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MASTERS OF THE BURIAL GROUNDS – ELITES, POWER AND RITUAL DURING THE MIDDLE IRON AGE IN VÄHÄKYRÖ

Abstract

In this article I argue that burials, from a social point of view, are dualistic entities that at the same time reflect both the power structures and the ideology of the society and that these two aspects may often be contradictory. As complex entities it is important to approach the subject with the aid of social theory to avoid oversimplification of a complex issue. I focus on the social and power elites of the Middle Iron Age and interpret changes in burials in Vähäkyrö, Ostrobothnia, from the perspective of changing power structures. It is suggested that the Migration Period in the area was characterised by ideological changes and power struggles that begun to be resolved during the Merovingian Period when power was centralised.

Keywords: Iron Age, power, ritual, elites, burials, Vähäkyrö, Ostrobothnia

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INTRODUCTION

In every society there exists a socially distinct group, or groups, of people who are socially separated from others in the society due to the status granted to them by others (Mosca 1939: 50; Olsen 1970: 106). From this it quickly follows that elite groups, consisting of a minority of the society, are easily formed and every society is, in the end, also ruled by a minority (Mosca 1939: 50; Bottomore 1985 [1964]: 12; Olsen 1970: 106). Though the social norms pertaining to this elite and the nature of the elite's rule varies between different societies, I do not believe this basic principle of the few ruling over the many can seriously be argued against. This is because a society, depending on mutual cooperation, requires social norms which guarantee its survival and these norms must be socially enforced upon the society. The larger the society is the more there is need for social control of the agents. Within the heart of this social control, and arising from it, are the elites of the society.

This paper takes a look at the Iron Age of Vähäkyrö in Ostrobothnia from the perspective of the society's elites and the development of power structures and the centralisation of power. The archaeological focus is on burials and burial grounds, however problematic these may be from the perspective of social analyses.

THE SOCIAL AND POWER ELITE

The term 'elite' is problematic as it is applied to a wide variety of groups within a society or even to groups within groups (see Bottomore 1985 [1964]: 1–23). Though the common denominator for all those coined as 'elite' is that they are distinct in social status when compared to others within the same group, the term is still too wide for analytical purposes. In the present paper I am interested in the elite who occupy the top levels of the social stratification, that is, those who have a distinct social status that gives them the right to claim legitimated authority within the society. I call this group with the term social

elite. Within this social elite are those who actually wield power granted by legitimated authority and to them, following Bottomore (1985 [1964]), I refer with the term power elite. It is important to understand that power elite is also a part of the social elite but as social elite itself is stratified, the power elite occupies the highest echelons of the social stratification within the social elite. It is evident that this dualistic approach is arbitrary but it is necessary for analytical purposes.

POWER, DEFINING POWER, RESOURCES OF POWER

Power exists in many forms in all social organisations and is thus an important aspect of social life and social reality. Power can be simply defined as the influence of one agent over the actions/opinions of another (Hawley 1963: 422; Olsen 1970: 2). By this definition it is easy to see that power exists in all arenas of social life and is thus not a commodity which can be easily singled out or measured (Bierstedt 1950: 730; Hawley 1963: 422–3; Etzioni 1968: 314–23; Olsen 1970: 2–3).

Power can be loosely classified, for analytical purposes, in three categories – force, dominance and authority. Of these, force is the ability to concretely apply one's power over the others, for instance in the case of physical coercion. Dominance rests on the ability to control a resource deemed important by the others and thus, via the control of this resource, attain a position of power in the society. Authority is based on ideological and social legitimation which embeds the power in the social structures of the society. Often all three forms are present in one way or another in any given power structure (Bierstedt 1950; Olsen 1970: 6–7).

Though different in nature, common to all three categories of power is that they require a power resource – something the power is based on (Olsen 1970: 4). In the case of force, the power is dependent on the resources to actually apply the needed concrete coercion over others. In the case of dominance the power resource is the resource on which the dominance is based on, be this concrete physical commodity and/or an ideological resource. Authority's power resource is a voluntarily given legitimation (Bierstedt 1950; Olsen 1970: 6–7).

If the power rests on the ability of physical coercion or on a single controllable resource, the power structure is unstable and precarious (Blau 1986 [1964]: 199–200; Lewellen 2003: 90). A stable power resource has two characteristics – it is embedded in the fabric of the social reality of the society and it is easily transferred from one agent to another thus removing the power structure from the individual agent (Bottomore 1985 [1964]: 43; Bourdieu 1977: 183–4). Legitimated authority fulfils these two characteristics. Legitimation creates a power resource which is easily transferable and embeds the power structure into the society's social reality. When embedded, the society itself enforces the power structure without the need of coercion. In other words, power becomes a part of the accepted social reality and agents are constrained by peer pressure to comply with it (Blau 1986 [1964]: 200; see also Bourdieu 1977: 171–3).

LEGITIMATION OF POWER – THE POWER OF RITUALS

Because legitimated authority is the only form of a stable power structure and because legitimation can occur only if the power structure is embedded in the social reality of the society, it is a logical conclusion that legitimation must take into account the ideology of the society. Nothing is so closely related to the ideology of a society than rituals.

