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AN EARLY IRON AGE CAIRN FROM FRÖNÄSUDDEN, SOUTHERN OSTROBOTHNIA

Abstract

During the past two decades an increasing number of prehistoric remains have come to light in the region of Southern Ostrobothnia. These remains include a considerable number of cairns. Although the number of studied and investigated cairns has not by any means increased in the same proportion, recent relatively small-scale field studies have indicated that our knowledge of the metal-period settlement of Ostrobothnia will achieve more detail and change along with the excavation and study of new remains of various types and periods.

A cairn excavated in Frönäs in Ylimarkku in 1979–1980 is an example of such remains. Problems related to this find and cairns in general are discussed in the following article.

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Frönäs is a small village in the former parish of Ylimarkku (Sw. Övermark) in the present commune of Närpiö on the coast of Southern Ostrobothnia about 40 kms south of the town of Vaasa. Frönäsudden is the south-east and south tip of a broad forest covered moraine formation bounded to north-east, east and south by wide areas of bog and forest. The distance to the coast is over ten kilometres. The basic survey coordinates of the site are as follows: basic survey map 1242 07 PÖRTMOSSEN : x 6959 20, y 521 66. The elevation of the area is from 20 to 22.5 metres asl.

Field surveys conducted in 1977 revealed two low stone cairns on the hill, one of which lay beneath a power line transversing the hill with the other cairn adjacent to it. The first-mentioned cairn was investigated under the direction of the author in 1979 and 1980 in connection with a course in archaeology arranged by the summer university of Vaasa. The course was attended by local amateur archaeologists who were mainly members of the local historical society.

The investigations revealed that a survey report by Jacob Tegengren from 1938 contained a hitherto unidentified reference to the cairns. It could also be observed that in constructing the

power line in the late 1930s cairn stones had been used for supporting the posts. The same occurred a second time in the 1950s in connection with work on the line. In the late 1970s heavy machinery used in ditch digging and forestry work broke the slabs of sandstone in the surface layer of the cairn into small sheets of stone. These red pieces of sandstone were the only feature to draw attention to the location, which otherwise appeared only to be a scattered and partly disturbed formation of stones covered with grass and bushes. The second cairn which is located outside the clearing around the power line is 5 metres in diameter, low in profile and constructed solely of round stones. Also this cairn had been disturbed by digging.

The surface layer of stones of the investigated cairn consisted nearly completely of red slabs of sandstone. Beneath these there were first smaller and then larger round stones. In the bottom layer there were also stones in their natural locations. The stone setting was approximately 60 cms at its thickest. The cairn was bounded simple ring of larger stones (ca 9×6 metres). It was best preserved at the ends of the rather longiform cairn and it appeared to be rectangular. Along the longer sides stones from the upper layer had fallen outside the ring, which probably



Fig. 1. The Frönäsudden cairn with the surface and inner stone settings of the northern half removed. Photographed from above to the north-west. National Board of Antiquities/Mirja Miettinen 1979.



Fig. 2. Profile of the cairn with the northern half excavated in the foreground. National Board of Antiquities/Mirja Miettinen 1979.

happened when stones had been dug to support the post of the power line (figs. 1 and 2).

The artefacts and their fragments were found in the eastern end of the cairn from within the outer circle. Burnt bone was recovered from the areas of discoloured soil in the western part.

The finds are as follows: and open *bracelet* of bronze (NM 20729:1) (fig. 3) was found at a depth of approximately 30 cms from the surface in an upright position between stones with the open end facing upwards. The bracelet was made of a bronze rod, four-sided in section and with rounded facets. One end of the bracelet is thin and flattened and the other end is thicker and blunter. There are no signs of ornamentation or the effects of fire. Four fragments of a curved rod of iron of mainly round section, which are badly rusted possibly belong to a *bracelet of iron* (NM 21009:1) (fig. 4). The fragments were found in the bottom layer at a depth of about 40 centimetres. Apart from the fragments but in their near vicinity was a *fragment of iron* (NM 21009:1) of undefined type. At the location of the artefacts the bottom layer revealed weakly discernible discoloured soil, but no bones or charcoal. In the centre and western part of the cairn there were several indefinite areas of discoloured soil darker than the above which produced a total of 180 grams of burnt bone (NM 20729:2; 21009:2). A preliminary analysis by Dr. Mikael Fortelius defines the bones as belonging to an elderly human of undefinable sex.

