

Conference excursion to southern Estonia April 18, 2026

1. Medieval stone cross at Tatraorg valley is not in its original location. Probably it belonged to a burial site on the other side of the road, but it also can be a roadside cross – to commemorate some accident, murder or death case, and to call passers-by to pray for the soul of the deceased. Granite crosses with a cross mark in the centre are typical for medieval Tartu bishopric.



2. Makita village cemetery called Kabelimägi ('Chapel Hill') represents medieval rural burial practices. The double system of churchyards and local village cemeteries existed in present-day Estonia and Latvia since the 13th century Christianisation until Early Modern Times. Such cemeteries were located in the distance of 100/200–700/800 m from the village, as we also see in Makita. These burial sites were evidently legal in the Catholic period, but were prohibited by Lutheran Church when southern Estonia became a part of Sweden. The land was conquered from Poland in 1625 and the change was legally formed by Oliva peace treaty 1629.

On village cemeteries mainly west-oriented inhumations prevailed, but people were buried with simple jewellery (brooches, finger rings, necklaces) and often with some grave goods – coins and small tools (mainly knives and needles). Transition period practices survived until the 18th century.

Makita is, however, not a typical Estonian village cemetery. It was founded in the late 13th century by an immigrant community from the Pskov or Novgorod Land, and it represents medieval eastern Finno-Ugric burial practices, such as, e.g. in Ingermanland and Karelia. Conventionally this ethnic group can be called "Votic". The cemetery is covered by irregular stone setting that may partly originate from stone enclosures that marked grave borders on the ground (so-called *zhalniks*). The jewellery also differs from Estonian: women and girls had temple rings and bracelets, that are alien for the Estonian culture. Women were often buried with keys. Also crema-

tion was practiced on top of Makita Kabelimägi until the 15th century. The sooty area with cremains contained numerous pottery fragments. The community maintained their ethno-cultural identity until the mid-15th century and melt among the Estonians then. The cemetery was used as a typical Estonian village burial ground (people buried with brooches, rings, necklaces, coins, knives) until the early 18th century.

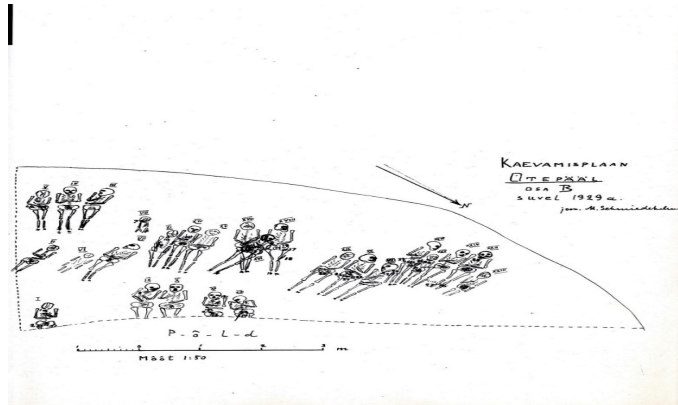
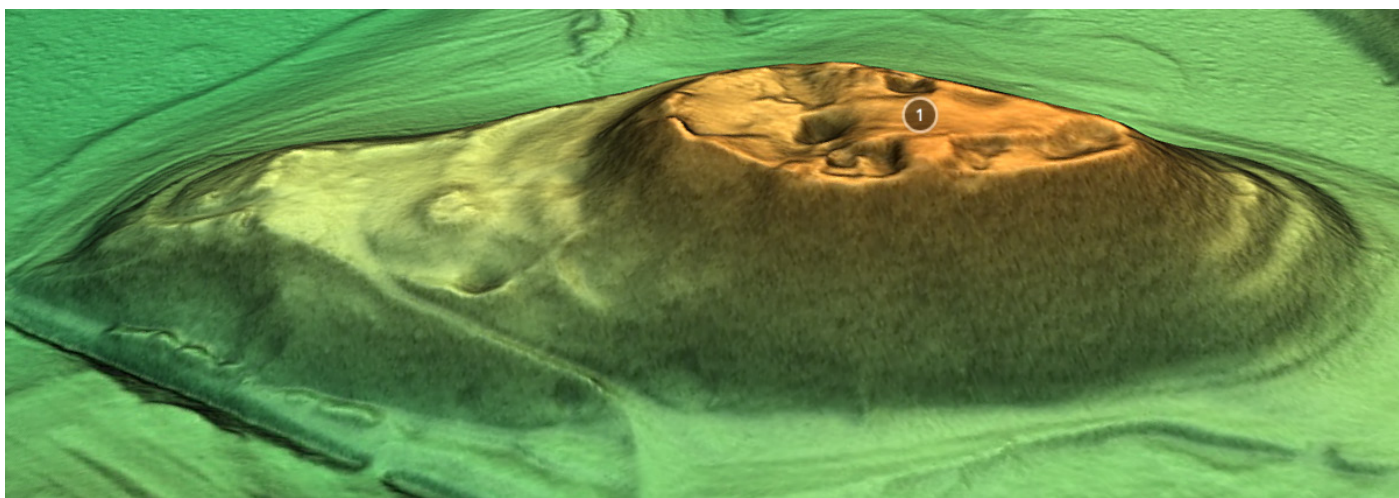


3. Otepää

Otepää hill fort is the biggest and most important hill fort in southern Estonia. Otepää means “bear’s head” in Estonian and such name can be found also in Russian and Latin sources. It is first mentioned in Russian chronicles in 1116. The hill fort, ca. 30 metres high, has 2 plateaus (ca. 8800 m² in total). Otepää is repeatedly noted in the chronicle of Henry of Livonia. Steep slopes make it one of the best naturally protected strongholds in Estonia. Otepää was probably the “capital” of whole south-eastern Estonia in the early 13th century. The hill was permanently occupied since mid-1st millennium already.

