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Children's Graves and Conversion to Christianity in Finland

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The period between the 11th and 13th centuries in Finland is considered as the transition from the Late Iron Age, that is the Crusade period (1025–1150 AD), to the early medieval period. Settlement, which consisted of villages of a few houses, was concentrated in the south-western part of the country and inland areas. The main sources of livelihood were agriculture and cattle breeding. Contacts with the neighbouring countries were active and through the contacts new spirits and ideas, above all the new religion, Christianity, were adopted.

Understanding of this period is mainly based on cemeteries which provide information about the material world, religion and society – if we can interpret the material. In this paper I will discuss how Christianity affected children's burial. I will briefly present the most common burial practice in Finland during the time period in question and present children's graves in two early Christian inhumation cemeteries from the 11th and 13th centuries.

Adoption of the Christian burial practice

Christianity was adopted to Finland gradually between 9th and 12th centuries. The first Christian influences, cross pendants and other jewellery with Christian ornaments, were received during the 9th century through contacts with neighbouring countries. However, adoption of the new religion and burial practice took centuries. According to Paula Purhonen (Purhonen 1998, 135), who has studied Christianisation in Finland, the unfurnished inhumation burial and Christian burial practice were gradually adopted in two phases during the 11th and 12th centuries. Inhumation burials appeared first, with weapons and tools oriented in north-south direction, or alternatively in different directions and without any regularity. In the following phase, grave-goods disappeared except for dress ornaments, and the grave orientation east-west with its variations was established. Finally, the first distinct Christian cemeteries appeared during the 12th century (Purhonen 1998, 137–139). Christian burial became dominant soon, although pre-Christian practices such as dressing the body, supplying the deceased with grave-goods and even cremation were also practised.

Approximately 70 cemeteries containing burials from the Crusade period and the early Christian period have been excavated in Finland (Purhonen 1998, 116). Unfortunately, the majority of these sites have been only partly researched and contain less than a few dozen burials. Characteristic of the cemeteries are the sparsely furnished inhumation graves with the deceased in a supine position with arms on the sides of the body or crossed on the chest or pelvis. Bodies are buried with or without wooden coffins. Remains of organic material indicate that sometimes the bottom of the coffin or grave pit was covered with textiles, furs, moss or branches. Sometimes the body was dressed and buried with artefacts, simply with a knife but more luxuriously with tools, weapons or jewellery. However, compared to the previous period (Viking Age 800–1025 AD) grave-goods became rare. Furthermore, the grave orientation east-west, with its many vari-

ations, was established (Purhonen 1998; Jäkärä 1997).

Children's graves in Ristinpelto and Myllymäki cemeteries

The cemeteries at Myllymäki in Nousiainen and Ristinpelto in Lieto, both located in the south-western Finland, are among the largest excavated cemeteries from the Crusade period. Although excavated between the 1930's and 1950's they are among the most representative Iron Age cemeteries in Finland. The Ristinpelto cemetery contains a total of 157 burials and can be dated to the 12th and 13th centuries. The cemetery at Myllymäki contains 91 burials. According to artefact dating, its use started in the 9th century, increased significantly in the 12th century and continued until the beginning of the 14th century. In both cemeteries the deceased were buried in the east-west direction. Most of the graves had no grave-goods, and even in those that did, the finds consisted mainly of individual artefacts. The most common finds were a knife hanging at the belt, jewellery and various decorations. However, the Myllymäki cemetery contained three especially rich graves in which the deceased had been provided with jewellery and artefacts such as a sword, a sickle, a key, or a firemaking steel. In both cemeteries, deceased were buried with and without coffins, and grave-markers were lying above several graves.

Because the osteological material is poorly preserved, the graves of children and adults in Ristinpelto and Myllymäki cemeteries were defined on the basis of the size of ring jewellery or, as in the most of the cases, on the basis of the length of the coffin and grave pit. This raises a source critical question concerning the representativeness of the material. Berit Sellevold has thoroughly analysed Iron Age and medieval skeletal material in Scandinavia. She has found out, that the length of the grave does not always correspond with the age of the deceased; only the graves for the newborn seem to vary between 50 and 75 cm in length, but in graves for older children there seems to be greater variation (Sellevold 1997, 21). Furthermore, Sellevold has emphasised (Sellevold 1997, 15–18), that skeletal material, particularly children's skeletons, from archaeological investigations is almost never representative of the origin population because of the later burial activity, physical and chemical processes, completeness of an archaeological excavation and excavation procedures. Therefore it should be noted, that in the cemeteries under study the number of children's graves is most probably under-representative.