The closest parallels of the artefact finds are to be found in Finnish and East Baltic finds of the Pre-Roman and Early Roman Iron Age (e.g. Salo 1968, Meinander 1969, Salo 1970, Kivikoski 1973, Schmiedehelm 1983). There are no parallels to either of the bracelets which could be given a more precise date than the Early Iron Age (i.e. ca 500 BC–200 AD). Also the parallels to the cairns are of contemporaneous date and the closest finds in this connection are in Ostrobothnia and the province of Satakunta (Meinander 1950, Salo 1970, Miettinen 1980 and 1982). There are no separate features permitting the dating of the cairn. The outer circle of stones is a feature occurring generally from the Bronze Age onwards (Salo 1970). On the other hand the practice of covering the surface with slabs of sandstone is feature to be discussed below.

The main starting point for the dating of the cairn is the topography of the site. The lowermost edge of the cairn is at an elevation of 21,82 metres asl and the low-lying hill does not rise much more than 22 metres asl. The map (fig. 5)



Fig. 3. Bronze bracelet (NM 20729:1). Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Timo Syrjänen.

shows how the shoreline of the 20 metre elevation curve dates to the beginning of our era according to shoreline displacement chronology (Siiriäinen 1978). At that time Frönäsudden was located on an isthmus between two long and narrow bays. At present the isthmus is mainly bog and marshy ground and the area of the bays cultivated land. Immediately before the situation illustrated by the map the isthmus had been transversed by a narrow and shallow strait with a large island to the west. At present the difference in elevation between the cultivated land and the bog (approximately 0.80 metres according to the basic survey map) is so insignificant that if one subtracts the mean thickness of bog turf in the area (ca. 1 metre) it is probable that while the shoreline was still at an elevation of about 20 metres above present sea-level there was a narrow strait crossing the isthmus which soon around the beginning of our era had dried. Thus, the cairns could not have been constructed at a date previous to the 20 metre



Fig. 4. Fragments of a bracelet (?) of iron (NM 20729:12). Photograph National Board of Antiquities/Timo Syrjänen.