A ritual is defined as a formal and repeating act which is often conducted in the same location (Kertzer 1988: 9). Though the term ritual can be used in many contexts (see Kertzer 1988), in this paper I use it to refer to an activity pertaining to the religious. Religion and its rituals indoctrinate followers into accepting its ideology and peoples' sense of group cohesion is at its strongest when participating in common rituals (Collins 1988: 191–5, 204; Bayman 2002: 77–8). As rituals represent the ideology of the society, whoever controls them and their material representations, is in a good position to gain legitimated authority over the society (Kertzer 1988: 13–4, 29, 38; DeMarrais et al. 1996: 15–7; Earle 1997: 144; Bayman 2002: 77–8). Thus rituals are strongly intertwined with societies and especially their power structures and legitimation (Kertzer 1988; Chapman 1995: 46; Fox 1996; Lewellen 2003: 65–7; Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006: 31).

THE RITUAL POWER OF BURIALS AND BURIAL GROUNDS

The archaeological focus of this paper is in burials so it is worthwhile to spend some ink to outline the meaning of burials, burial monuments, and especially the burial ritual. It is of course obvious that burials have been a major focus of archaeologists everywhere and this is especially true for Finnish Iron Age studies where the interest in burials has been so great in the past that settlement site data is still under-represented when compared to burial data. When it comes to social interpretations this kind of a one-sided material is detrimental as social interpretations should always be made by studying different types of archaeological material, settlement sites being among the most important (see e.g., Ucko 1969; Morris 1987: 8; Trinkaus 1995: 55; Härke 1997: 22; Cassel 1998: 30; Wickholm 2005: 35). Any social interpretation made on the basis of Finnish Iron Age material is thus destined to be hypothetical but this inconvenience should not discourage the attempt. With a solid theoretical framework the social of the Iron Age may yet be brought to light.

I wish to emphasize that I am not claiming that I can solve the single meaning of Iron Age burials within the pages of this short paper. As extremely complex entities the burials have more than likely had multiple meanings, of which some are contradictory with each other and thus any interpretation given is merely one aspect and does not represent the whole reality (Chapman 1995: 37–8). This, however, is not the topic of the present study so suffice to say that I fully acknowledge the complexity of the issue.

The Iron Age burials and burial monuments are the result of a ritual-cycle aimed at reproducing the social power structures of the society while at the same time reflecting the society's ideology which is, or becomes, partly contradictory with the actual social structures. This contradiction is a central theme of this paper.

Burials representing power structures

Social roles of the living affect the structures of their society and through this they affect the rituals performed by, and within, the society including burial and death rituals (Trinkaus 1995: 54). Burials are related to religion and although it is unlikely that institutionalized religions, such as

Christian religion, existed during the Iron Age, it is still justified to call Iron Age burial practices as religious.

Religion and religious activities, or activities with religious connotations, are closely related with institutions of political nature, that is, institutions of power (Lewellen 2003: 65–6). Thus the burial grounds have a great potential to reflect social power structures. Burial grounds and permanent burial monuments, such as cairns, are concrete symbols clearly defined in space. It is exactly these kinds of symbols to which identifying with, those in power can strengthen and legitimize their position in the society (see Okkonen 2003: 215–26). This is because these symbols represent, among other things, the stability and endurance of the society and they help to strengthen the identity of the society and its agents (Kertzer 1988: 18).

It should always be remembered that burials and death rituals have had meaning to the living and not to the dead (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006: 27; Goldhahn 2008). Thus we need to take into account the full ritual cycle associated with burials. I do not mean to say that we must attempt to reconstruct the actual rituals themselves, this would be impossible, but rather to theorize upon the social meaning of death rituals as a whole and not simply deal with the actual burials as *pars pro toto*.

From the perspective of power structures death rituals can be interpreted to have at least two aspects. The death of a powerful agent is dangerous to the power structure that the agent was central to and thus the agent's death is dangerous to the heirs (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). Death rituals in this context are important in renegotiating and legitimizing the position of the heirs and serve as controlling mechanisms during the dangerous period of transition from the old to the new power structure (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). Secondly death rituals are a good way for the power- and social elites to emphasize their own distinctive status as well as to promote group cohesiveness within the society as a whole. The elites' social status can be best emphasized with monumentality, which is an old trick of the power elite (Kertzer 1988: 22; Liston & Tuggle 2006: 171–2), but simply because this aspect is easiest to observe in archaeological record does not mean that it should be over-emphasized. We do not know what kind of death rituals were performed

during the Iron Age but looking at some examples from the rest of Europe shows that the rituals might have been extensive and could have lasted for considerable periods of time (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006: 32, 36–7, 43–5; Goldhahn 2008: 57). During this time several rituals, of which there is no archaeological evidence, could have been played out. As pointed out above, such ritual gatherings are moments when the group solidarity is often at its highest and thus it would have been easy for the power elite to place themselves in the middle of that solidarity and associate themselves directly with it.

Finnish archaeologists also agree that burial grounds and burial monuments are likely to be connected with power structures (e.g., Pihlman 1990; 2004; Schauman-Lönnqvist 1996; Wickholm & Raninen 2003). Recently Sirkku Pihlman has pointed out that there are less known Iron Age burial grounds than earliest known villages from the Middle Ages and she draws the conclusion that the late Iron Age burials more than likely represent only the upper parts of the Iron Age social hierarchy (Pihlman 2004; see also Asplund 2008: 355). An opposite view has been put forward by C.F. Meinander who has viewed, especially the later Iron Age society, as an egalitarian village society (Meinander 1980). He bases his interpretation on the collective nature of burials in the cremation cemeteries below level ground which to him signify an egalitarian ideology. However, Meinander also concurred that the Iron Age burials previous to the appearance of the cremation cemeteries were likely to represent a hierarchical society (Meinander 1980: 10).