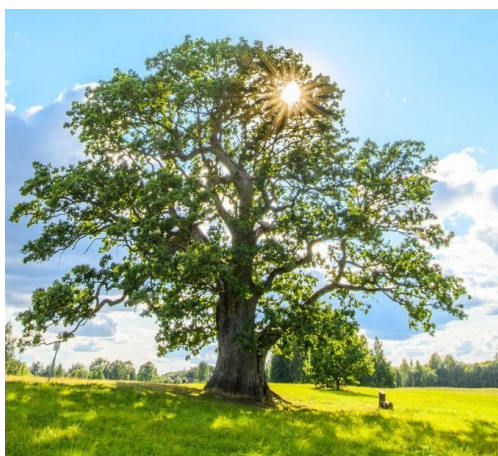
In 1224 Otepää capitulated to the crusaders and became the residence of the bishop of Tartu for a decade. The hill fort was replaced by a red brick stone castle that existed until the mid-15th century. The site was excavated in 1950–1974. The find material is very rich, but documentation is poor and a synthesis is not possible.

At the foot of the castle there was a big settlement – a borough with parish church, stone houses and several hundreds of inhabitants. A cemetery with ca 150 excavated plague victims, probably from 1378 when only 1/6 or 1/10 of the bishopric’s population survived, is located near the bus station. East of the hill fort there is a 13th–17th cc. cemetery with a medieval stone cross. A similar cross is also in the churchyard.



4. Between Otepää and Urvaste we cross the **Sacred River Võhandu** or Pühajõgi ('sacred river') – a stream in its upper course yet. The pastor of Urvaste Johann Gutsclaff published a theological book on the “false sacredness” of the river in 1644, initiated by the fact that local peasants destroyed Sõmerpalu manor water mill in 1642. Hindering the waters of the sacred river was considered to be the reason for permanently bad weather. Pühajõgi was believed to be the home of Thunder. The pastor also noted that children were sacrificed to the river in case of bad weather in the past, and that annual ox sacrifices still continued.

5. Tamme-Lauri oak is the biggest and oldest oak in Estonia. It is 17 m high and its perimeter is 8.5 metres. The tree was considered sacred and “fire god” Laurits (popular derivate name from St. Lawrence) was believed to live in its trunk. The tree has survived the Herrnhut brothers' activities against sacred natural sites in the 18th century. It is considered to have started growing since 1326.



6. Urvaste church is the only rural basilica in Estonia. The church might date from the last quarter of the 14th century, but a 13th century Gotlandic coin from the churchyard from between 1220s–1280s indicates the presence of earlier churchyard there. The church has, as most medieval churches in eastern Estonia suffered much from wars and has lost its vaults. It was somewhat extended in the 18th century.



7. Ala-Kõrtsi 13th century cemetery. Ca. 500 m west of the church is a 13th century cemetery, discovered and heavily looted by illegal metal detectorists. Rescue investigations of 2017 yielded a large number of jewelry (rings, brooches, bracelets) from graves disturbed by ploughing. The find assemblage dates from the 13th century. Bracelets are almost missing in typical village cemeteries. To get information on the burial rites, small-scale investigations took place in 2024 when 6 skeletons, part-

ly destroyed by ploughing were unearthed. In Urvaste a specific feature of Võrumaa (south-eastern Estonia) medieval village burial rites was observed: men and women were directed in opposite directions: men towards the west, women – towards the east. Also the remains of a shawl, richly decorated with bronze spiral tubes, as well as a cenotaph burial with 2 bracelets, a ring, knife and fire steel with flint was discovered. Ala-Kõrtsi cemetery was deserted in the late 13th century when the churchyard was founded. It represents the early phase of post-crusade Christian burials.



8. Restu village cemetery has a typical for its location at roadside, although the medieval horse way has developed into a modern road. The site has not been excavated, but numerous parallels suggest its date from the mid-13th to the early 18th century. As typical for village cemeteries during the time of using, it is also now covered with trees.



9. Sangaste hill fort has a rampart on the slope that is very untypical for Estonia. It was excavated in 2007 – 2 trenches at the edge of the plateau and one cutting the rampart. The edge of the plateau has been raised with added soil (the fill layer is up to 2.25 m thick). The stronghold has remained unfinished – there should be a circular rampart also at the edge of the plateau. Radio-carbon dates (95.4%) are: 1) 1019–1193 or 1195–1213; 2) 1131–1133 or 1159–1297 (both from the plateau, before adding the fill) and 3) 1023–1221 (char in the circular rampart). One trench gave no finds, from the other late 12th – early 13th c. wheel-thrown pottery was found. The missing upper rampart shows that the hill fort remained unfinished. Maybe the fort was founded during the big uprising of 1223 against the Crusaders? It seems that people of the stronghold had prepared themselves for an forthcoming attack, collecting fire-cracked stones for defense in stone heaps at the edge of the plateau.