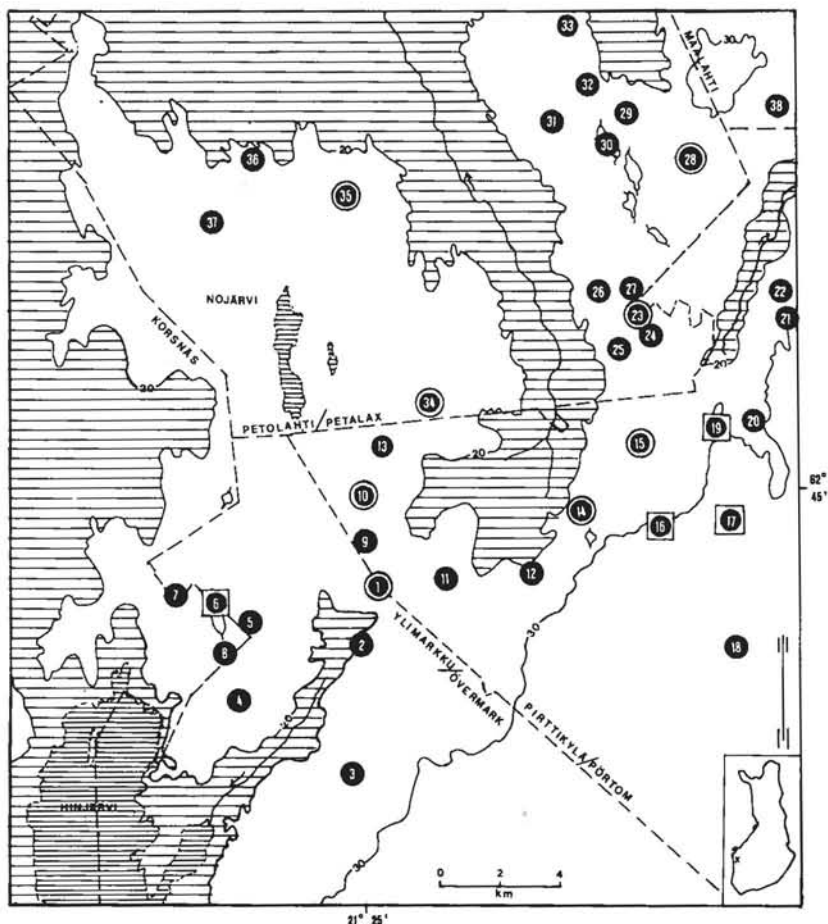


Fig. 5. Frönäsudden and environs around the beginning of the present era with the shoreline at an elevation of ca 20 metres above present sea-level. Groups of cairns with sandstone-covered cairns marked with circles. Bronze Age cairns and groups of cairns marked with squares.

Number				24	Petolahti	Raineliden	inv 4
1	Ylimarkku	Frönäsudden	SKL 8	25	"	Holmströms myran	inv 11
2	"	Sturikbackvägen	SKL 10	26	"	Lill-Tallmossen	inv 3
3	"	Norrmossbacken	SKL 9	27	"	Ångsbacken	inv 14
4	"	Kalkamossen	SKL	28	"	Rimossbacken	inv 1
5	"	Norrskogen	SKL 11 a+b	29	"	Högbackkärret	inv 7
6	"	Storberget	SKL 2	30	"	Högbacken	inv 8
7	Korsnäs	Norrskogen 2	SKL 2	31	"	Smalmoskärren	inv 9
8	"	Norrskogen 1	SKL 1	32	"	Gorjuthbacken	inv 6
9	Pirttikylä	Frönäsberg	inv 39	33	"	Mamrekärret	inv 5
10	"	Nojärvsskogen	inv 38	34	"	Tuckara	inv 13
11	"	Kyrkskogen	inv 14	35	"	Viitala bergen	inv 15
12	"	Styvasback	inv 15	36	"	Viitala Brännskog	inv 10
13	"	Gräsmossback	inv 13	37	"	Långbacken	inv 2
14	"	Raineuddarna	inv 11	38	Maalahti	Vittberget	SKL 44
15	"	Småbäck	inv 12				
16	"	Prekamyrön	inv 28				
17	"	Småstenrösbäck	inv 5				
18	"	Mässmossback	inv 2				
19	"	Storstensrösbäck	inv 6				
20	"	Velkanebäck	inv 27				
21	"	Storhagen	inv 7				
22	"	Brinken	inv 8				
23	"	Tallmossen	inv 10				

SKL = Seutukaavaliiton pitäjittäinen suojelukohde-luettelo

inv 3 = Inventointikertomuksen kohde

SKL = Zoning authorities' list of prehistoric remains

inv 3 = Survey report number of site or cairn/cairn group

shoreline. With respect to the development of the topography of the area and generally the location of cairns near shores and routes of communication, it is not probable that the Frönäsudden cairns could have been constructed much after the drying of the strait. It must also be noted that in the area shown in the map (fig. 5) there is despite relatively thorough surveys no knowledge so far of cairns or groups of cairns below the elevation of 20 metres asl. (Miettinen 1982, 63). The closest ones are in Korsnäs about 18 kms south-west of Frönäs and in Storsjö, Maalahti commune about 20 kms to the north.

