

The Christianisation of Finland – a Case of Want of Power in a Peripheral Area

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Funeral ritual; ecclesiastical organisation; tithing; the parish system; German Order

Introduction

The cathedral of Turku (Sw. Åbo) in SW Finland was consecrated in the year 1300. This date can be regarded as the terminus of a long process that began around 1000 and involved the Christianisation and conversion of the permanent settlement of Western Finland, and the organisation of this area to correspond to the earliest ecclesiastical social structure.

This article outlines a model of developments in Finland especially from the second half of the 12th century to around the year 1300. Elements of this model are partly in agreement with the results and suggestions of several researchers. I also address the problem of the hiatus between chronological horizons involving the abandonment of the pre-Christian cemeteries and the introduction of the tithe system.

The present discussion refers to both archaeological and historical materials, a point that may seem trivial. The fact remains, however, that in Finland the representatives of these respective disciplines only fragmentarily and to a limited degree make use of the sources of their mutual areas of research, particularly with regard to the 13th century. This article addresses perspectives that have been at least partly ignored in Finnish research on the Late Iron Age and early medieval times.

Before discussing the problems at hand it is necessary to present two points that are important for understanding the arguments that follow, as they may not be sufficiently known to researchers unfamiliar with the special conditions of Finland.

Firstly, archaeologists in Scandinavia operate with an Iron Age chronology, in which the last

period is the Viking Age, ca. 800–1050 AD, after which the Middle Ages begin. In Southwest Finland, however, the Viking Age is followed a further prehistoric period preceding the Middle Ages, viz. the Crusade Period, from ca. 1025 to 1200. There is yet another chronology that applies to the eastern and south-eastern parts of Finland, i. e. Savo and Karelia. Here, the last period of the Iron Age is known as the Karelian Crusade Period, lasting until ca. 1300 AD. Since the Second World War, most of Karelia has belonged to the Soviet Union, later Russia. Savo and Karelia are not discussed in the present article.

Secondly, the areas of Iron Age settlement in present-day Southwest Finland comprised Finland-Proper, Satakunta and Tavastia (fig. 1). The middle of the 12th century saw the beginning of colonisation of areas in Finland that in themselves were suited to arable farming, but were not settled during the Late Iron Age for reasons such as the unsuitability of the soil for tilling with prevailing technology (Orrman 1987; 1990b; 1991). Accordingly, the Finnish archipelago and the western Uusimaa region came under colonisation in the mid-12th century, followed by the Åland Islands and eastern Uusimaa in the late 12th century, and the Finnish regions of Ostrobothnia in the second half of the century, while the Swedish colonisation of the coastal region of Ostrobothnia began during the second half of the 13th century. These groups of colonists were already Christian, and their arrival and presence must have had a great mental and ideological influence on the inhabitants of the neighbouring areas (Meinander 1950; 1977; 1983; Orrman 1990a, 1992; Hellberg 1987; Luukko 1950). It is obvious that the same coloni-



Fig. 1: Northern Europe, the Diocese of Turku, later Finland, with the historical provinces mentioned in the text. 1 Finland Proper; 2 Uusimaa; 3 Häme; 4 Ostrobothnia; 5 Satakunta; 6 Karelia and Savo; 7 the Åland Islands. The southern part of the Swedish-Russian border of 1323 is marked with a dotted line (after Hiekkänen 1994, 12, fig. 1).

sation from Sweden reached even the shores of Estonia from the 12th century onward. Following these points, I return to the subject at hand. The period 1025–1300 is here divided into three stages, each of which is discussed separately.

The first stage

It is currently maintained that the spread of inhumation burial, the east-west orientation of graves and a decreased amount of grave-goods are partly interwoven stages in the process of Christianisation (Cleve 1948; Gräslund 1999; Kivikoski 1969; Purhonen 1998; Staecker 1999). In Finland, the spread of inhumation burial can be, with a few exceptions (Lehtosalo-Hilander 2000), said to have begun around the year 1000. The orientation of graves and their content in terms of objects, however, remained predominantly pre-Christian.