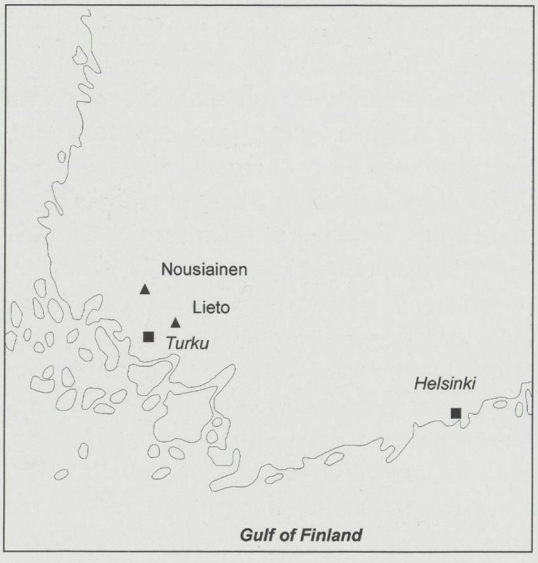

Fig. 1: Location of Lieto and Nousiainen.

At Ristinpelto, there were 29 children's graves (19% of all deceased), but at Myllymäki only 4 (5% of all deceased). As the proportion of children's graves in the largest (over 40 documented graves) Crusade period and Early Medieval cemeteries in Finland fluctuates between 6 and 18% (Purhonen 1998, 154), the proportion of children at Myllymäki seems unusually small. Reasons for this may be factors affecting the preservation and finding of the graves, but also the criteria used to define children's graves. Also, cremations carried out after inhumations at the same location at Myllymäki may have affected the preservation of the graves. The number of children deceased in infancy was lower than estimated in both cemeteries: at Ristinpelto not more than eight, i.e., 5% of all deceased, but none at all at Myllymäki.

No clear concentration of children's graves in a certain part of the cemetery could be observed. Instead, children were buried like adults in different parts of the cemetery. This seems to indicate that the age of the deceased did not matter in the location of the burial site in the cemetery. Children were buried next to adults, even though some children were also buried next to each other and also alone, so that there were no other graves near the child's grave. At Ristinpelto, one child was bur-

ied in the same grave with an adult, and in several cases a child was buried directly on top of a previously buried adult, which would seem to indicate that the child was intentionally placed near the adult.

Children's graves had slightly less grave-goods than adult graves. At Ristinpelto, 22% of adult graves had grave-goods, whereas for children the figure is only 17%. At Myllymäki, the proportion of adult graves is 43%, i.e., significantly larger than at Ristinpelto, and two of the four children's graves had grave-goods.

For both children and adults, the total number of artefacts was usually one or two. However, a difference in artefact types could be discerned between the graves of adults and children. Children's graves featured a knife, a clay vessel, a single bead that may have hung on a chain, and a head band decorated with bronze spirals. The most common artefacts are knives and beads. At Ristinpelto, only one child's grave had a clay vessel. No jewellery or weapons and tools, rare even in adult graves, were found in children's graves.

In terms of grave structures, children's graves resembled adult graves. There were proportionally as many children's graves with coffins as adult graves, at Ristinpelto approximately half and at Myllymäki about two thirds, but unfortunately it was not possible to compare the structures of the coffins in the study material. Only the use of furs was different in the graves of adults and children: based on the remains of a few individual furs, they were used only in adult graves.

According to these results, children buried in the Ristinpelto and Myllymäki cemeteries were given the same treatment as adults and the burial of children did not differ significantly from the usual burial practice in terms of grave location, structures, or goods.

Christian influence on children's burial

In the cemeteries under study, those children who were buried in the same place as adults, were treated akin to adults and considered as members of the community at an early stage. If the position and respect of the deceased is measured according to the energy expended on the burial, as Joseph Tainter has proposed (Tainter 1978, 121–128), children and adults

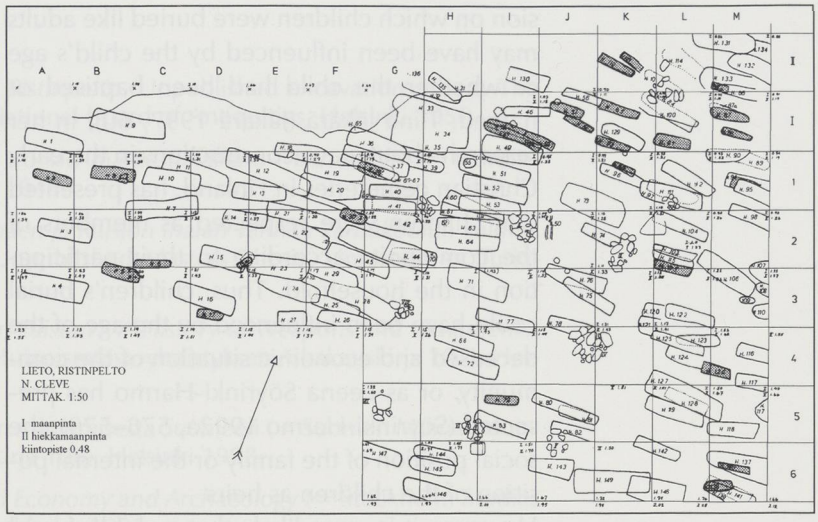

Fig. 2: Children's graves in Ristinpelto (drawing: Cleve 1950).

in these communities could be considered as equal. There may not have been a definite, age-related border between childhood and adulthood. As in later rural communities, children probably started working at a very young age and helped their parents in different chores with responsible tasks increasing with age.

