IDEOLOGY AND TRADITION IN LANDSCAPE CHANGE:
A CASE OF THE HELME PARISH, ESTONIA

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This paper traces the territorial structures of power in the Helme Parish in south Estonia. Territorial power structures convey abstract ideology upon a landscape: it shows who makes the decision, who owns the land and how it is celebrated, and how far the influence lingers. These structures involve taxation and administration units as well as property etc., which also determine social behaviour, e.g. which villages get along better with each other. Sometimes it seems that long established social ties in landscape can survive new territorial power structures, i.e. that tradition prevails over ideology. We hypothesise that: a) Changes in power structures find their way through the ideology and new regulations to inscribe new layers in material and immaterial culture, e.g. settlement patterns, and ways in which landscapes are understood; b) These changes could happen only if the ideology of change is supported and carried out by all members of society, not only the elite; and c) Different power levels practise diverse territorial strategies. The study demonstrates that the primary power relations are stable in the landscape. Their location has been constant since the Early Iron Age.

Keywords: landscape change, interface, ideology, power in landscape, settlement shift

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes its point of departure in a viewpoint that landscape forms a set of interfaces (Palang & Fry 2003), i.e. areas where different elements meet and could be integrated for common benefit. Landscapes are studied by a variety of disciplines drawing on different approaches that handle the research object differently. As to the challenge of what landscape means to each discipline, e.g. area, arena, administrative unit, picturesque view, backdrop of human activities, living environment, mental image etc. it could instead be viewed as a forum of interfaces. Some disciplines treat landscapes as physical phenomena, others as social space or constructed reality; some see it as a collection of material objects and some as something non-material or perceivable. Some disciplines focus on nature or culture or on the landscapes of two succeeding cultures, past traces and future strategies. To acknowledge all these interfaces (nature-culture, culture-culture, material-mental, past-future, time-space etc.) as landscape’s inherent properties would ease inter- and transdisciplinary landscapes studies. Among these interfaces, we pay attention to the following. First, landscape should be handled as a whole, consisting of three interrelated parts, as described by Keisteri (1990). These layers include material features, nonmaterial perceived features and driving forces behind these two. Second, one way of reading a landscape is handling it as communication between different agents (see Widgren 2004): ideology, social systems, laws, justice, practice. Third, time plays a certain role in the landscape. Cosgrove (1984) has described how different socio-economic formations create their own landscapes with their own symbols and value systems. Palang et al. (2002) have argued that between these landscapes formed by succeeding socio-economic systems exist barriers that are not transparent, i.e. people without necessary background knowledge and experience are unable to understand
(read) the landscapes of the previous formation. Through the interface between mental and material and the interface different social orders/times, we can follow how power and tradition have (dis)placed settlement systems.

The interface between humankind and nature creates places where people prefer to conduct their everyday practices. Places where no activities occur could describe certain culture as well as places considered suitable for settlement and agriculture. However, these ‘favoured’ and ‘non-favoured’ places are not constant entities throughout history, and the choice is not merely dependent on objective physical reality, assuming that this reality has not changed dramatically. Ideology therefore determines the suitability of places for certain actions in certain periods. Yet sometimes it seems that long established social ties in landscape can persist in new territorial power structures. Landscapes are usually perceived as something very stable, although change is as inherent part of the landscape, e.g. seasonal changes. How much does it have to change (during how long period of time) to be perceived as the landscape of new formation?

This paper tries to trace the territorial power structures in the Helme Parish in South Estonia. We hypothesise that:

- Changes in settlement pattern, landscape understandings in both material and immaterial culture reflect the changes in power structures.
- These changes could happen only if the dominant ideology that causes change is supported and carried out by all members of society, not only the elite. If the support is not unanimous, it might lead to a formation of a “counter-landscape” (H. Palang, unpublished conference paper).
- The landscape and territorial strategy differs between power levels; the local (primary) power structures are more stable in time and space than those on the top level.

LANDSCAPE CHANGE

For better understanding of the changes in landscape we need to clarify the interface between the mental and material sphere in landscape in time. The prevalence of mental above easy-spotted physical changes should be scientifically well established: The basic concept which underlies all studies in environmental perception is that, where behaviour seems to be influenced by environment, that influence does not operate directly, but through an intermediate stage or stages. Behaviour is influenced by a person’s attitude towards the environment, not as it is, but as he thinks it is. In other words, the image of an environment is what counts, and this image may be distorted in all sorts of ways (Appleton 1996, 48).

