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THE “RAVATTULA” HAIRDO FROM GRAVE 20/2016: NEW INFORMATION ON IRON AGE HAIRSTYLES

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INTRODUCTION

The oldest church excavated in Finland is located on Ristimäki (“Cross Hill”) in the village of Ravattula, beside the River Aurajoki, within the municipality of Kaarina. Around the church was a churchyard containing approximately 400 graves. During the excavations carried out in 2010–2016 by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Turku, led by archaeologist Juha Ruohonen, 61 inhumations in total were studied. These graves were dated to the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, from the Late Finnish Iron Age to the early Middle Ages (Ruohonen 2017; 2019).

Hair remains were excavated in ten graves, identified as belonging to female individuals. Five of the styles into which these had been arranged were identified as hair buns.¹ Two of the buns were most likely created by wrapping a single hair braid into a bun (TYA 914:1316:6; TYA914:1367:7), two of them by first twisting an unbraided ponytail around itself and then wrapping it into a bun (TYA 914:1259:11; TYA 933:173:14). These ancient hair remains are now dry and brittle, and the buns resemble dense discs of hair after being pressed in the graves. The fifth hair bun has a special hairstyle that differs from the others. It is the only one of its kind excavated in Finland and is the subject of the present article.

THE HAIRSTYLE FROM GRAVE 20/2016

Grave 20/2016 is located near the northern edge of the main hillock of Ristimäki, about 25 meters northwest of the church remains. The dimensions of the grave were found to be approximately 240 cm x 70 cm, with a depth of around one meter. The coffin was found to be 186 cm long and made of wooden boards held together by iron nails. The coffin was 46 cm wide at its western extremity and 43 cm wide at its eastern extremity. Based on the depth of the bottom of the grave and the location of the nails in the lid, the coffin was at least 35 cm high. Under the remains of the legs of the deceased were very well-preserved pieces of coffin bottom boards or planks, 3 cm thick at their thickest point. (Fig. 1.)

Based on the locations of the remains, the deceased measured 160–165 cm in height. In addition to the hairstyle, very small fragments of skull bones, brain remains, and teeth were found to be preserved in the grave. Osteological research revealed that the deceased was a slightly older, mature woman (Liira, personal communication 2019). The preservation of the organic matter from the skull was made possible due to the placing on top of the head of a headdress edged with bronze spirals (for more on that type of headdress, see e.g., Vahter 1952; Riikonen 2006: 210, 213–4).

Fragments of tabby weave fabric made of vegetable fibres were found among the skull fragments and were also caught under some of