It seems that in at least in Myllymäki, children deceased in infancy were mainly buried elsewhere. This result could be caused by the preservation and find conditions of the graves, but it could also be a phenomenon due to the burial practices of the community. The deci-

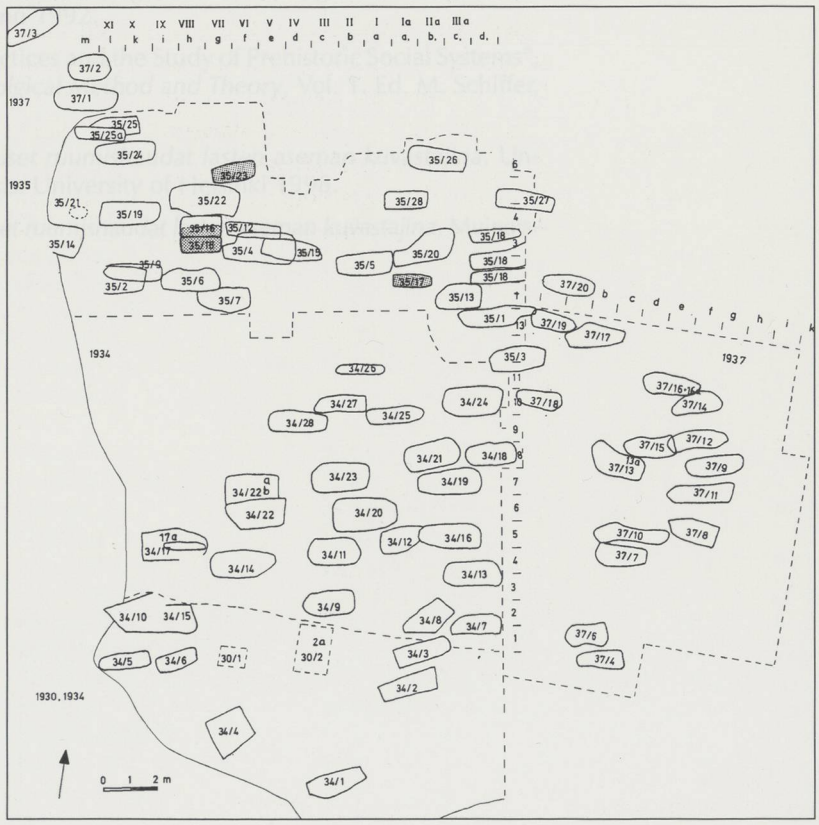

Fig. 3: Children's graves in Myllymäki (drawn by R. Ylönen after H. Salmo).

sion on which children were buried like adults may have been influenced by the child's age or whether the child had been baptised or named. Tiina Jäkärä (Jäkärä 1997, 60), in her research about grave constructions in the early Christian cemeteries in Finland, has presented that children were respected as members of the community according to their participation in the household. Thus, children's burial could have been influenced by the age of the deceased and economic situation of the community, or as Leena Söyrinki-Harmo has presented (Söyrinki-Harmo 1992a, 578–579), the social position of the family or the internal position of the children as heirs.

However, it is more likely that a child's burial was influenced by the new burial custom or new religion, Christianity. Paula Purhonen has noted (Purhonen 1998, 154–155) that if compared to the pre-Christian cemeteries, the number of infant burials increased in the Christian cemeteries which may indicate, according to Purhonen, that the custom of child abandonment appeared in Finland before the adoption of the Christian burial. Furthermore, Purhonen has also stated (Purhonen 1998, 119–120) that the Nordic legislation during the 12th–14th centuries contained orders concerning the burial, among other things that unbaptised individuals had no right to be buried within the church cemetery. Thus, the increased number of infant burials in Christian cemeteries could indicate that due to the Christian burial practise children were buried in the same place as adults instead of burying infants outside the cemetery.

In both cemeteries a knife appeared among the most common artefacts found in graves. Probably it was personal property received at an early age. In children's graves also a single bead appeared in both cemeteries. It seems to have been a common feature because beads put in children's graves have been found also in other Viking Age and Crusade Period cemeteries in Finland (Schwindt 1893, 145; Söyrinki-Harmo 1992b, 152; Lehtosalo-Hilander 2000, 222). Purhonen has presented that silver beads, particularly in children's graves, functioned as protective amulets symbolising new life or even baptism (Purhonen 1998, 161). Alternatively, because beads have been found in children's graves in pre-Christian cemeteries as well, a single bead could have been a symbol of naming. According to old Nordic tradition, a child was accepted as a member of a community in connection with naming which also conferred upon the child the right of inheritance (Hagberg 1949, 16).

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