Consequently one should begin with humankind and his behaviour while studying landscape changes. Human behaviour in the environment is driven primarily by power, ownership ideology and subsistence policy. This distorted image of an environment that changes together with socio-economic formation can be observed, for instance, in the development of settlement systems, centre/periphery relations, and in more recent time also in administrative territorial boundaries, thus in territorial power structures.

The nexus between structures (sensu Giddens 1984 or resources on one hand and habitus sensu Bourdieu 1977) and affordances (sensu Gibson 1986) on the other is made through practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1991). Practices leave their spatial-temporal imprint on the landscape, and are ‘informed’ by the already existing spatial order (Llobera 1996). Thus when a new socio-economic formation tries to create its own landscape with its own symbols and value systems (Cosgrove 1984), it lies upon ideology to decide whether structures of past practices are perceived as ‘favourable’ or ‘non-favourable’; sometimes it makes more sense to wipe off previous structures, to abandon them, or to replace them with new structures, in order to capitalise from the power of the previous formation. Places that are perceived ‘favourable’ through different formations give a reason to compare landscape
with a palimpsest – meaning a medieval writing block where an original inscription would be erased and another written over it, whereas fragments of previous writings are partly recognisable (Vervloet 1986, Crang 1998, Espersen 1999, Marcucci 2000).

As Sauer (1925/1963) wrote, culture inscribes itself on the landscape as the sum of erosures, accretions, anomalies, and redundancies over time. Some places have throughout history been constantly re-coded as ‘favourable’ and ‘non-favourable’. The changing formations may leave the physical objects untouched but then the functions, meanings, and understandings (of the landscape) are altered (Fig. 1).

![Diagram](image)

Fig 1. The morphology of change in landscape (Palang et al. 2002).

The changing formations create time limits to landscapes. Each formation shift changed the rules of (cultural) landscape development. The limits between the formations are not sharp; there is a certain time lag involved. The longer the transition from one stage to another, the better one can understand the previous formation. Sharp limits and big differences in ideology cause misunderstandings and incomprehension in landscape ‘reading’; the limits become shields that separate different understandings (see ‘jumps’ in Fig. 1). This is not only about researchers, it also influences people using landscapes everyday – they are not able understand the logic of the landscape any more.

The dialectics of change without real physical landscape change is caused by the different strategies that the different power levels presumably practice in the landscape. The primary settlement units have conservative ownership and power relations; they also behave in a conservative way in the landscape. At the same time, rapid changes on the top power level could bring along drastic reorganisations in cultural landscapes.

The invisible part of the landscape thus consists of two inseparable layers – chronology and ideology. We understand ‘ideology’ as the people’s relations to their surrounding environment, and the way they use this landscape in social behaviour, economic and symbolic acts. Chronology reflects how culture looks on the time axis, how one stage of development has influenced another (Lang 1999). The changes of ideology create time barriers in the landscape; these are as important in delimiting landscapes as are spatial boundaries. We will focus now on finding how these different ideological and chronological considerations have worked in shaping the landscape appearance in the Helme parish.

**TERRITORIAL POWER STRUCTURES HELME PARISH**

One of the easiest ways of following landscape changes in through exploring settlement structures. They are physical; they leave traces in archaeological materials that could be interpreted in order to follow the ideological changes. To do that, we have studied the Helme Parish in southern Estonia (Fig 2).
In changing settlement systems, two ‘rationally-influencing’ features play a role. One of them is economic power, carried out by economical units such as estates and collective farms, the other one is political system, expressed through administrative division of the area. We leave out the long list of historical power formations concentrating in the following in Estonia: the system of one dominating farm (Early Iron Age), the fort-and-settlement system (the Pre-Viking and Viking Ages), the fort district system (Late Iron Age), the system of manors and villages (the Middle and Modern Ages), the parcelled farms system, and the kolkhoz system (the second half of the 20th century).

