

The values of archaeological heritage sites – how to define significance

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Abstract

To streamline land use planning for archaeological cultural heritage and enable predictability of decision-making, the Finnish Heritage Agency launched the 'Nationally Significant Archaeological Sites' (VARK) project in 2018. The aim of VARK's remains selection is to regionally, temporally and thematically prepare a compendium that is as comprehensive as possible that provides as good an overview as possible of the archaeological heritage of Finland. The administrative goal is to prepare a list that the Finnish government can approve as an inventory referred to in the national land use guidelines based on the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999). Similar inventories have previously been conducted on nationally significant built cultural environments (RKY) and nationally valuable landscape areas (VAMA 2021).

Keywords: heritage management, national land use guidelines, significance, assessment.

39.1 The Antiquities Act protects all ancient remains, but it may grant the permission to remove one as well

In recent decades, heritage work and the protection of ancient remains have changed in many ways from what it was before the turn of the millennium. The change has been influenced, along with other developments in society, by the increase in knowledge of the archaeological heritage and the expansion of the concept of ancient remains or archaeological heritage (e.g. Mathers et al. 2000). The development of research methods has made it possible to find ancient remains more easily and more than before (cf. e.g. Ikäheimo & Seitsonen 2021; Rantanen & Tiilikkala 2016; Tiainen 2017; Tiitinen 2016). The number of known archaeological sites is constantly increasing, even though some of the sites are being destroyed – either with permission after exploration or without permission, and without being able to document them. Between 2018 and 2021, about a thousand previously unknown archaeological sites and about 2500 other archaeological cultural heritage sites have been added to the Finnish Register of Ancient Monuments and Sites (hereafter referred to as FRAMS) each year. At the same time, just over a hundred sites have been removed from the protected sites of the register (cf. Maaranen 2020).

There are ongoing activities in the areas of active land use and commercial forests, the impact of which on archaeological cultural heritage must be assessed by the cultural environment authorities. The Antiquities Act (295/1963), which came into effect in 1963, protects all ancient remains immediately after they have been found and no other decision is needed. The law does not take a position on how valuable an ancient relic should be to be protected. The law only states that the ancient remains are protected as memories of Finland's previous settlement and lists the structures to which the protection applies.

However, Article 11 implicitly implies that not all ancient relics are equivalent in stating that 'if the ancient relic causes disproportionate harm to its significance, permission to disturb the ancient remain may be granted upon application.' Based on the land use plans to be processed, the conservation authorities at the Finnish Heritage Agency and the museums with regional responsibility make daily assessments of whether the planned measures, if implemented, may cause a risk of damage to archaeological sites in the area. If damage is likely, it is necessary to assess how large the damage is in relation to the significance of the archaeological site and how significant the planned land use project is in relation to the remains. Although the Finnish Heritage Agency has issued guidelines on how to implement the processes related to land use projects, the individual protection authorities responsible for the area must take a position on the significance of the archaeological site based on their own views and experience.

The assessment of the significance of archaeological sites is mostly based on features that are not visible and cannot be obtained without studies that interfere with structures or cultural layers. It is quite common that sites in the planning area have not yet been excavated or the excavations have been so small-scale that the information obtained from them is not sufficient for basing the assessment on it. It is also quite common for a site to first undergo test studies (e.g. surveys, test pits) to determine its nature and value.

The definition decides whether the ancient relic is so valuable that it will not be allowed to be removed, but requires that the plans must be changed so that there is no need to remove the remains. Quite often, however, it is concluded that the remains are such that protection can be waived after adequate research. A uniform set of criteria is needed in order to enable the assessment of the significance of archaeological sites as objectively and equally as possible by different organisations across Finland.

39.2 What makes an archaeological heritage site significant?

As ancient remains are automatically protected in Finland, there has been no need to assess their value. Valuation may also have been avoided because it has been feared that it will lead to a weakening of the protection of sites considered to be less significant when some sites are identified as more significant than others.

However, substantial archaeological sites were first outlined as early as 1983, when the Nationally Significant Prehistoric Protected Areas was published. (Siiriäinen 1983) The study delineated large geographical areas with many significant archaeological sites. Its aim was to identify the areas where land use plans should pay special attention to already known and possible previously unknown ancient remains. Typically for the time, the publication presented only prehistoric sites of interest, with sites dating back to historical times being excluded – as the title of the publication implies.

The evaluation of ancient remains was also discussed in the 2001 publication 'Maiseman Muisti - valtakunnallisesti merkittävät muinaisjäännökset'. It presented about 350 ancient remains, which gave a cross-section of Finland's most interesting and valuable ancient sites (Purhonen 2001: 5–9). Due

to the gradual expansion of the concept of ancient remains and partly also the consequences of the internal organisational division of the National Board of Antiquities, the *Maiseman muisti* publication already contained some of the best-known ancient sites of historical times. The publication has since been used as a source in statements on land use plans, as the project did not carry out the hearing, for example. The selection of sites presented in the publication has also aroused critical discussion, as the valuation of the sites was basically based on the views of researchers from the Department of Archaeology at the Finnish Heritage Agency, not on a wider discussion with several parties (Halinen 2006: 58–62).