The reduction of objects of household implements, especially ceramics put in graves began already in the early 11th century, but it was not until the beginning of the 12th century that a gradual change to the east-west orientation of graves ensued. Objects related to dress started to disappear only in the 12th century. The actual transition to inhumation burial appears to have depended on stronger cultural contacts with the areas to the east and west that had already come under Christian influence and undergone conversion. This is also a sign that that religious ideas had begun to change, which was reflected in the custom of burial.

I assume the changes that took place around or a little after 1100 to have had a universal ecclesiastical background in the Gregorian reforms of the Western Church, whose earliest marked impact in Sweden appears to have been papal letters from 1080–1081. From this time onwards missionary priests can be regarded as having been sent to Finland in larger numbers in keeping with a specific agenda.

In my opinion a stage can be distinguished from ca. 1025 and 1150 (see also Kivikoski 1969, 31; 34–35) which I did not take into account earlier (Hiekkänen 2000, 18). This period, in turn, can be divided into two sub-periods. The first of these, ca. 1025–1100, was a kind of initial stage with its main emphasis on the cultural infiltration of Christian customs,

while actual Christianisation in terms of conversion was of minor importance. During the period ca. 1100–1150 more or less systematic missionary activity began and became established.

In terms of organisation, this was a process at the micro-level – there were no missionary centres. Economically solid peasants and farmers were presumably the most inclined to adopt the new religion (Taavitsainen 1987, 99; 1989, 84). The process of Christianisation and conversion concerned farmsteads, and there were presumably numerous private churches (Eigenkirchen) in these contexts, particularly in Finland-Propria (see also Taavitsainen 1987, 99–100; 1989, 85 f.; Salo 2000). It is difficult to point to any contemporary conversion over larger areas, and I would exclude the possibility of, for example, local *ting* rulings on conversion. This, of course, does not mean that Christianity could not have spread quickly during the first half of the 12th century.

The second stage

The second stage began in the middle of the 12th century, when the pace of change became more intense. As is usual within archaeology, dates are not sufficiently precise, but a change appears to have taken place in the decades around the year 1150. Increasingly fewer graves can be dated *post*-1150 due to the fact, that more and more graves are without objects – the funeral ritual is changing. Nevertheless it cannot be claimed that only graves lacking finds are Christian. I place the final boundary of the second stage around the year 1200 or the first quarter of the 13th century. This is in agreement with the results of a re-dating of the Crusade Period (Sarvas 1971, 51–63) that have been confirmed later (Riikonen 1999; Taavitsainen 1990, 142–155). Graves with objects related to dress disappear from the archaeological record towards the end of the second stage.

The alleged first crusade to Finland, which is mentioned in sources later in the 13th century, is dated to the 1150s. It is said to have been undertaken by Bishop Henrik – later patron saint of Turku Diocese and all Finland – supposedly together with King Erik Jervardsson. We need not take the late 13th-century legend texts on the crusade literally, but they may well

contain elements of the actual course of events (Suvanto 1987, 149–156; Virrankoski 2001, 66). In the 1150s, missionary work was begun which was shaped by the leadership of the Catholic Church in Sweden and the growing central authority of the Crown.

As in the period after 1080, these events were also related to the Gregorian movement taking an initiative or at least urging royal authority and the increasingly established and stable Swedish Church to take an active role. All this was in strong opposition to archdiocese of Hamburg-Bremen which was on the side of the German emperor. I assume this to have been at issue when the papal legate Nicolaus Breakspear made his visitation to Sweden in 1152–1153, with the purpose, among other others, of establishing a Swedish archbishopric (Nilsson 1998, 96). If this were the case, the borders of the planned archbishopric were also discussed, especially since Finland appears to have figured as a future diocese already in the 1120s – the dating here is problematic – in the so-called document of Florence (Nilsson 1998, 78–79).

Regardless of whether there was only one bishop named Henrik, or several, it appears that a centrally led mission was launched in Southwest Finland in the 1150s. The work of individual missionaries and the so-called domestic priests of Christian Finns was supervised by the missionary bishop. The centre of the mission was in Nousiainen, roughly 20 kilometres north of the present city of Turku. The missionary area comprised the permanently settled areas of Finland, i. e. Finland-Proper, Satakunta and Tavastia.