In general the main part of the cairns seem to be located both in the area shown by the map and roughly speaking in the whole Southern Ostrobothnian coastal in the area bounded by the 20–30 metre elevation contours. These cairns are usually located in groups of several dozen, sometimes even a hundred, on gentle slopes hilltops, but also on completely flat ground. They are usually located apart from present-day settlement, in contrast to the large (diameters from 15 to 20 metres) cairns of the 4th–6th centuries (Meinander 1950). The cairns defined as being of Bronze Age date are probably larger on the whole than those located at lower elevations. No precise statistics can be given regarding this because so far the number of investigated and precisely dated cairns is insufficient.

Below the above-mentioned Bronze Age shore-levels (i.e. below 27.5 metres asl., Siiriäinen 1978) cairns are characterized by the fact that most of them are quite small, low in profile and hard to observe because they are mostly covered over by vegetation. Often the group includes one or several larger cairns, which may be located in a central position in relation to the others. Mostly structures or other details cannot be seen on the outside. It is usual that some of the cairns were constructed next to or around a larger stone in its natural location or sometimes between two stones. Insofar as the form can be identified without excavation, be cairns usually seem to be round, in rarer cases longiform and sometimes rectangular. There are also some cases which resemble ship settings (e.g. Meinander 1944, Meinander 1950 49–51, Miettinen 1980, 1982).

Especially the smaller cairns do not have the outward appearance usually expected of burial cairns. Rather they remind the observer of cairns piled in the course of field clearing. This interpretation may have been prevalent both among the local populace and researchers.

However, the several dozen cairns of this type investigated in various parts of the Ostrobothnian coastal region have shown that surface observations alone do not offer any solution to the problem of the nature of these numerous cairns. Cairns of apparently indefinite appearance have revealed constructions and grave finds. On the other hand this large group of cairns most definitely includes constructions that are not prehistoric graves. Some of them may have come about as a result of primitive farming techniques and may partly be of prehistoric date (Meinander 1977 21–22).

The low-lying cairns also include ones which are covered with slabs of sandstone, an example of which was the above-described grave in Frönäsudden. Survey observations alone do not permit an assessment of whether the whole surface is covered with sandstone or whether the stone setting otherwise includes an exceptionally large amount of sandstone. It seems however that if despite the vegetation an exceptionally large amount of sandstone can be observed the cairn in question is one which has been intentionally constructed with sandstone. The map (fig. 5) gives cairns of this kind in the area discussed with a separate symbol. Of a total of 38 groups of cairns at least eight include cairns with a large amount of sandstone on the surface. In the area presented in the map (fig. 5) about a fifth of the cairn groups include cairns covered with sandstone. With respect to the rest of the coastal area of Ostrobothnia there is no data of even this overall a nature, but field observations by the author over a period of over ten years suggest a similar ratio throughout the area where this phenomenon can be observed. This detail will be discussed more closely below.

In addition to the Frönäsudden cairn (number 1 on the map) the present author knows of only two other cairns covered with sandstone in Ostrobothnia which have been excavated. One was excavated by Meinander in 1936 at Riitasaari in the parish of Laihia (Meinander 1944) and the other by the author in 1975 at Rimossbacken in Petolahti (number 28 on the map) (Miettinen 1982).

The Riitasaari cairn is part of large complex of cairns located at an elevation of 22.5–25 metres asl on a group of bog islands in the middle of Riitaneva bog in the western part of the parish of Laihia. The excavated cairn was longiform (ca 13×14.5 metres) and was covered with slabs of sandstone. It contained several adjacent enclosures of different size and mainly rectangular form. One of these contained burnt bone and

one revealed a grindstone. There were no finds permitting precise dating but features relating to the height of the cairn and suggestive of the cemeteries of year-like enclosures suggest the beginning of the Roman Iron Age (Meinander 1944, Salo 1968).