The need to assess and classify archaeological cultural heritage in terms of its significance is universal. As competition for the resources available to societies has intensified, it has also become necessary to define what is important, valuable and relevant for ancient remains and what needs to be preserved (cf. Darvill 2000: 22–44; Génétay and Lindberg 2014; Kalman 2014: 211; Lauwerier 2017 et al.). It is important for the success of the valuation that the valuer has a comprehensive understanding of the archaeological site based on existing data. Based on this, the cultural-historical values of the site are identified and the significance of the site is determined. The significance of a site is a synthesis of the defined values (Kalman 2014: 179; 211).

In the development of the criteria and their indicators for the evaluation, the cultural-historical value of the site has often been considered the most significant of them. In practice, it is the sum of other measurable values. The definition of cultural-historical value varies slightly depending on the author of the criteria, but most commonly, cultural-historical value is considered to consist of the social, research, historical, spiritual and aesthetic values of an object.

Social value refers to the importance of an archaeological site to the community where it is located or that perceives it as its own. For example, the Sámi sieidi sites have great importance to Sámi people. In ancient times they also have led people to do things differently or even change their social behaviour (Äikäs 2015: 110). Socially significant sites are usually visible landscape elements with a strong identity value for the population of the area (cf. Groenewoudt et al. 2017: 179–194; Kalman 2014: 210–215). In Finland, these are typically the most famous hillforts, castles and fortresses, as well as sites related to religious life. They are also often accompanied by significant and interesting stories that tell something about the community's past.

Many historical military sites have become significant archaeological sites in Finland – especially as symbols of the battles of the First and Second World Wars. For example, the Salpa line, a Second World War defence structure, has been perceived as an important monument, although it was never used in battles. Its importance has been emphasised as a monument of independence, for example during Finland's 100th anniversary in 2017. However, the phenomenon of increasing interest in military works is international (cf. Darvill 2005; Wallis & Harvey 2017: 1–14). Very few archaeological sites have wider social significance. Most of the objects are those that are practically little known. More typically, even landowners are unaware of the ancient remains on their own land, even though FRAMS is a public register to which everyone has free access.

The research or informational value of an archaeological site consists of what information can be obtained in its research from when it was formed due to human activity. The research value may consist of research data already obtained from the site or what information can still be expected to be obtained from that type of site. An archaeological site that has achieved classical status in research history may not emerge when assessing its research value. In most cases archaeological sites of this kind have already been totally excavated, such as the Bronze Age cairn at Kotokallio in Lieto (reg. no. 423010011). If research data on a site is not available, its research significance is assessed based on what information has been obtained from other sites of the same type in the past. Often the research significance of an archaeological site is emphasised when its value is determined.

Archaeological remains that have achieved a classical position in the history of research does not always stand out when assessing its research value. If the archaeological site has been fully researched or similar sites that have not yet been studied can be selected, and the classic area has no deeper social value, it may be considered less valuable in the evaluation. When estimating the research value of remains about which no research data is yet available, the information obtained from other similar types of remains is used as a basis for the analysis. Often the research significance of an archaeological site as an assessment criterion is weighted compared to other criteria.

Historical value is affected by how well human activities and community development that have taken place in the past can be linked to the site under study. The aesthetic value of remains, in turn, is not only formed by what the site looks like visually, but it also gets content from how powerful the feelings it evokes in people are. Ancient remains can also have spiritual value that involve a strong emotional charge and a connection to the remains religious or artistic features.

39.3 Nationally significant archaeological sites: The VARK project

To streamline land use planning for archaeological cultural heritage and enable predictability of decision-making, the Finnish Heritage Agency launched the project 'Nationally Significant Archaeological Sites' (VARK) in 2018 (<https://www.museovirasto.fi/en/cultural-environment/archaeological-cultural-heritage/nationally-significant-archaeological-sites-vark>). The project has developed and tested a method for assessing the significance of archaeological sites, based on which a selection of archaeological sites of national significance will be formed. The project will be implemented throughout Finland, except for the province of Åland.

The aim of the VARK remains selection is to regionally, temporally and thematically prepare a compendium that is as comprehensive as possible that provides as good an overview as possible of the archaeological heritage of Finland. The administrative goal is to prepare a list that the Finnish government can approve as the inventory referred to in the national land use guidelines (issued on 14 December 2017) based on the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999). Similar inventories have previously been conducted on nationally significant built cultural environments (RKY) and nationally valuable landscape areas (VAMA 2021).