The establishment of the missionary diocese with its centre at Nousiainen, the colonisation of large areas of the country with Christians and the rapid process of Christianisation as shown by the archaeological evidence of graves could not have been unrelated phenomena. The latter factor – the conversion process – must have been intensified by the other two.

Compared to the situation south of the Gulf of Finland the development is not quite the same. The organised mission is considered to have started there from the late 1180s onwards. According to the development of the funeral culture the situation seems more in accordance with Finland. There is no obvious reason for the difference of some 30–40 years.

The third stage

I would claim that during the second stage discussed above there was no ecclesiastical territorial organisation in Finland. Presumably, the farmsteads and/or groups of farmsteads mostly used their own churches and cemeteries. The third stage is marked by the emergence or establishment of a territorial parish system at the same time as the centre of the missionary diocese of Finland was moved from Nousiainen, some twenty kilometres south to the bank of the River Aura, no more than 1.6 kilometres from the site of Turku Cathedral.

I also assume that by the beginning of the 13th century Christianisation and the conversion of the population had reached such a stage, that the Church could now begin levying taxes. Even previously, possibly since the beginning of work by the missionary priests, some of whom become so-called domestic priests at an unknown number of farmsteads and/or groups of farmsteads, the clergy had received maintenance from the respective farmsteads. The farmsteads had also paid for the construction and upkeep of the churches and their interiors. Now, at the beginning of the 13th century, this maintenance became regulated partly as the provision of food for the priest and partly in the form of fees for services. The bishop was the driving force in this process and he, too, received his share of the tax.

The centre of the diocese was moved from Nousiainen to Koroinen after the year 1229, possibly as early as 1230 or 1231, as Nousiainen is already mentioned in records as a parish in 1232, and not as the see of the bishop. By 1234 at the latest Masku had also become a parish. The chronological horizon around 1230 appears to be significant in establishing the time when the first congregational structures emerged. I suggest that this took place in the 1220s and 1230s. I cannot propose an earlier date, because it is difficult to assume that parishes were established before this process came under way in the provinces of Svealand, which was not before ca. 1200 (Schück 1974, 295) even though the formation of the parish system is far from uniform (see e. g. Brink 1990; 1991; 1996; Nilsson 1999). Nor does there appear to have been any organising actor, i. e. a bishop in the missionary zone of Finland in the early 13th century.