In 1974 and 1975 three cairns were excavated in the large cairn area of Rimossbacken in Petolahti. In the area there are about 200 cairns on a long island in a bog. Most of these are small (diameters ranging from 2 to 4 metres). There are about 20 cairns of medium size (diameter 5–10 metres) and only three cairns of over 10 metres in diameter. Of the excavated cairns two were of medium size and one was small in size. The sandstone-covered cairn (number 135) was oval in form (about 6–8 metres) and was bordered by an encircling wall sloping inwards and carefully laid of stones to a height of 60–80 cms. There was a thick burnt layer in the centre with two fragments of a spiral bronze ring of indefinite date, but no burnt bone. The lowest edge of the cairn was at an elevation of 26.38 metres asl. The Rimossen cairns could have been constructed in the Pre-Roman Iron Age at the earliest when the shoreline was at the present elevation of 24 metres asl. On the other hand, at the beginning of our era (20 metre shoreline contour) the shore was far from the site, which already at that time was surrounded by bogs and was hard to reach. It is probable that the Rimossen cairns date from the last centuries BC (Miettinen 1982 62,74).

In the large typically Bronze Age cairns of the area in question (fig. 5), such as those at Småstensrösbacken and Storstenrösbacken in Pirttikylä (numbers 17 and 19) there are no slabs of sandstone in the upper layer. Nor are there red stones in general in the cairns of the area that are clearly at elevations above 30 metres asl. Isolated slabs of sandstone found in them must be interpreted as belonging to the local morainic cover.

Also elsewhere along the coast of Ostrobothnia as far as Vaasa there are cairns with sandstone upper layers at elevations varying from 22.5 to 30 metres asl (Miettinen 1982, 74). Only few cairns of this type are known from lower elevations. For purposes of dating the most important ones of this groups are the following: several dozen cairns and stone settings at Nisseshagen in Storsjö, Maalahti parish with remains of dwelling sites and cup-marked stones all in the same complex of prehistoric remains include at least one cairn approximately 8 metres in diameter with a large amount of sand-

stone on its surface. The cairn has not been excavated and is located at an elevation of 18–19 metres asl. Only two of the numerous cairns at the Nisseshagen site have been investigated and both have revealed Migration Period cremations. Neither contained sandstone. Pollen analysis indicates cultivation of grain at Nisseshagen in the period from around 300 to 700 AD (Vuorela 1986). Sandstone has not been observed to have been used in any of the other cairns in the Storsjö area that are located close to the 20 metre elevation contour. On the other hand, sandstone was used in places in smaller cairns at elevations of 25 to 27.5 metres asl in various places on the former coastal area of Storsjö (Miettinen 1986).

In the northern part of Maalahti parish in the area of Kalasar there are several unexcavated groups of cairns located at elevations ranging from 17.5 to 27.5 metres asl. These include cairns with considerable amounts of sandstone in the upper layer. The elevations date the lowermost ones to the Roman Iron Age at the earliest and the uppermost ones to the Pre-Roman Iron Age.

In 1982–1984 Pekka Honkanen conducted excavations of a group of cairns at Storhällor in Mustasaari (formerly Sulva). The cairn group is located at an elevation of approximately 28 metres asl. Of the excavated cairns one had sandstone in its stone setting but not as a covering for the whole surface layer. Ceramics of Morby type were found (NM 22027). The most probable dating for the cairn is the Pre-Roman Iron Age.

Survey reports from as early as 1952 regarding the western parts of the commune of Laihia mention sandstone in cairns, located at elevations ranging from 22.5 to 27.5 metres asl. Follow-up surveys of the past years in the same area confirm previous observations. To date there have been no finds providing datings as with the exception of the above-mentioned cairn in Riita-saari there have been no other excavations of sandstone-covered cairns. Elevations of these cairns suggest datings falling into the span of the Pre-Roman Iron Age for most of them.

In the 1930s Jacob Tegengren excavated a total of nine cairns of a group of several small cairns at Edsbacken in the commune of Närpiö. Only two of the cairns revealed finds providing datings; one was from the 4th century AD and the other from the Migration Period. The excavation report mentions sandstone but without any reference to their location in the cairns. The site is at an elevation of approximately 20 metres

asl (Meinander 1950 206–207, Meinander 1977 25).