The system of one dominating farm
The first landnam in the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age had resulted in the formation of the farming settlement; the second landnam took place where and when the possibilities for simple internal colonisation were exhausted. Increasing population density together with preservation of the extensive style of farming led to a sharper competition for arable land. It became more urgent to clarify the property relations and change to more intensive methods of farming. The property relations to (arable) land were marked usually in two ways in the landscape: on the one hand, stationary fences were erected around the fields (stone fences in northern and western Estonia, wooden fences inland); on the other hand, monumental stone graves were built above ground. Thanks to these changes in ideological features property relations become visible for archaeologists. The settlement system was apparently egalitarian, i.e. it mostly consisted of separate farms that built similar looking graves. Research has shown that more valuable grave goods were placed only in a few graves in some settlement units, while the graves in the surrounding area are relatively poor in finds. This indicates clearly defined territories where one more influential and wealthy farm dominated. This system is hard to imagine without some sort of taxation system, which means that a part of the production of other farms was collected by the dominating farm. While in northern Estonia this second landnam began in the Late Bronze Age, in the inland areas – and thus in Helme – this happened somewhat later, maybe during the Roman Iron Age (1st Millennium AD).

The stone graves in Helme have not been studied yet, but they allow distinguishing of four territorially defined areas. Their size is nearly identical with the one-dominating-farm system of the Early Iron Age in the western and northern parts of the parish. Two areas (Kärstna and Taagepera) have four settlement units marked with stone graves, one area (between Lõve and Helme) has two and one (in Pikasilla) has one. As the stone graves in south-western Estonia very often contain burials from later periods, one can assume that these settlement units remained in place (see Fig.3 for place names).
Important processes in the development of the ancient society took place in the Viking Age (8th to 11th century), when the fort-settlement systems were formed in many places in Estonia. These were settlement centres that consisted of a fort and an unfortified settlement situated close by, often at the foothill. The formation of such centres reflects the changes in the social order with much more powerful (or ambitious) people appear. In different parts of Estonia this process gave various results in land use and settlement system. In northern Estonian coastal areas the former settlement concentrated in fort settlements, i.e. close to the power centre, while in inland areas this concentration is not always apparent. In the former case, the new structures replaced the dispersed farm settlement pattern, causing significant shifts in both the location of settlements and the in the lines of power. New structures emerged side by side with the existing ones.

In Helme, the development followed the second route. The spread of finds leads to a conclusion that the settlement system expanded towards the central and southern parts of the parish. The power centre in the form of a fort settlement was created in Tõrva where no traces of a former settlement have been found. This was a creation of a new settlement unit approximately in the centre of the later parochial parish. Undoubtedly, life also continued in the older settlements in the north and west of the parish. Based on the currently available material, it is impossible to conclude whether these settlements were autonomous of Tõrva or whether some sort of subordination system was in place. At the same time, there are no grounds for assuming that one independent political entity within the limits of the Helme parish already existed. In areas further from Tõrva, autonomous units that opposed the centre have been noted. For instance, the pile dwelling in Lake Valgjärv in Koorküla indicates power struggle in the area. This remained a shortlived feature and alien to the area. It had socio-political and cultural links to the areas in the south, in the present-day Latvia.

The fort district system
In the 11th century, significant changes in power structures took place in Estonia. The former fort-settlement systems fell apart and stronger centres emerged. This process can be traced in two ways in the landscape. In places, the entire former centre was abandoned and a new one built in another site. Elsewhere, the unfortified settlement was removed from the foot of the fort, but the stronghold itself remained and was prepared further. The construction and maintenance of these new stronger centres was carried out through the system of fort districts – each fort was surrounded by a district that paid taxes or had other obligations to
the fort. The district, in turn, consisted of subdivisions – termed *vakus* – the inhabitants of which cooperated in fulfilling the duties. In better explored areas in northern Estonia it has been possible to demonstrate a link between one-dominating-farm system of the Early Iron Age, the ancient *vakus* system of the Late Iron Age and the historical *vakus* system of the 15th and 16th centuries (Lang 2002). This means that the primary power systems maintained their build-up throughout a couple of thousand years and did not depend too much on how the power relations in the top of the social hierarchy changed.

In Tõrva the fort-settlement system fell apart in the 11th century, but the fort and apparently the power centre stayed at the same place. The foothill settlement disappeared; the hill-fort was built stronger and mightier. Findings from the Late Prehistoric and Early Middle Age show that settlements were located in approximately the same areas as previously. Due to the lack of findings, it is impossible to say whether the Tõrva fort district covered the whole of the later Helme Parish.