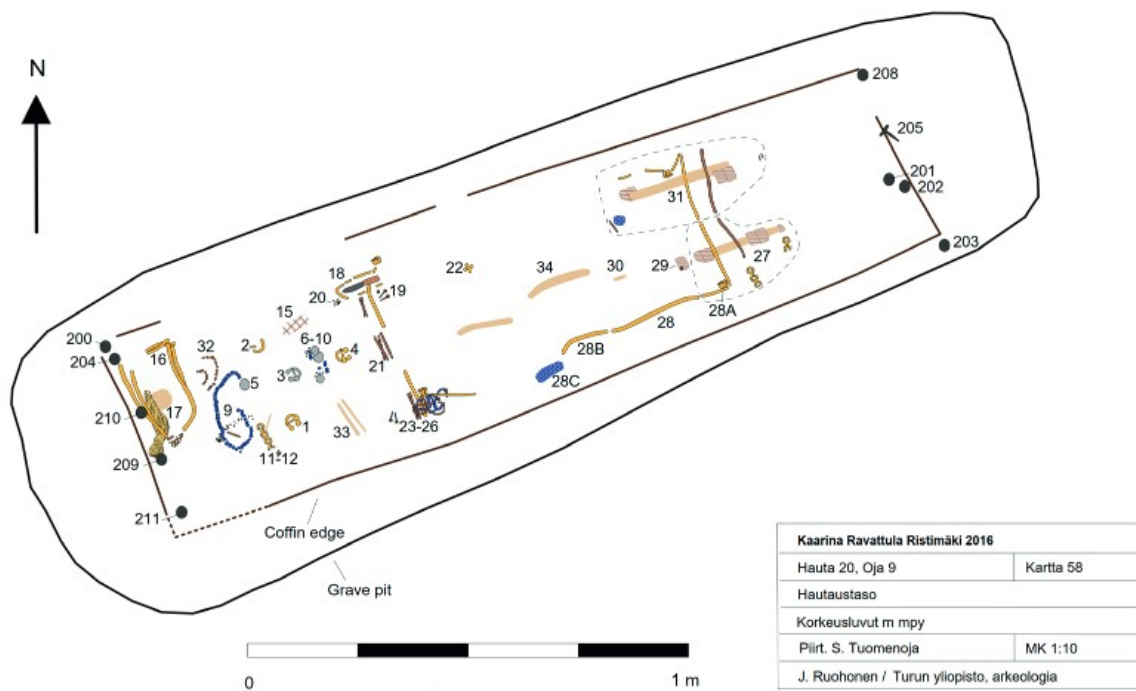


Figure 1. Map of inhumation grave 20/2016 from Ravattula Ristimäki cemetery. 1–2, 4 = penannular brooch (bronze), 3 = penannular brooch (silver), 5–10 = glass beads and silver coins, 11–12, 16, 19–22, 24, 27–29, 31 = bronze spirals and textile remains, 15 = textile remains, 17 = hairdo and skull remains, 18 = knife, 30, 33–34 = bone remains, 200–211 iron nails.

the glass beads and silver coins of the necklace. The deceased had four penannular brooches, and all of them had preserved wool textile. The pieces of clothing identified were a dress, an apron, and a shawl with bronze spiral decorations, leg wraps, and mittens made using a single needle looping technique. A broad knife sheath covered with a bronze plate was found on the left waist of the deceased. It had once hung from a patterned, tablet woven band, worn around the waist. On the other side of the coffin, on the right hip of the deceased, was placed a patterned tablet woven band, arranged in a bundle. Several dozens of centimetres of the band were preserved.

The clothes, jewellery, and the knife sheath of the deceased are very similar to the ones found in several other Crusade Period (c. AD 1025–1200) graves in Southwest Finland. Similar shawl decorations have been found at Ihala in Raisio (KM 14275:276.2), Ristinpelto in Lieto (KM 4448:1) and Yliskylä in Perniö (KM 2912:113). Similar headdresses and broad, bronze-plated knife sheaths have been found in several female graves, for example at Humikkala in Masku and

Kirkkomäki in Kaarina (Riikonen 2006: Table; 2009: Table 1, Image 5).

The Ristimäki grave 20/2016 has therefore the characteristics of a Crusade Period grave. Based on radiocarbon dating of the skull bone (Ua-62832: 837±26), the deceased was buried between the late twelfth and mid-thirteenth centuries AD. The calibrated (Bronk Ramsey 2017; Reimer et al. 2020) dating result is 1175–1260 with a 1-sigma error (68,2% probability), or 1160–1270 with a 2-sigma error (95,4% probability). The results are not unequivocal; the hair of the deceased was dated as being somewhat older than the skull bone. The result of the radiocarbon dating of the hair (Ua-56916:965±29) with 1-sigma error gives us the date range between 1030–1050 (14,7%) and 1080–1150 (53,5%), or with 2-sigma error the years are 1020–1160. When the location of the grave, the objects in the grave and their radiocarbon dates are taken jointly into consideration, one can conclude that the deceased was most likely buried in around the mid-twelfth century.

Grave 20/2016 revealed the best-preserved hair remains (TYA 933:214:17) from Ravattula



Figure 2. The hair remains with the bun (TYA 933:214:17) from Ravattula Ristimäki inhumation grave 20/2016. (Photo: Riikka Saarinen / Museum Centre of Turku.)

Ristimäki cemetery (Fig. 2). Its size and shape also differ from other hair remains excavated at the site. The hair bun has been preserved together with a large amount of hair from the top of the head. The dimensions of these surviving remains are approximately 7 cm x 15 cm, of which the bun measures approximately 4 cm x 7 cm. It is difficult to measure the length of the hair. The face of the deceased was turned towards her left shoulder, and the bun was probably positioned on upper part of the back of her head (*occiput*). While the surface of the hair covered by a thin layer of fine clay, it was possible to identify the colour of the hair as blonde by visual observation alone.

The soil can affect and change the colour of hair just as it can affect that of wool fibre (Kirkinen, personal communication 2020). Besides blonde-coloured hair, the Ristimäki graves have also revealed hair colours visually identified as different shades of red (e.g., Ruohonen & Väänänen 2016: 34).

The bun hairstyle was lifted from the grave as a single block of soil. It was cleaned at the conservation laboratory of The Museum Centre of Turku. The work was done under a stereo

microscope using a thin brush and a mini vacuum cleaner to remove small grains of sand. In order to study and clean the underside of the remains also, the object was turned upside down; it was protected with a plastic wrap, padded with cotton wool, and turned with the use of a plexiglass sheet. At no point during the research did was any sign detected of bands or pins that could have been used to tie or fasten the hair. It is of course possible that hair fasteners may have completely decomposed, but there are no signs of fasteners from any other graves either. After the study, the object was placed on the soft cushion, which is shaped from cotton wool and covered with silk crepe. The find is now stored within the collections of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Turku.

