 34 klaashelmest, 31 nelinurkset ristküjutisega vöönaastu ning palju muid ehte ja vööosade katkendeid. Kaks Abbassiide münti (809 ja 931 pKr) ning Kölni peapiiskop Adolf I verming (1194–1204) kinnitavad kalme üldist dateeringut, aga sõelumisel leiti ka senini varaseim leid kalmest – aastatest 520–550 pärinev skandinaaviapärase võrdhaarne sõlg (jn 3). 2023. aastal koguti ligi 7,2 kilo põlenud luid, mida analüüsitakse täpsemalt koos ülejäänud valli sõelumisel leitavate ja 1986. aasta kaevamistel kogututega.

Paralleelselt mullavalli sõelumisega võeti ette Ahli kalme tegelike piiride väljaselgitamine. Kuna isegi kalmet läbivate teede servades on selgelt näha kivistikku ja kultuurkihti, otsustati käia metallidetektoriga läbi kalmet ümbritsev ala. Valdav enamik detektori signaale võeti ainult teadmiseks, välja kaevati üksikud leiud kalme kaugematest osadest, mis mõõdistati Maa-ameti GPS-iga (jn 4). Selgus, et Ahli kalme esialgne ala hõlmab rohkem kui 9000 m<sup>2</sup>, ehkki suur osa sellest on kruusavõtmise ning hilisemate tegevustega tugevasti lõhutud. Kindlamalt võib väita, et kivistik on paremini säilinud kõrgendiku edelaosas, mille praegust kaitsevööndit on tarvis tunduvalt laiendada.

Üks detektori signaal (HM220) osutas terviklikule leiukompleksile (jn 5), mille uurimiseks tehti selle ümber 1 × 1 m kaevand. Leiud algasid mättast 15 cm sügavusel, raud- ja paekivide vahel. Kõige peal asetsevad suurauad, mille rõngastest oli läbi torgatud nuga. Nende all olid kirves (jn 6) ning vikati katkend ja kõige sügavamal painutatud tipuga odaots. Lisaks nendele kuulusid kompleksi ka ehted ja vööosad: hoburaud-sõlg koos sõrmusega, pannal, spiraalsõrmus ning rihmajagaja. Kompleksi lähedal esines väga tumedas mullas palju tugevalt põlenud luukilde ja jämekeraamika katkendeid. Tegemist on oletatava krematsioonikoha servaga – sarnaseid 2–3 m läbimõõduga laike avastati ka 1986. aasta kaevamistel. Leiukompleksi on võimalik dateerida 12. sajandisse.

Ahli „Kalmumäe“ lõhutud loodeosa järeluuringutega koguti suur hulk leide ning luid, mis täiendavad 1986. aasta kaevamiste tulemusi ja võimaldavad ühe Lääne-Eesti suurema kivikalme leiumaterjali põhjalikumalt analüüsida. Asetedes vaid 1,5 km rannikust, oli see 6.–13. sajandil matmiskohaks muistsele kogukonnale, mis osales mereteid mööda toimunud kaubanduses, nagu tunnistavad näiteks paljud kalmest leitud hõbesemete katkendid ja mündid.