Meinander was not wrong – that the cremation cemeteries might reflect an egalitarian ideology is likely a correct interpretation. Where he went wrong was to assume that ideology equals existing social structures.

Burials representing ideology

Burials have a strong link with ideology and within death rituals the ideal norms of the society are played out (Morris 1987: 32; Trinkaus 1995: 56–7; Diinhoff 1997: 111; Härke 1997: 23). From this follows the conclusion that burials do not reflect the actual reality of the society *per se* but rather the perceived ideal form of the society's social reality, i.e. the way the society either

perceives, or wishes to perceive, their reality. Because this ideal social reality is the desired state of affairs within the society it is understandable why the power elite wish to be associated with this ideology in order to gain and maintain their legitimate authority. Thus it is possible that burials, that seem to deliver a message of egalitarian ideology, occur in societies that are actually socially stratified (e.g., see Fontijn 2008: 93–4; Spikins 2008: 183) – one needs only to take a look at our own society to concur.

Cremation cemeteries below level ground, a representation of an egalitarian ideology?

The cremation cemetery below level ground, referred to as cremation cemetery in the present study, becomes the prominent form of burial in Finland around the 7th century AD and continues as the prevailing burial form to around 11th century AD when inhumation burial starts to prevail (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982: 7; Wickholm 2005: 32).

The distinctive feature of the cremation cemetery is that the burial form is collective in nature. The bone material and artefacts are scattered over a wide area and no individual burials can be discerned with the exception of some of the weapon burials of the 7th and 8th centuries, during the early phase of the use of the cemeteries, and the inhumations of the late Viking Age and Crusade Period, that is, during the final phase of the cemeteries' use (Wickholm & Raninen 2006; Wessman 2009).

Regarding the ideology represented by the cremation cemeteries, I am inclined to agree with Meinander – the collective nature of the burials does indeed reflect an egalitarian ideology. However, I argue that the society itself was stratified. It should be remembered that even though the final resting place of the remains lacks individuality, the death rituals preceding the cremation, and the cremation itself from sheer practical viewpoint alone, bear heavily individualistic aspects. The cremation ritual has likely drawn a great audience and may have been quite a spectacle (Crawford 2004: 97). As pre-cremation rituals have probably left few easily identifiable archaeological features it cannot be proved, but it can be reasonably argued, that they may have been magnificent. Another phenomenon speaks for the social

stratification behind the egalitarian ideology of the cremation cemeteries – the weapon burials of the Merovingian Period.

That the weapon burials signify stratification in the society that built the cremation cemetery is no new news as it has been suggested before (Wickholm & Raninen 2006; Wessman 2009). It has also been argued that the weapon burials of the early phase of the cremation cemeteries' use during the 7th and 8th centuries AD was an indication of two co-existing forms of burial, the collective and the individual, and this was a result of dualism in the concept of the soul and because the warrior elite, represented by the weapon burials, wished to maintain their individuality in burials (Wickholm & Raninen 2006).

To add another aspect to the discussion, I suggest that the individual weapon burials might have something to do with the belief that some agents were believed to be 'special dead' who have the power to sanctify space, in this case the cremation cemetery (see Crawford 2004: 95). As the cremation cemeteries have often been in use for several centuries (Wickholm 2005: 32; Wickholm & Raninen 2006: 151; Wessman 2009: 32–3) it is clear that the space of the cemetery can be termed as a location of continuous ritual activity. Such places are important for the power elite as being identified and associated with ritual places is a good way to gain legitimation for one's authority. Thus the weapon burials, as a distinctive element, could represent the power elite whose strength even in death might have believed to stretch over the cemetery and thus give the place its sanctity. It may also be that the Merovingian Period was a time when the power elite was feeling insecure and thus felt it necessary to distinct itself in the form of the weapon burials. I have argued previously that the Migration Period was a time of crisis in Finland and that during the Merovingian Period the new power elite, that rose from the turbulence of the Migration Period, began to consolidate its position (Kuusela 2008: 33–7). If this is the case then the disappearance of the individual weapon burials during the Viking Age might reflect the strengthened and consolidated position of the power elite. As the power structures became consolidated during the Viking Age, the need to make a distinction with weapon burials might have no longer been deemed as necessary and now the more egalitarian final deposition of cremation products might have been seen as more

appropriate. In this way the power elite might have wished to emphasize its solidarity with the lower social strata, the social elite, who were also being buried in the cremation cemetery.

To conclude, the dominating collective burial form of the cremation cemeteries favours the interpretation that they reflect an egalitarian ideology. The final deposition of cremation products without individuality can be interpreted as a statement of equality in death – mighty individuals cannot be identified from either the grave goods or individual burial monuments. However, archaeological signs of stratification can be found from them in the form of the weapon burials and further on reasonably speculated upon.

Egalitarian ideology in a stratified society

In Finland either the explicit or implicit interpretation of the cremation cemeteries is often that they contain the burials of the whole society (e.g., Meinander 1980; Wessman 2009) although views to the contrary have also been put forward (e.g., Pihlman 2003). In contrast Marika Mägi has argued that Estonian cremation cemeteries contain only the burials of elite families (Mägi 2002: 11, 74, 123).