Of the above mentioned excavated cairns there are three cases (Frönäsudden, Rimossbacken and Riitasaari) where the surface of the cairn was totally covered with slabs of sandstone. The large amounts of sandstone observed in other cairns indicate that they were collected and transported to the site intentionally. Intentionality is all the more emphasized when we take into account the fact that with the exception of Lauhanvuori there are no deposits of sandstone in the known outcrops of bedrock in the region of Ostrobothnia. The closest deposit of sandstone in bedrock is on the lower reaches of the Kokemäenjoki River in the adjacent province of Satakunta (Risto Salomaa, personal communication). In Satakunta sandstone was in common use in the inner structures and on the surface of cairns from the Bronze Age onwards (Salo 1981).

In investigating the origin of the sandstone in the Ostrobothnian cairns I have had to rely on discussions of general nature with certain geologists (Martti Lehtinen, Risto Salomaa) on the one hand and on my own field observations as well as those of other archaeologists. These suggest that there are relatively sparse occurrences of sandstone in morainic deposits in the areas to the south and east of Vaasa, the coastal area of the mid reaches of the Bothnian Gulf. As discussed above, sandstone occurs hardly at all in cairns situated at elevations higher than those for Bronze Age shorelines (over 30 metres asl). The majority of the cairns with sandstone are in the elevation zone of 20 to 30 metres above sea-level. It is of course possible that at this elevation there is a larger amount of sandstone in the moraine. On the other hand sandstone was known and used as a material in the region already in the Stone Age.

For instance, observations from Stone Age sites in Pirttikylä and Ylimarkku show that there is such an abundance of sandstone materials at sites above the 50 metre shoreline that sandstone must have belonged to the composition of the local moraine. The same also applies to the Raineåsen site adjacent to the Småstenrösbacken group of cairns and dated to the period of the Kiukainen Culture (fig. 5, number 17). The site is at an elevation of 37.8 metres asl (Miettinen 1980). However, slabs of sandstone have not been observed in the Småstenrösbacken cairns and the custom of using them in the construction of the cairns was apparently not practised in this area in the Bronze Age.

In excavating the Riitasaari cairn in Laihia Meinander also observed that the sandstone must have been brought to the site from elsewhere. Meinander mentions information from local inhabitants according to which the nearest deposits of sandstone are at a distance of about 10 kilometres from the site (Meinander 1943 35). Most of the sandstone in the Frönäsudden and Rimossbacken cairns was also brought from elsewhere. There is only a small amount of sandstone in the local moraine. Collecting the sandstone was presumably a laborious task and it can be understood that the groups of cairns usually include only one or a few with a sandstone layer. The custom may also be related to hitherto unknown social factors. Most of the cairns with the layer of red stones covering them are the largest ones in their respective groups and are also the most visible and centrally located ones.

It was apparently the intention of the cairn builders that the sandstone was to be seen. The red colour of the stones brings to mind the universal practice, dating back to Paleolithic times, of covering the deceased with red ochre. Red was a symbol of life. It is possible that the sandstone layer of the cairns was a variation of this age-old custom.

The practice of covering the cairn with a layer of sandstone slabs is limited to the coastal area in question and it is also limited chronologically, according to present observations to the Pre-Roman and Early Roman Iron Age.

Shore displacement chronology shows that the custom came into use in Ostrobothnia around the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age at the earliest. The lowest elevations sandstone-covered cairns range from approximately 17.5 to 20 metres asl, dating them to the period from the first to the fourth centuries AD. The cairns were made by the population of the coastal region of Ostrobothnia. Here a continuity of settlement can be observed from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. The prehistoric remains of this population consist of cairns found at all shoreline levels of the period and certain, hitherto still rare, dwelling sites. Nearly all of the known sites and remains of settlement of the period are situated close to the small cairns or within the actual areas of cairns. It is obvious that when studies can be extended to the surroundings of the cairn groups, new material not provided by the graves will most probably be found. Thus our knowledge of the Early Metal Period culture of Ostrobothnia will change and become more complete.

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Abbreviations:

FM = Finskt Museum

SM = Suomen Museo

SMYA = Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja