

Where did Hertele Church go? Views on the administrative system of Harjumaa in the 13th century.

Kersti Markus

Summary

Abstract: For a medieval architecture researcher, 13th century Harjumaa is one of the most mysterious areas in Estonia. Previous concepts about how parishes emerged do not seem to be valid here; our knowledge of the actual county borders is questionable as well. This article analyses the function and role of the biggest and mightiest ancient Estonian castle – Varbola stronghold – in the development of Harjumaa’s administrative structure, the division of the post-conquest lands, and the possible background for selecting the location for the first churches. It is concluded that the circumstances in Estonia in the 13th century changed much less than previously thought, and Estonians maintained a significant position in the new society.

Keywords: Middle Ages, churches, fort district, Varbola

Only a few people probably know that there was once a Hertele church and parish in Estonia. The place of worship first appears in records in 1281, when Reval’s canon *dominus Hermannus de Hertel* was mentioned. In the same year, the Padise chapel, belonging to the Cistercian Order, was subsumed under the Hertele parish church. The two sides in this contract were the Bishop of Reval, Johannes, and the abbot and convent of Dünamünde monastery near Riga. Hertele is noted for the last time, in 1284, in the border treaty signed by the Ösel-Wiek Bishop Hermann and Letgasti, Vice-regent of the Dan-

ish king. The contract describes the border running through the marshland and forests, but near Ellamaa village mention was made of a crosier serving as a boundary marker which had been carved from a large tree that the inhabitants of the Herchele (Hertole) parish destroyed after Bishop Hermann’s death.

The parish was located on the south edge of Revala County, next to the Harjumaa and Ösel-Wiek bishopric. The landscape was mostly made up of bogs and forests, without dense settlement. Inevitably, the question arises of why it was deemed necessary to build a church there in the first place. Who was it meant for? However, the picture would change considerably if we eliminated the county borders. The nearest centre then would be Varbola – the biggest and mightiest ancient stronghold in Estonia.

The article examines the function of the Varbola stronghold in 13th-century Harjumaa and concludes that it could have been an international trade centre. This is probable because of the stronghold’s location by the navigable Kasari River, its late emergence (12th century), the sparseness of settlement in the neighbourhood, its location at the border area of three counties, its unusual size (ca 100 residential houses) and mighty defensive buildings (stone walls). However, the strongest argument was the continuing vigorous functioning of Varbola after Estonia was conquered in 1227. The stronghold lost its importance only in the second quarter of the 14th century. One reason could have been the fact that the river became too shallow for boats. Moving trading ports from their previous locations nearer to the sea happened in other parts of Estonia as well.

In the author’s opinion, the Hertele church and parish were connected with the trading centre in Varbola. At least partly, the Hertele parish probably coincided with the Varbola

fort district, which stretched across the county borders, and was later divided between Rapla, Märjamaa and Nissi parishes. The church itself should be sought in the surroundings of Varbola. A parish reaching across the county borders might seem unusual, but we do not actually know how the borders ran around Varbola. The first border treaty mentioning this area dates from 1284 and is not recognised by local people.

In connection with determining the extent of the Varbola fort district, the question of Harjumaa's administrative structure emerged in the 13th century. According to archaeologist Valter Lang, settlement centres in the Viking Age formed around Lohu, Keava and Voose strongholds. Lohu, in the heart of Harjumaa, was the mightiest of them and was probably also the densest settlement centre. The importance of Lohu stronghold was made obvious in the 'Chronicle of Henry of Livonia'. The stronghold areas also played a significant role during the post-conquest period. We know from the Chronicle that the strongholds were divided between the conquerors, together with their lands, fields, people and tithes. This practice continued until the end of the 16th century. This fact has, strangely enough, not been taken into consideration in researching the post-conquest administrative structure.

The Estonian list in 'Liber Census Daniae' gives a comprehensive overview of the land division in Harjumaa in the 1240s. It appears that in the mid-13th century, power in Harjumaa belonged to the Danish King and the Lode family. The king and his illegitimate son Knut owned the most important part of the Lohu stronghold area, and the entire Keava stronghold area. The Lodes, on the other hand, had most of the land around the Varbola trading centre. The small Danish vassals held the land mainly at the margins of the Lohu

stronghold area. However, the Varbola trade centre continued and the land around the most important forts belonged to nobility of Estonian origin. Therefore the changes in Estonian society after the conquest were not as radical as generally presumed in our history books.

Estonian history overviews mostly assume that later parishes grew out of ancient parishes. At least in Harjumaa, this is not true. Thus there were only two parishes in Harju: one included almost the whole of Harjumaa (later Hageri) and the other was situated in the north-eastern part of the county (Kose). The Lohu and Keava stronghold areas and the Varbola trading centre, with its hinterland, therefore had to be a part of one ancient parish. And after the conquest, the parish acquired one church, Hageri. Had the church been centrally located, we might even believe the version of one big ancient parish that became a church parish after the conquest. However, the Hageri church is situated at the northern edge of Harjumaa.

According to the author the main factor in building churches was the location of forts and the strategic location in the landscape. As a result, parishes appeared in Harjumaa which give the wrong picture of the dominant administrative structure in prehistoric times.

The aim of this article is to question some existing views about 13th century Estonian society. The administrative structure greatly varied by counties, and thus it would be premature to offer major generalisations at this point.

Translated by Tiina Randviir

Proof-read by Richard Adang