Considering the facts that only few osteological analyses have been done from the bones of the Finnish cremation cemeteries and that it is very likely that only a portion of the whole bone material was deposited in the cemetery to begin with (Heikkurinen-Montell 1996: 96) the answer to the question is likely to remain one of opinion. Personally I am inclined to concur with Mägi and my reasons for doing so are that it is likely that it was the elites who wished to distinct their social position with the archaeologically recognisable burials. The cemeteries were well-known spaces of ritual activity, that is, concrete ritual symbols, and their topographical features are such that they can be described as monumental (Wessman 2009: 32). Thus they fall in line with the older monumental cairn tradition and are likely an altered form of the same idea. As important and concrete symbols, it would have been of great importance for the social elite to be associated with the cemeteries to legitimize their distinctive position in the society. For the power elite it would have been important to be associated with the cemetery in order to legitimise their authority.

BURIALS IN VÄHÄKYRÖ

To ground the theoretical framework presented in this paper to archaeological reality, I take a look at the development of burials and burial grounds in Vähäkyrö, located in Ostrobothnia. Vähäkyrö is taken as a case-study mainly because of the extensive excavations conducted there, albeit most of them in the beginning of the 20th century when documentation and excavation methodology was inadequate when compared to present day standards. A relatively up-to-date research history can be found from the book by Reijo Taittonen (1999) so to save ink I will bypass the writing of a detailed research history of the area by a simple reference to his book. Since the publication of Taittonen's book, the Museum of Ostrobothnia (Risla 2001; 2005a; 2005b) and the Finnish National Board of Antiquities (Kankkunen 2003a; 2003b; 2004; Vanhatalo 2006; Lehtonen 2008; Pesonen 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2008d; 2008e) have done small-scale surveillance and test excavations as well as inspections of sites but no large-scale archaeological research driven by academic interest has been recently conducted in the area.

Results of the recent, rather short, archaeological survey conducted in Vähäkyrö by the archaeologist Petro Pesonen, working for the National Board of Antiquities, suggests that there might be extensive Iron Age settlement sites nearby the known burial grounds and burials (Pesonen 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2008d; 2008e). I take this opportunity to commend Pesonen for the fact that he inspected many sites during his free time outside of the actual survey project he was paid for. Previous to Pesonen, other archaeological surveys had also indicated that the areas nearby the known burial grounds might contain settlement sites (Miettinen 1994; Okkonen & Alakärppä 1997). In order to truly understand the Iron Age of the area, a thorough study of these sites is of paramount importance. Until such studies are begun, archaeologists have to work mainly with burials when conducting social interpretations regarding the Iron Age of Ostrobothnia.

Vähäkyrö is located in Ostrobothnia nearby the city of Vaasa and has a rich Iron Age record especially from the Migration Period to the Merovingian Period. There are no known grave finds younger than Merovingian Period, a phenomenon common to Ostrobothnia, which has led scholars

to postulate that the area was depopulated sometime during the early 9th century (Meinander 1950: 151–2; Ahtela 1981: 129–31). However, pollen analyses and other archaeological studies conducted in Vöyri-Maksamaa by archaeologists of the Umeå University indicate that the said area has had settlement continuity from the Pre-Roman Iron Age to historical times (Baudou et al. 1991; Viklund 2002; Holmblad & Herrgård 2005). As the problem of the settlement continuity in Ostrobothnia is not the main focus of this article, I will not at this time delve into it but will limit myself to examining the Middle Iron Age.

Concerning the dating of the burials

Practically all datings of the burials are based on typology. As a relative dating method, typology naturally does not have the same power of evidence as absolute dating methods. This is especially the case with burials where the finds of different periods may very well be mixed and no clear chronology can be built (Pihlman 1990: 54; Lillios 1999: 238). When using typology to date graves, it is problematic to attempt to form a chronology of primary and secondary burials based solely on artefacts though this is what archaeologists have often attempted to do. Whenever an earlier artefact type has been encountered among younger types, the automatic assumption has been that of a younger secondary burial together with and earlier primary burial (see e.g., Keskitalo 1979; Ahtela 1981). Because the typological age and the time of deposition may not correlate such interpretation is far from unproblematic. Only by absolute dating and osteological analyses could primary and secondary burials perhaps be proved. Thus it is best, when relying solely on typology, to use only rough estimations of age. See the appendix for the excavated and dated cairns and burials in Vähäkyrö.

PROCESSES OF POWER IN VÄHÄKYRÖ

In Figure 1a the only site dated to the Earlier Roman Iron Age is shown in relation to the shorelines of ca. 1 AD. In Figure 1b are the sites dated to the Younger Roman Iron Age in relation to shorelines of ca. 200 AD and in Figures 1c and 1d the sites dated to the Migration- and Merovingian Periods in relation to the shorelines of ca. AD 400 and 700 respectively. The shorelines have been