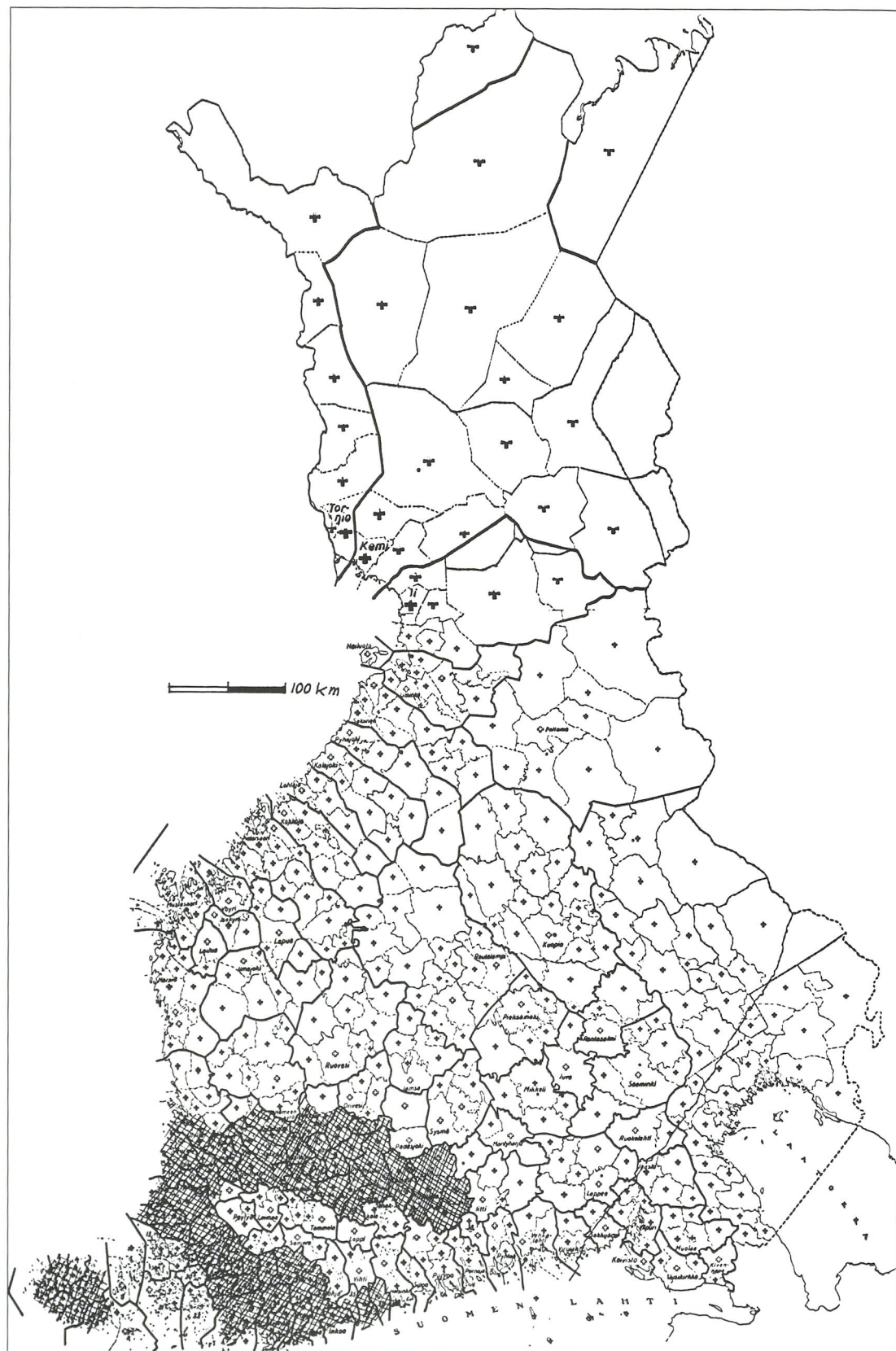


Fig. 2: The area of the earliest parish organisation (c. 1220–1240) in Finland. The parishes in question are hatched (after Jutikkala 1959, 26–27, fig. 15, with author's modifications).

The establishment of parishes meant that the old farmstead cemeteries and churches were now abandoned. Following a system that must have been based on the knowledge of the Church and the local population concerning the carrying capacity of the farms, the population was divided into groups. These groups mostly corresponded to a river valley, or a part thereof in certain areas, as for example along the River Aura, where three parishes (Kaarina, Maaria, and Lieto) were established. This fact evinces the economic potential of this area in comparison with the other river valleys. There was thus a definite reason why the centre of the diocese was moved here around 1230. In Satakunta, the parishes were mostly established along the long Kokemäenjoki river valley. In Tavastia they were founded – with the exception of Hollola – along the shores of Lake Vanajavesi. This structure was slightly different in Uusimaa, whose closest parallels appear to have been in Helsingland (Orrman 1994, 13–20; 2000, 68–71). In the Åland Islands, parish structure was adapted to local conditions.

According to my calculations, the number of parishes of the first wave rose to 40, with 21 in Finland-Proprietary, 5 in Satakunta, 4 in Tavastia, 6 in the Åland Islands and 5 in Uusimaa (fig. 2) (Hiekkänen 2000, 20).

I also claim that detailed planning underlying parish structure can be inferred from the fact that most of the churches were built at sites separate from the old burial grounds, even though there are exceptions, viz. Humikkala in Masku, Yliskylä in Perniö, Kirkkailanmäki in Hollola and Kauskila in Lappeenranta. The names of the parishes are also revealing, as it seems that none of them can be derived from the name of a farmstead or its owner.