The intention is that archaeological sites that have been assessed for the VARK selection will be preserved in all circumstances and will not be granted the permit to disturb ancient remains or, if granted, there must be exceptionally good justification. The starting point is the idea that archaeological remains should always be preserved rather than to allow them be destroyed because the remains are a direct link to the past, unlike their documentation (cf. Darvill 2000: 28) Approximately 3.2% of the 45 000 archaeological sites in Finland (minus the sites defined as possible ancient remains and sites of stray finds) have been included in the VARK selection candidate list. This is only 3% of all currently known ancient settlement areas. In terms of numbers, the largest number of involved remains are settlement places, which is more than a third of all VARK sites (555 in total). The smallest percentage of different kinds of VARK remains are working and manufacturing places, which account only for 2.3% of their total number. If compared to their own class type, the most numerous are church structures, which include not only churches and church ruins but also abandoned church places. In the VARK selection there are 61 of them in total. This is 32% of all church structures included in FRAMS. It is noteworthy that there are also relatively many places of worship, cult and stories, as well as places of

art (like rock paintings and carvings) in the VARK selection when compared to other types of remains. This is probably because their cultural-historical significance is perceived to be greater than settlement places, for example. It is likely that the evaluators' own values have guided the selection towards such remains that have greater emotional importance to us.

39.4 Criteria used to assess the value of remains in the VARK project

The VARK project was started with the creation of criteria to be used in assessing the significance of sites. When a set of criteria is created and used later, it is important to recognise that the set of criteria always looks like its author. Subjectivity cannot be completely avoided. The features associated with an archaeological site that have been considered important to assess depends to a large extent on the author's own experience of the archaeological cultural heritage.

To reduce the effects of the subjective view on the evaluation criteria, a workshop was organised at the start of the project (4 December 2018), where the basics of the criteria were reviewed. Based on its results, the valuation criteria were later developed. Representatives of all key organisations working on archaeological heritage (provincial museums, university departments of archaeology, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of the Environment, the Finnish Forest Board and the scientific community) were invited to the workshop. Thirty experts on the use of archaeological heritage participated in the planning (Tiitinen 2018).

Not all criteria may be applicable to all types of archaeological sites. To be able to highlight and evaluate all the characteristics of the different types of remains, the valuation criteria should be varied and comprehensive. In the VARK project, however, there has been a desire to keep the criteria limited and general, as this has made it possible to focus on such features that unite all monument types and that are the most essential. Also, due to the lack of data and classification in FRAMS, it was not possible to use unambiguous quantitative criteria that would have indicated the rarity or prevalence of the remains, both locally, regionally and nationally. In the future, more attention will need to be paid to these as valuation tools are developed to assist in the implementation of the future Archaeological Heritage Act. At the same time, opportunities must be developed to assess the preservation of sites in relation to their value. Preservation refers mainly to the preservation of ancient remains in relation to external damage to it, such as agriculture, forest use, roads, sand pits, etc.

In practice, each estimators' views on the significance of the site are influenced by their own background and experience of archaeological heritage. The aim of drawing up uniform criteria has been to support the achievement of the most objective possible outcome. Several dozen archaeologists from the Finnish Heritage Agency and museums with regional responsibility have participated in the assessment of the significance of the sites. During the project, the significance of nearly 5000 archaeological sites has been assessed. At the initial stage, sites that are remains included in the *Maiseman muisti* publication, the Finnish selection of archaeological monuments for the Hague Assessment (unpublished and not yet in force) and sites that were classified as category 1 based on the classification used until 2014 were included in the assessment. The remains were earlier divided into three classes: 1. aim to preserve in all circumstances; 2. further research is needed; 3. Destroyed or totally excavated. In addition, monuments that are marked in regional land use plans were included in the first stage. Sites that have been found after 2014 and are generally considered valuable have also been included

in the evaluation. Limiting the material to these has made it possible to complete the work by the deadline. About 30% of them were estimated to be of national significance (around 1450 remains). This is only 2.5% of all archaeological sites in Finland.

39.5 Significance is not a constant value

The significance of an archaeological site varies depending on the type of site and its time of use. Therefore, each type of target should only be considered against its own set of targets when assessing its significance. When selecting the most significant archaeological sites in Finland, the aim has been to have the widest possible coverage of different types of remains and to pick only sites that best fill the criteria of most significant sites. Of the around 200 monument types with their subtypes in FRAMS, 123 are included in the VARK selection of candidate remains.

It is important to look at the significance of sites through different criteria. For example, the large and diverse area of settlement site in Porvoo's Henttala (reg. no. 613010013), which was inhabited from the Mesolithic period to the Neolithic period, is easy to assess as exceptionally significant, both culturally and historically. Its value compared to a place of temporary use is obvious. On the other hand, the value of an archaeological site that appears modest may change when viewed from a research perspective. If the aim of the study is to find out culture related to the hunting and fishing economy, a small-scale temporary residence can be an invaluable source of information.