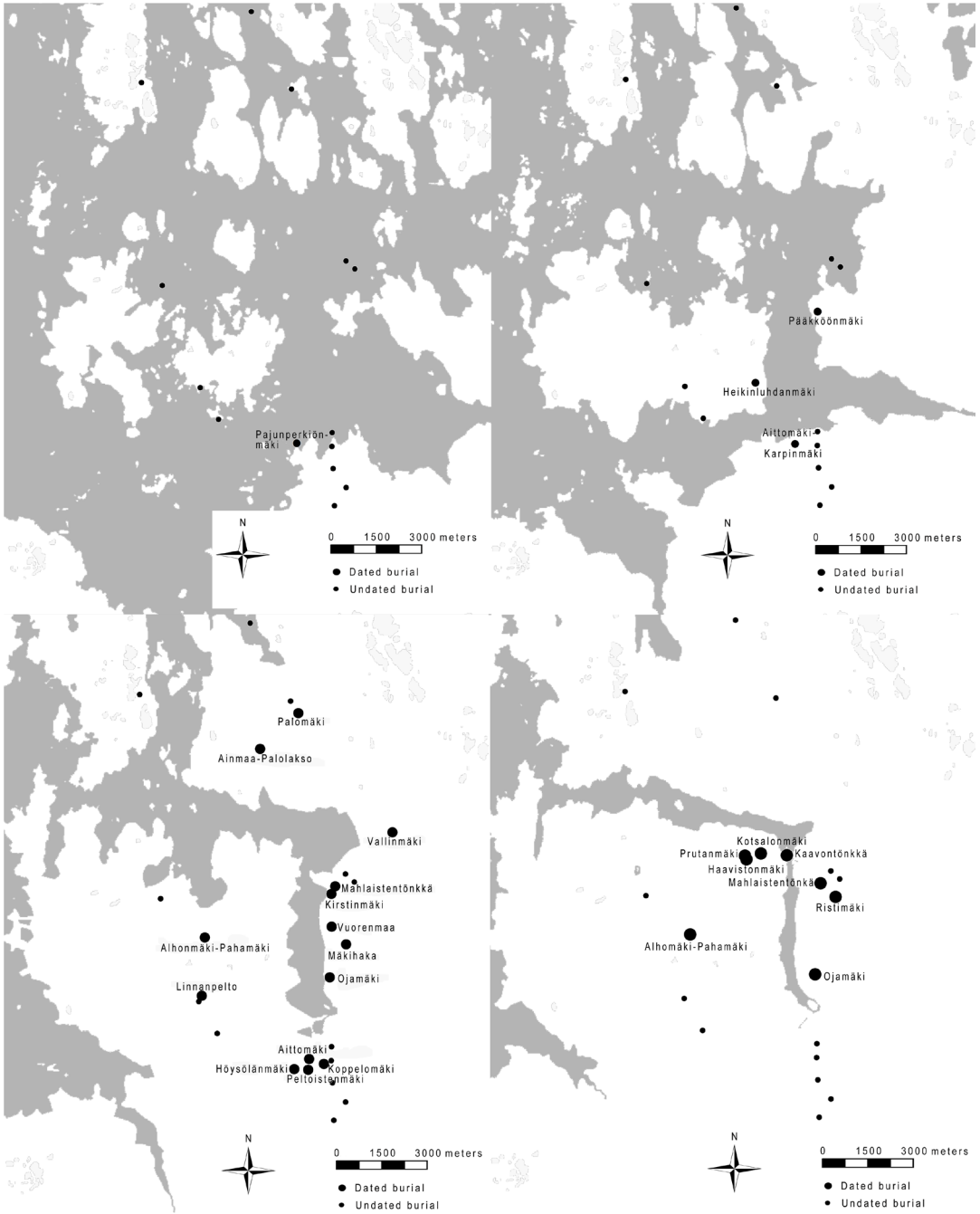


Fig. 1. The Iron Age burials of Vähäkylä: a) Pajunperkiönmäki in relation to the shorelines of ca. AD 1, b) burials dated to the Younger Roman Iron Age in relation to the shorelines of ca. AD 200, c) burials dated to the Migration Period in relation to the shorelines of ca. AD 400, and, d) burials dated to the Merovingian Period in relation to the shorelines of ca. AD 700. Dated sites are shown as large dots. The smaller dots are undated cairn sites.

These maps are based on the digital elevation model of the National Land Survey of Finland. Digital elevation model is © of the National Land Survey of Finland (license 409/MML/09).

reconstructed using the digital elevation model of the National Land Survey of Finland and the isostatic land uplift curves for the Vaasa region made by Jari Okkonen (2003).

Looking at Figures 1a-d it is evident that the land uplift was a significant factor in the Iron Age landscape and it seems clear that the burials are closely related to the shores. In Figure 1d it can be observed that the Merovingian Period burials are centred on the shores of the long and narrow bay to where the Kyröjoki River flowed during this time. The Tervajoki group, now further to the inland than during the earlier periods, which has many prominent Migration Period burials, contains no burials from the Merovingian Period. This shore-boundedness has been explained as a dependency on shore meadows for grazing (Baudou 1991). Thus this change could be explained by the fact that the Tervajoki area was no longer suitable for animal husbandry and this is why the area was abandoned.