It was pointed out in the above discussion that the Church taxes went hand in hand with the territorial parish structure. It appears that there could not have been territorial congregations economically based on a larger group of people engaged in agriculture if there had not been any agreement between the leadership of the Church and the local population concerning the costs involved. In the parish, the latter were mainly responsible for the maintenance of the priest and vicarage, and for the building and upkeep of the church. It can also be claimed that the tithe system as laid down in canonical law – and not the individual and

unsystematic levies for priests and bishops and fees for services – was the basis for the formation of parishes.

The problem, however, is that at least in Finland the tithe system of the south-western provinces was dated to the mid-13th century or slightly later by Kauko Pirinen, the leading authority on medieval Church taxation. This date is applied regardless of whether it concerns the so-called Finnish Law for the old arable farming areas of Finland-Proprietary and Lower Satakunta, or the Swedish Law adapted to the economic opportunities of the colonists of Uusimaa, the Åland Islands and Southern Ostrobothnia (Pirinen 1962, 72–74; 88–89; 174–176; 218–220; Kuujo 1974, 299–300; Pirinen 1991, 90–92). It is assumed that in Tavastia and Upper Satakunta tithe agreements were not made until the end of the 13th century. In these regions the Church taxes were adapted to income obtained from hunting and fishing alongside farming.

There is thus a discrepancy of 20–30 years in the coastal regions and 60–80 years in the inland between the founding of the parishes and the tithe agreements, assuming that the chronology of the emergence of the parish structure presented here is correct. If this is the case, the economy of the congregations in the initial stage must have had some other basis than the tithe system. On the other hand, it can be asked whether the dating of the tithe system in Finland is correct, or whether the accepted dates should be revised. According to Kauko Pirinen's argumentation, his dating of Finnish Law, the first tithe system to be introduced in Finland, is partly based on the possible forwarding of the bishop's tax to the king in the 1250s and on details related to the introduction of decretal law (Pirinen 1962, 72). Eljas Orrman (1983; 1987, 182) has suggested that certain details of the tithe system point more to the year 1200 than to 1250. Such a revision of the date might eradicate the above-mentioned discrepancy.

It appears to be an inevitable fact that there were congregations in Finland already during the second quarter of the 13th century and that they must have had an economic and organisational basis for their existence. It is less credible, however, that there was an ecclesiastical territorial structure, for example in Finland Proprietary during the couple of decades between the abandonment of the farmstead

