Latest Iron Age inhumation cemeteries of northern and eastern Estonia and their closed find complexes

Summary

From ca. 1050 AD to the end of the Late Iron Age (dated differently: from 1200 AD until 1250 AD) large social and cultural changes took place in Estonia. In burial customs a new tradition beside cremation – inhumation burials – emerged as early as in the second half of the 10th century. In the 11th century inhumation burials appeared near the stone graves and in the 13th century they became dominant in northern Estonia. The time of break in the material culture at transition from Prehistoric to Medieval Ages is not clearly determined. Period from the end of the Viking Age to the early Middle Ages has the richest archaeological material in Estonia, but its chronology is quite incomplete and outdated.

The aim of the present study was to clarify the chronology of the Latest Iron Age finds. Therefore 13 cemeteries with almost 300 closed complexes were considered to specify the dates of certain single artifact types, to verify their previous datings, to try to identify chronological groups of the finds, to concretize the datings of the cemeteries and, last but not least – to get in personal touch with the archaeological material from the period under discussion.

The 13 cemeteries considered in the study are as follows: Kaberla, Mallavere and Tallinna Niguliste from Harjumaa County; Pada, Küti, Tammiku, Viru-Nigula and Mäetaguse from Virumaa County; Raatvere, Lahepera, Õvi, and Ulila from Tartumaa County and Tooste from Võrumaa County (Fig. 1). Selection of analyzed artifact types was made on the basis of multiplicity and homogeneity: the discussion involved the most numerous and most homogenous find types. Conclusively 15 objects were chosen (Appendix 1): bracelets twisted of three bronze wires, bronze spirals, bronze chains, knife sheaths with bronze endorsement, bronze rings, cross-headed pins with completely connected terminals, bronze bells with relief...
cincture, bronze bells without decoration, spiral-headed pins, penannular brooches with rolled terminals and round section, penannular brooches with faceted terminals and so-called square ornament and rhomb section, penannular brooches with faceted or rectangular terminals and rhomb section, spiral bracelets, so-called Gotland-Baltic type buckles and lyre-shaped fire-steels.

In Pada cemetery, some of these artefact types were from closed complexes with Gotlandic coins from the 1220s–1230s (see Appendix 2). According to these finds, it was possible to specify the datings of objects involved in respective close complexes objects more precisely. Considering with the circulation of these coins on the average of 30 years, the datings of bracelets twisted of three wires, bronze spirals, chains, knife sheaths and penannular brooches with faceted or rectangular terminals could be specified to second or third quarter of the 13th century.

Single coin finds are still not enough to date these mentioned artefacts also in other cemeteries. So I tried to find out how these selected 15 object types figure with each other (see tables 2 and 3) – my aim was to clarify if any more narrow chronological groups among the objects would become evident. This, although, did not appear, and no non-contemporaneous groups became obvious. This shows that all 15 artefact types were in use at the same time and burial complexes, where they were found, may be simultaneous; but it does not show when each cemetery was founded and when it was abandoned.

For making an absolute chronology coin datings were used: as told, in Pada cemetery Gotlandic coins from the 1220s–1230s dated some artefacts to the second and third quarter of the 13th century. With Pada cemetery we can be more specific: considering all coin-finds and the great number of all 15 artefact types, it would be possible to speculate the beginning of the cemetery to belong into the 1220s. To specify this theory, other findings should be considered in the study as well. The upper chronological limit of Pada cemetery can be determined by the fact that mintage in Tartu and Tallinn increased in 1265. The fact, that coins from the last third of the 13th century do not occur in Pada cemetery lets us speculate that burying there had come to an end before the year 1265. Using Pada’s coin datings and considering the similarity between northern Estonian inhumation cemeteries, it can be assumed that the use of Küti, Mallavere and Tammiku cemeteries ended also in the second or third quarter of the 13th century. At the same time there seems to be some kind of transition from Prehistoric times to
the Middle Ages in Kaberla and Lahepera cemetery. Mäetaguse cemetery is represented only with one burial, and this is not enough to say, how long was this cemetery in use and how much did it resemble with other northern Estonian inhumation cemeteries.

About southern Estonian inhumation cemeteries, since Ulila, Õvi and Tooste were represented only with one burial, nothing new can not be said. Raatvere cemetery had more burials, but it seems to be earlier than northern Estonian cemeteries.

Niguliste cemetery in Tallinn and Viru-Nigula cemetery are both located at medieval churches. The graves at Niguliste church in Tallinn cannot be dated more exactly than into the first half of the 13th century. Graves from Viru-Nigula are the latest among the considered 13 cemeteries – one of them can be dated to the second or third quarter of the 13th century. Present study shows some kind of turning point in material culture in northern Estonia in the second or/and third quarter of the 13th century. So it can be presumed that transition from Late Iron Age to Middle Ages took place in that time in North Estonia.

To be able to make more specific conclusions about the datings, burial customs, society, clothing, etc., it would be necessary to consider more artefact types, their ornament, denudation and evolution, also to pay more attention to their area of distribution, and to their datings in the neighboring areas. To draw more extensive conclusions, open settlement sites and strongholds with their findings should also be involved.