Other changes from the Migration Period to the Merovingian Period seem evident as well – there are more Migration Period sites than Merovingian Period sites and this has been interpreted as an indicator that the population of the Merovingian Period was smaller than that of the Migration Period (Ahtela 1981: 127; Seger 1982). This might also make sense remembering the importance of the shore meadows (see Holmblad & Herrgård 2005: 142, 151–3) – as the inland areas were no longer suitable for grazing, as the land rose, the people in the inland settlement areas had to seek better places to live in. This explanation is not unproblematic because it is deterministic and gives a too simple explanation for a complex phenomenon. This is especially true in the case of the Kyröjoki region because here the ecological changes caused by the land uplift were minimal (Holmblad & Herrgård 2005: 190–204). Another problem is once more the assumption that burials actually represent the whole society. Not claiming that the above explanation would be wrong, I argue that there is more to the story than the subsistence needs of humans. Therefore I will analyse the development of the Vähäkyrö area from the perspective of power structures and elites.

Resources of legitimated power

I have previously argued that during the Iron Age the social and power elite determined their status

with two capitals – the honour and material capital (Kuusela 2008). Honour capital determined the social status of the agent and material capital functioned as a resource with which honour capital was maintained and generated. This means that material capital was meaningful only after it was used and turned into honour capital (Kuusela 2008: 27–8; see also Hedeager 1992). This could easily lead to the assumption that material capital is by itself a power resource but this would be a simplification. Material capital and honour capital form a part of the symbolic capital (e.g., Bourdieu 1977: 171–83; 1989) of the Iron Age and it is the sources of this symbolic capital that form the resource of legitimated authority of the Iron Age. Symbolic capital is born from the interplay between honour and material capital and their exact role in the composition of the symbolic capital may change through time as I will argue later.

In this paper I will focus especially on material capital with which I mean all material wealth such as cattle, land and moveable goods to name a few. Material wealth itself is not important, it is important only to the degree that it makes up the composition of the symbolic capital as a whole. Nevertheless it seems evident that material wealth has played an important part in the social distinction of the Iron Age and thus it has had an important part in the functioning and creation of power structures. Therefore I will, in this paper, use the concept of material capital to give a social explanation for the changes observable in Vähäkyrö during the Migration- and Merovingian Periods.

Exchange and power

If we accept that material capital has been an important factor in the Iron Age power structures we can simplify the structure by comparing it to an exchange (see Blau 1987 [1964]). Those who have access to a large amount of material capital (the power elite) can distribute it amongst those who are lacking it (the social elite) in exchange for compliance. This exchange has limits as the agent redistributing material capital has to maintain balance between distributing material capital and preserving a status where his material capital still exceeds the capital of other agents. As long as this balance is maintained, the power structure will remain stable and the exchange-cycle functions as a reproducing mechanism maintaining the

structure. Should something disturb this balance, the power structure will also be disturbed. Such would be the case if the social elite gains large amounts of material capital irrespective of the power elite. In this case the power elite would have to redistribute more material capital to the social elite in order to receive the same amount of compliance as before and such an exchange is naturally not desirable for the power elite (see Blau 1987 [1964]: 171–6).

When the balance of exchange is disturbed, the power elite has some options – it can try to reach balance by attaining enough material capital to maintain its distinction in relation to the social elite. The power elite may also try to restrict the availability of material capital, for instance by removing it from circulation (see Bourdieu 1977: 180). Both options may be difficult once the imbalance has already occurred and so re-negotiating the symbolic capital's composition may be required. In other words, the meaning of material wealth and its part in the composition of symbolic capital need to be altered.

The imbalance has effects for the social elite as well. When their material capital increases, their ability to attain symbolic capital, irrespective of the power elite, increases. This opens up new social trajectories for them which they likely also perceive and thus these new trajectories become a part of their social reality. This in turn leads the social elite to question the existing power structures and challenge the power elite in a power struggle. This is likely to disturb the functioning of the society on a larger scale as a power struggle amongst the elite may lead to the disruption of the society as a whole when the lower social strata also start questioning the existing power structures upon observing the challenge of the power elite by the social elite. In this light it is wise for the social- and power elites to avoid the complete disruption of, for instance, age-old ritual practices and via this conservatism preserve the faith of the lower social strata on the social power structures that distinct the elites from the rest of the society.

Changes during the Migration- and Mero-vingian Periods

In Scandinavia the Migration Period has been interpreted as a time of changes in ideology and social structures (e.g., Gansum & Hansen 2004:

369; Kristiansen 2004: 115; Näsström 2004: 52; Hedeager 2007) and in the case of Estonia, a time of power struggles (Kriiska & Tvauri 2007: 152). Though it may be tempting, or at least exciting, to view the Migration Period as an especially turbulent time, scholars are of the mind that the change, which may perhaps reached its climax during the Migration Period, had actually begun already in the Younger Roman Iron Age (Storli 2000; Hedeager 2007: 46). Nevertheless it seems that changes observable in archaeological record are apparent especially during the Migration Period. Among the most prominent of these changes is the appearance of massive gold hoards (Hedeager 1992: 48–9; 68–9; 2007: 47; Solberg 2003: 135–6). In Denmark the appearance of gold hoards is paired with a clear decrease in grave finds indicating a change in ritual behaviour (Hedeager 1992: 68–9). Lotte Hedeager interprets the appearance of gold as an indication of a change from the earlier prestige goods -system, based mainly on Roman imports, to a system where the easily handled gold takes a central place in the meaning of wealth (Hedeager 1992: 234–5; Hedeager 2007: 47).

In Finland a change in the society is traditionally placed on the Merovingian Period, on the 6th to early 7th centuries, and this change has been interpreted including an increase in mobility, wealth and the centralisation of power (Pihlman 1990: 46–7). In Ostrobothnia these changes are seen to be especially prominent during the 6th century (Pihlman 1990: 47).