BUN HAIRSTYLES

The hair remains from Grave 20/2016 are very different from the other bun hairstyles found at Ravattula Ristimäki. To achieve it, the hair has probably first been parted vertically in the middle in two sections. One section was wrapped into a bun, while the other was first twisted

around itself, and then wrapped around the bun. This kind of hairdo cannot be achieved without a hair tie and pins if the hair is clean and slippery but may have been possible if the hair was rarely washed and remained naturally greasy.

Before the bun hairstyles were discovered in Ravattula Ristimäki cemetery, the only other hairstyle found in Finland from the same period was from grave 1 at Kirkkailanmäki, Hollola in 1978 (Hirviluoto 1986: 38). The grave was dated to the thirteenth century and documented by Leena Tomanterä in a drawing (Hirviluoto 1986: Photo 3; Taavitsainen 1990: 84). The Kirkkailanmäki hairdo is more complicated than the Ravattula bun and requires longer hair. But even this hairstyle can be created without hairpins and other accessories, if the hair is not too clean. To achieve this hairstyle, the hair is divided horizontally in two sections. Each section is first drawn to a knot, then both sections are knotted together in a bun, and the rest of the hair is wrapped around the bun (Lavonius, personal communication 2020).

When we searched for hairstyles similar to the Ravattula bun, we noticed that remains of hair from the period in question are also rare outside Finland. So far, we have not found an obvious equivalent, but the basic concept for this hairstyle in all its simplicity is probably very ancient. There are several remains of hair from Pre-Roman and Roman Age Denmark where the hair was first parted, then braided and twisted, and formed into swirls and knots. Similar hairdos are also depicted in coins and metal dishes from these periods. These have their origin in Roman hairstyles that also spread to Germanic populations (Ræder Knudsen & Møbjerg 2019: 92–4).

In late Scandinavian Iron Age iconography, as found for example on rune stones and gold sheets, a typical female hairstyle is a knotted ponytail (Mannering 2008: 62, Figs. 5.5–5.7). A braid from a grave in Romsey Abbey, UK, was radiocarbon dated to cal AD 895–1123. The remains of the hair and from a part of the skull that may have been attached to the hair were placed on top of a block of wood in a lead coffin. There is nothing else left of the deceased, and there is no knowledge of their gender. Based on a stable isotopic analysis of the hair, the diet of the deceased was dominated by fish protein, which

could indicate that they may have held an ecclesiastical position. The lead coffin suggests a high social status. A DNA analysis may later be done on the hair (Cameron et al. 2017).

The Ravattula Ristimäki hair bun seems well preserved but so far, it has not been possible to extract any DNA from it (Kirkinen et al. 2020: 55). A transmitted light microscope study may reveal that a seemingly well-preserved hair is so badly damaged by microbes that it is impossible to even get a cross-section of the hair to study the pigment particles (Kirkinen, personal communication 2020). Research methods are constantly evolving, so in the future it may be possible to study the preserved Ristimäki hair further using interdisciplinary analyses. For instance, ancient DNA, and carbon and nitrogen isotopes analyses could provide entirely new perspectives on this hair material. We could find out about the last years of the deceased, the environment they lived in, and the food they ate (Wilson 2019: 164).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HAIRSTYLE

Just like an individual's clothing, a hairstyle reveals the social status, power, and wealth of the wearer. The cut and style of the hair distinguishes the person from other people or groups of people. The changes in the length or styling of the hair mirrors an individual's changing age, life situation, and social status (Lehtinen & Sihvo 2005: 103; Stenn 2016: *passim*). Styling your hair takes time, and complicated hairstyles usually require help from other people. In some cultures, the cutting of hair can be a sacred ceremony. Strong hair could be understood as a sign of health, power or sexuality, and was often linked to fertility (Stenn 2016: 63–4, 67–8).

Unfortunately, the Finnish archaeological record currently preserves too few finds of hair remains to undertake a larger comparative study. The deceased from Grave 20/2016 had the most elaborate hairstyle of the Ravattula Ristimäki site – one that required good styling skills. The deceased was buried in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, wearing a traditional Crusade Period dress that showed wealth and high social status. She was perhaps an older woman, highly regarded in her community, a woman whose particular status was emphasized by her hairstyle.

NOTES

¹ An article focusing on all the Ravattula Ristimäki human hair material is underway.

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Abbreviations

KM – Kansallismuseo (The Collections of the National Museum, Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland)

TYA – Turun yliopisto, arkeologian oppiaineen kokoelmat (*the archaeological collections at the University of Turku*)

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