*The system of manors and villages*

The next stage of extensive change occurred in the first half of the 13th century when Estonia was conquered by the German and Danish crusaders. Southern Estonia suffered the most in the conquest – the local elite was nearly eliminated; in northern Estonia and in Saaremaa both old power centres and those in power could partly uphold their positions. Despite the physical elimination of the former elite and its replacement by a new foreign one, the geographical location of the power seats did not change. This may not be surprising, as in all times, the power centres are located considering certain geographical, economical, and settlement logic. In Helme area, the power centre persisted. It was only moved a few kilometres northwest – from Tõrva to Helme, were both a castle of the Teutonic Order and a parochial church were built by the new rulers.

The parish church in Helme was first mentioned in 1329. It was probably built in the 14th century when the local power centre was moved there. The parish included the current Helme, Hummuli, and Põdrala communities, the areas surrounding Kärsna and Tarvastu that today are part of the Viljandi County, and Omuli, today in Latvia. The settlement in the 14th century expanded southwards where new estates, such as Holdre, Koorküla, Hummuli, and Aitsra were established. In all, a minimum of sixteen manorial estates were established in the territory of the Helme parish.

The medieval village graves indicate that the settlements were principally located in a similar pattern to the previous periods but had become larger. A continuing use of places like Kärsna and Taagepera as power seats may be traced back from the manors to the one-dominating-farm system functioned in the Early Iron Age.

*The system of consolidated farmlands and manors*

The parcellation of communal lands in the mid-19th century and selling of land titles to peasants demolished the existing land use structures and created a system of individual farmsteads. The community (*vald* in Estonian) became the primary unit of administrative power. Initially the communities were based on the estate system, but gradually these were separated and reorganised into larger units. By the end of the 19th century four communities existed on the territory of the Helme parish, with centres in Hummuli, Helme, Riidaja, and Taagepera. This can be interpreted as a continuation in the primary power structure. Helme with its parochial church functioned as the centre for the whole area. The emerging capitalist society became symbolised in the rebuilt manor houses of the estates, such as Taagepera, Holdre, and Hummuli. In the second half of the 19th century, new settlements started to emerge away from the estates. These were concentrated to crossroads close to the inns, such as Ala, and Tõrva. They quickly gained economic power and became centres for local life. A railway line was built between Valga and Pärnu passing through Helme Parish in the south (in present day Latvia) and supported the shift of settlements to that direction.
The private farm landscape of the interwar period

The following bigger change in the land use and ownership pattern was caused by the establishment of the independent Republic of Estonia in 1918 and the nationalisation of the estates the following year. The estate heartland was divided among those who had served in the War for Independence as awards. In places, the impressive manor houses were used as hospitals or schools. In northern Estonia, lack of land forced an establishment of new villages in less favourable lands. In the Helme area, new villages emerged on the former estate lands in Leebiku, Taagepeera, and Riidaja. The drawing of a border between the independent Republics of Estonia and Latvia cut off areas around Omuli and Ergeme (Härgmäe) and thus the vicinity of Holdre, Taagepeera, and Koorküla was marginalised practically overnight. The Valga county was established, to which the area was now subordinated. The settlement increase in Tõrva continued and town rights were granted in 1927. Power was divided between the parish centre – Helme/Tõrva – and the three new community centres in Hummuli, Põdrala (with a centre in the village of Riidaja), and Vaoküla (with a centre in Taagepeera). In 1932, parishes ceased to be administrative units.

Collective farm landscape

The Soviet period started with the nationalisation of all land in 1941 and the collectivisation of agriculture in 1947 to 1950. Initially, the land was left for the former owners to use, but since 1947 the collectivisation of agriculture was enforced and the collective farm became the primary power unit in the countryside. The mass deportation in March 1949 spurred the collectivisation along and, by the end of that year, 146 collective farms had been formed in the Valga County. In 1950 to 1952 this number was reduced to 52. Weaker enterprises were united and taken over by the state between 1956 and 1960 and thus only 26 agricultural enterprises in the whole county were left. Continued consolidation by 1986 resulted in three state farms (Hummuli, Tõrva, Taagepeera) and one collective farm in Riidaja named after Yakov Lyakhov, who had been a Soviet pilot shot down by the Germans in the Second World War somewhere around Riidaja and later proclaimed a hero of the Soviet Union. In many cases, the centres of the farms were located in the former estate centres, like in Hummuli and Riidaja, but also in Jeti, Leebiku, Reti.