When a change occurs and when it is clearly detectable in archaeological record depends on what is the reaction time of the archaeologically visible actions to the change. When speaking of burials we are speaking of a conservative ritualistic behaviour which might be quite resistant to changes. Therefore interpreting the observable changes in the composition of the archaeological record as a direct signal of change does not take into consideration the fact that the change might have actually happened earlier and the archaeological material simply 'reacts' with a delay. If we compare Figure 1b to Figure 1c we see a drastic change – the land uplift has generated areas that have probably been settled quite quickly once they have risen from the sea, and this is indicated also by the clear increase in burials. During this time, the amount of grave goods also increases in Vähäkyrö, when compared to the Younger Roman

Iron Age. The Migration Period has probably seen both the expansion of settlement, made possible by the land uplift, and an increase in wealth. This might partly be because more shore meadows appeared as the land rose, but other things, outside the geographical bounds of Ostrobothnia, might also have acted as factors that increased the material capital in circulation during this time.

Lotte Hedeager has recently proposed that the Huns, active in Central Europe during the Migration Period, might have had contacts with Southern Scandinavian tribes and introduced a new warrior culture that dealt with material capital in a new kind of way that gave gold and moveable wealth a very prominent position (Hedeager 2007). The fact that gold has clearly been plentiful in the North during the Migration Period also suggests that this commodity was readily available in rather large quantities. The sacrifice of large amounts of gold may have been an attempt to restrict and limit the availability of material capital in order to either rectify or prevent an imbalanced exchange, as described earlier, from occurring. Sacrifice has probably also created symbolic meaning and has worked the role of material capital in the composition of the symbolic capital. It may have not been enough that one had wealth – in order to gain symbolic capital it had to be dealt with properly and this may have included the sacrifice of significant quantities of material wealth.

Although gold is not plentiful in Finland, though there is some from Ostrobothnia, the general trend seems to be in line with the rest of the North at least in Ostrobothnia – material wealth seems to increase during the Migration Period (Pihlman 1990: 47; Holmblad & Herrgård 2005: 176–7).

If the concept of the material capital went through changes during the Migration Period and, as it seems, material capital increased, then an imbalanced exchange situation could have occurred. This would have probably led to the disruption of power structures and a possible power struggle. This might, in part, explain what seems to happen in Vähäkylä during the Migration- and Merovingian Periods.

Centralisation of power

If we compare Figure 1d with Figure 1c we see that burial sites dated to the Merovingian Period

are fewer than those dated to the Migration Period. As I noted before, this has been interpreted as a sign that the population decreased, yet there is a different aspect to this phenomenon.

If we now accept that the Migration Period was a time of change and crisis partly because material capital in circulation increased, then we may interpret the Migration Period as a time of power struggle between the power elite and the social elite. This power struggle has included the re-negotiation of the composition of symbolic capital and especially material capital's part in it. As material capital has increased and more and more of the social elite have gained it irrespective of the power elite, the power elite may have tried to restrict and alter the meaning of material capital. One alternative in doing this is to be associated with places that have significant meaning to the society's social reality – sacred spaces. The appearance of the cremation cemeteries during this time may in part reflect this change in the society's ritualistic and ideological behaviour. The egalitarian nature of the cremation cemeteries signifies, among other things, the egalitarian ideology among the elite and presents a new kind of a relationship between the social elite and the power elite. This ideology may have emphasized the equal status among the elites though in reality it is possible that the elite stratum has itself been stratified.

The weapon burials of the Merovingian Period may perhaps be associated with the power elite who most strongly wished to be associated with the ideological core of the society in order to maintain their power. With the weapon burials the buriers have made a strong symbolical gesture – by conducting them to an important ritual space, they directly and distinctively associate the group represented by the weapon burials with the ritual space. Such an act would have been a strong claim for legitimate authority within the society.

Thus I see the change occurring during the Merovingian Period in Vähäkylä as reflecting the centralization of power. The part of the society, that represented itself with burials, now conducted their burials on a single clearly defined space. In other words the question is one of aggregation of power which is represented by the aggregation of the archaeological indicators of power (on the concept of aggregation theory in archaeology see e.g., Asplund 2008; Vaneeckhout 2008). The possible egalitarian ideology reflected by the cre-

mation cemeteries could indicate a consensus and solidarity among the social and power elites and the consolidation of the new power structure.

CONCLUSIONS

Power structures and power during the Iron Age were closely connected with religion and rituals and these in turn were closely connected with the ideology of the society. In order to gain legitimated authority and thus construct an enduring power structure, the power elite had to be closely associated with these rituals. Among the most clearly visible entities of these rituals are burials and burial grounds and it is suggested that they were an important part in the communication of both ideal views of the society and the power structures. As the ideal views of the society, closely related with the dominating ideology, and the actual power structures of the society might be contradictory, it is important to remember that the burials and burial grounds should not be interpreted in a too straightforward manner.

Based on the above, I argue that in Ostrobothnia, the development of the burials from the Migration Period to the Merovingian Period can be explained from the viewpoint of changing power structures. Drawing a comparison with developments outside of Finland the changes during the Migration- and Merovingian Periods can be tied to a similar development elsewhere in the North. It is argued that during the Migration Period, the society went through ideological changes that disrupted the existing power structures and this disruption ended up in a power struggle between the social elite and the power elite. This in turn led to the re-organisation and re-negotiation of power structures and the centralisation of power during the Merovingian Period.