In the VARK project, six different criteria have been used to assess the significance of sites. They were used to assess their: 1. cultural-historical significance; 2. archaeological research value; 3. prevalence or rarity; 4. archaeological diversity; 5. environment and landscape; and 6. preservation. The rating scale ranged from 0 to 3 and 1 to 3, depending on the criteria. A site may have been possible to score between one and 17 points for its archaeological significance.

At the time of writing, evaluation data for all criteria has been obtained from a total of 1444 items. The median of the sum of the points of the sites is 12 out of 17. The quarter points are at points 10 and 16. This means that one quarter of the sites have been included in the VARK range of proposed sites, even though they have received fewer than 11 points for archaeological significance. In most cases, this is since the VARK selection also includes sites that, if located alone, would not have met the criteria for a nationally significant site. They are included because they belong to a territorially and functionally cohesive set of sites whose significance would decrease if some less valuable part of it were left out. Some 205 subjects have received a full 17 points in the evaluation. The figure is surprisingly high. The full score on preservation and the environment is a bit confusing, as only a few archaeological sites are left in their original condition. Likewise, only a few archaeological remains are in a well-preserved environment with no extraneous elements at all that interfere with understanding the site.

In terms of criteria, the highest scores for the sites considered to be the most nationally significant are awarded in the cultural-historical sense. The average of the points of cultural-historical significance (0–3) is 2.51. Of the 1440 sites, 813 have been assessed as culturally and historically very significant and 557 as quite significant. Some 72 sites have been assessed as only slightly significant. This high number may be affected by the fact that the VARK candidates were initially considered to be significant sites, for example. The lowest average scores are in archaeological diversity. For this, the average score is only 1.4%. This is explained by the fact that the selection mainly shows items that only represent a certain time and phenomenon. Of the 1457 remains, only 294 are those for which more than one monument type is entered in FRAMS. The diversity of Bronze Age burial mounds is generally estimated to be relatively low, so the average score for their diversity is only 1.2. However, as many

as 60 Bronze Age burial mounds have been proposed for selection. In addition, they occur in almost the entire coastal area, so they are available in a selection from each coastal province. Their national significance has been enhanced by the fact that many of them are relatively well preserved and have elements preserved around them that help to understand why the site was built there.

When the points given in the values are considered by type of relic, the variations are relatively small. The VARK selection includes a total of 30 antiquities related to routes. Those have the lowest scores on average (median 10.96). There is a total of 1044 ancient remains related to routes in Finland. Of these, 5.9% belong to the selection. It appears that these have been included in the VARK selection at below-average values because they have been considered rare, well preserved and of cultural-historical significance.

The highest scores are given to church structures (a total of 61 sites with an average score of 13.96). They are, of course, of high cultural-historical significance, but they are also characterised by the fact that they are usually in groups of ancient remains, i.e. they are often associated with a settlement place or places and a cemetery. Although the VARK selection mainly includes individual types of ancient remains, belonging to the group always still appears to give to a site higher than average scores (the average score for groups of ancient sites is 13.62).

39.6 Conclusions

One of the goals of the VARK project has been to develop an assessment of the significance of ancient remains. Although all the subjects were scored based on different criteria, the scores have not been used in the selection of the sites. A certain minimum score has not been necessary for a VARK site in order to be selected. The verbal descriptions of the criteria and the overall view formed from them have been considered more important than the scoring. Valuing items is always influenced by the estimators' personal experience and interests. The criteria used are not entirely commensurate. The cultural-historical significance of the site is largely the sum of other criteria and may also have been considered more important than other criteria. Some of the criteria have also been considered problematic, as there has not always been enough information to assess all the criteria. In particular, the assessment of the preservation of a site has been considered difficult in sites without visible structures on the ground.

In the VARK project, the assessment of sites has focused only on those criteria of significance which are relevant to land use. Although the social significance of a site is an important criterion for its protection, it has not been considered in the VARK assessment. Also, economic and political values have been left out of this project. The evaluation of the significance of archaeological sites needs to be further developed and the experience gained in VARK's work provides good conditions for this. During the project, information such as the number of archaeological sites, their relationships with each other and their condition have been supplemented. Views have also been obtained on the quality of the content of FRAMS and on its current possibilities in the protection of sites and the assessment of their significance.

It is also important that the information obtained in the VARK project can be used both in the further development of the register and in the harmonisation of the assessment of the significance of sites. This is essential when making administrative decisions related to archaeological sites. The criteria now used strongly reflects the values and meanings of their own time. They will also change over time, and it is therefore important that the range of significant sites also develops and expands over time.

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