Tõrva strengthened its position as a local centre when the Helme Parish enjoyed the status of a county in the years 1950 to 1959. Two big companies providing services to the Valga County – a construction and a land amelioration enterprise – were located in the vicinity of Tõrva. The centre of the Tõrva state farm was built close to the town in Patküla. At the same time, the southern part of the area gradually lost out. The collective farms initially established in Jeti and Holdre were joined; the Taagepeera state farm moved its centre northwards to the village of Karjatnurme on the main road from Valga to Pärnu. Finally, the Vaoküla municipality was united with Helme in the mid-1970s. The ideological aim was to unite administrative boundaries with those of agricultural enterprises. Although Tõrva enjoyed the status of the powerhouse for the area, the Hummuli state farm was economically stronger and provided services to the others contesting the power of Tõrva.

The postmodern re-emergence of private property

The abolishment of the collective farms has lead to a further concentration of settlement towards the centres in Tõrva/Helme, Hummuli and perhaps Riidaja and to a further marginalisation of the areas in the south and west of the parish. Loss of economic wealth has decreased the attractiveness of the area and pushed a search for new identities. The place of the collective farms as centres for local power has been taken over by community administration. Tõrva still serves as the centre for the whole parish, but Riidaja is increasingly turning its face north towards Viljandi, while Hummuli looks more towards Valga. The former centre Taagepeera is gradually loosing its importance and inhabitants, as are the former estate settlements on the Latvian border, such as Holdre, Jeti, and Koorküla.
A- Roman Iron Age (5th century BC to 4th century AD);
B- Medium Iron Age (5th to 8th century);
C- Estonian Viking Age (9th to 10th century);
D- Late Iron Age (11th to 13th century);
E- Middle Age (13th to 16th century);
F- Manors (incl. modern manors; first manor in Helme parish has been mentioned in 1516).

Fig. 4. Centres in the Helme parish.
CONCLUSIONS – POWER AND TERRITORIALITY

Landscape is a pattern of historic memory, consisting of both visible and invisible traces left by the millennia-long human culture in all its variability. Humans are not only born into their surroundings, but also create and recreate that surrounding. Similarly, relations between humans are constantly re-created, including power relations at different levels. This, in our opinion, is the traditional landscape we sought – landscape as the communication of age-old (power) relations from one generation to another, uniting both ideology and chronology.

The study of the Helme Parish (Fig. 4) demonstrated that the primary power relations (expressed through the settlement system of dominating farms/villages and the others) are extremely stable – the location of these structures has stayed constant since the Early Iron Age. The pattern persisted throughout historical period. Tõrva/Helme has formed a centre since the Viking Age at least. Kärstna, Taagepera, and Riidaja have been local power centres relatively long, although the border with Latvia, created in the 1920s, has gradually been eroding the importance of Taagepera. Hummul has emerged more recently as a local centre.

Primary structures, such as the vakus as taxation and administration units, remain at the same location historically, while symbols, meanings, values and functions are every now and then recoded, as are functions of some features. Attempts to alter this traditional structure, such as the creation of the village Soviets instead of rural communities in the Soviet period or establishing collective farms, seem to lead ultimately back to the reformation of the ages-old structures. In this sense landscape works similarly to the principle Granö (1929) used in 1920s while delimiting landscape regions of Estonia and Finland: (power) relations exist as continuous fields; there are core areas separated by transition zones. Strict delimitation of the range of the core area is difficult and often makes no sense. Landscapes work in time in the same way as they do in space.

Power creates the rules that after some time become usual for people and create no further problems. The conflicts that create a change rise from within the society, and there is no outside power or overarching laws. The different interest groups in the society used counter-ideology for reaching their aims, i.e. self-identification is done by opposing to something else. Realising these ‘ideals’ in practice is directly connected with power. The amount of possible social strategies (i.e. the way power is taken and expressed) is in fact limited and in reality they do not differ that much from the opposed strategies. The ‘playground’ is limited and most of the rules as well. In the opposite case the system would not be stable – a classical example of which is illustrated by the inability of totalitarian systems to find agents through which to carry out its ‘ideals’ permanently. Ideology having permanent influence is carried out not by certain interest group, but rather society as a whole and every member of the society individually. This is the way why for example the vakus system, formed already in the prehistoric times lasted into the Middle Age.

Summing up it seems that the wider and longer-lasting a change in the appearance of a settlement system is, the more probable that this change is driven not by some interest group, but agents and individuals following their everyday practice. Hence they, on the one hand, fortify the power, at the same time, change its base and thus cause deterioration in the ideology until a new ideology is needed.

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