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APPENDIX. Dated burials in Vähäkyrö.

Earlier Roman Iron Age

Among Vähäkyrö's excavated burials only one site, Pajunperkiönmäki, contains burials that have been dated to the Earlier Roman Iron Age (Hackman 1905: 90–2; Meinander 1950: 188; Salo 1968: 78–80; Ahtela 1981: 62–5). Pajunperkiönmäki belongs to the so-called Tervajoki group, which has burials from the Earlier Roman Iron Age to the Migration Period (Ahtela 1981).

Younger Roman Iron Age

Three excavated sites in Vähäkyrö are dated to the Younger Roman Iron Age – Aittomäki (Hackman 1905: 85–6; Meinander 1950: 187; Keskitalo 1979: 109; Ahtela 1981: 68–72), which belongs to the Tervajoki group, Kullahanmäki-Heikinluhdanmäki (Meinander 1950: 188–9; Keskitalo 1979: 109–10; Ahtela 1981: 60–1) and Pääkköönmäki–Vuorenmaa (Hackman 1905: 79–80; Meinander 1950: 73, 77, 84; 125, 192–3; Salo 1968: 81, 170–2; Keskitalo 1979: 110–12; Ahtela 1981: 60–1).

Migration Period

Sites containing burials dated to the Migration Period are the following – Palomäki (Ahtela 1981: 38–41), Ainmaa-Palolakso (Meinander 1950: 84, 197; Keskitalo 1979: 188–9; Ahtela 1981: 41–5; Pihlman 1990: 235), Alhonmäki-Pahamäki (Meinander 1950: 189; Ahtela 1981: 54–7), Mäkihaka (Meinander 1950: 84, 192; Ahtela 1981: 9–11), Kirstinmäki (Hackman 1905: 84, 174, 193, 219, 225, 259, 269; Meinander 1950: 84, 101, 193–4; Erä-Esko 1965: 20, 32; Ahtela 1981: 17–23; Pihlman 1990: 200, 235), Linnanpelto (Meinander 1950: 189; Keskitalo 1979: 188–9; Ahtela 1981: 57–60), Mahlaistentönkkä (Meinander 1950: 195; Ahtela 1981: 24–35; Pihlman 1990: 200, 235–6), Ojamäki (Meinander 1950: 191; Keskitalo 1979: 174–8; Ahtela 1981: 7–8; Pihlman 1990: 235), Vuorenmaa (Meinander 1950: 84, 193; Ahtela 1981: 15–6), Vallinmäki (Hackman 1905: 170; Meinander 1950: 84, 196; Ahtela 1981: 35–8) and from the following sites belonging to the Tervajoki group – Aittomäki-Karpinmäki (Hackman

1905: 85–6; Meinander 1950: 187; Ahtela 1981: 68–72), Höysölänmäki (Hackman 1905: 86–7; Meinander 1950: 188; Ahtela 1981: 66–7), Koppelomäki (Meinander 1950: 85, 186; Ahtela 1981: 74–6) and Peltoistenmäki (Meinander 1950: 84, 186–7; Ahtela 1981: 73–4).

Palomäki's burial is uncertain as the artefacts are not datable (Meinander 1950: 196). Ahtela suspects that the burial might be from Migration Period due to the large number of bone artefacts found (Ahtela 1981: 40). Without stronger grounds Palomäki's dating must be kept highly suspect. The burial of Mäkihaka has been interpreted as a case of earlier primary and a younger secondary burial based on a brooch which is typologically dated to the Younger Roman Iron Age (Ahtela 1981: 9–11). As a single typological feature is not a strong evidence to prove a case of an older burial, I have chosen to deal with Mäkihaka as a Migration Period burial.

Merovingian Period

The following sites contain burials that have been dated to the Merovingian Period – Ojamäki (Meinander 1950: 191; Ahtela 1981: 7–8), Alhonmäki-Pahamäki (Meinander 1950: 190; Ahtela 1981: 54–7), Ristimäki (Meinander 1950: 193; Ahtela 1981: 16–7), Mahlaistentönkkä (Meinander 1950: 102–3, 194–6; Ahtela 1981: 24–35), Haavistonmäki (Salmo 1938: 265; Meinander 1950: 149, 190; Ahtela 1981: 51), Prutanmäki (Meinander 1950: 191; Ahtela 1981: 52), Kotsalonmäki (Salmo 1938: 55; Meinander 1950: 118, 149, 190; 1952: 123; Ahtela 1981: 49–50) and Kaavontönkkä (Salmo 1938: 53, 81, 131–2, 218, 235, 292; Meinander 1950: 67–70, 121, 129, 191; Ahtela 1981: 45–9). It is notable that no burials from Merovingian Period are found from the Tervajoki group.

Prutanmäki is a problematic case as the artefacts – rivets, a shield boss and a spearhead among others – were found during construction work in 1847 and were already lost when an archaeologist got to the site. It is suspected that a spearhead (NM 4264: 44) in the archaeological collections of the National Museum of Finland belongs to the same context and both Meinander and Ahtela interpret the site as a Merovingian Period burial (Meinander 1950: 191; Ahtela 1981: 52).