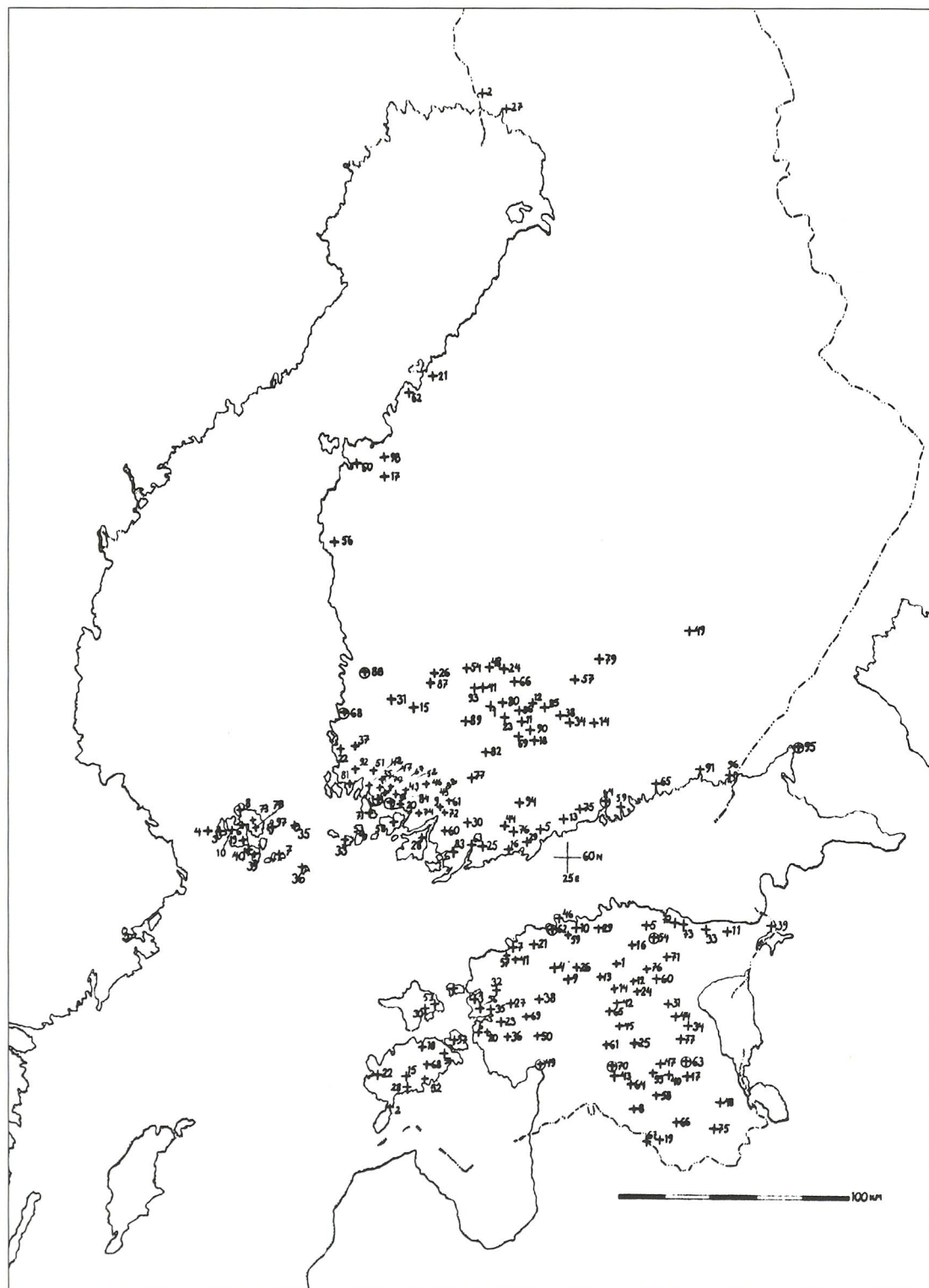


Fig. 3: The Medieval stone churches in Estonia and Finland (after Hiekkänen 1992, 18, fig. 2).

cemeteries around 1200 or earlier and the adoption of the tithe system. The tithe system led to the emergence of the parish system, as it could not function under other conditions. The Gregorian reforms are in the background, but they were not an immediate cause.

The system of congregations was established in Estonia during the same period. But while in Finland it was a result of a at least seemingly peaceful agreement, though carried out by power in a peripheral area, in Estonia as well as in the other Baltic areas the Christianisation was brutally forced by the German Order. There is no immediate reason why the Order did not proceed from the Estonian soil over the narrow Gulf of Finland on to the Finnish areas. The reason could definitely not have been the lack of want of power *per se*. Nor would there have been any threat by the Swedish king while its political and military possibilities were next to none compared with the advanced and modern system of the German Order. The only reason is to be found in the economical differences between Estonia and Finland. Estonia was rich in comparison to Finland especially when it comes to the agriculture and its products. This can be seen when

comparing the number of medieval stone churches in both countries which is equal. The difference is that in Estonia the churches are much more numerous compared to the land area (fig. 3). This shows that the economic possibilities were more favourable in Estonia than in Finland. It can also be stated that the Cistercians never made their way to Finland while they established themselves both in Sweden and in the areas of the later Baltic Countries.

No fundamental changes took place after the establishment of the congregation system in Finland. The number of congregations rose to around 150 towards the end of the Middle Ages in the middle of the 16th century. The first stone churches were built in the late 13th century in Turku and in the Åland Islands, but the actual boom of building churches in stone began in the early 15th century (Hiekkanen 1994, 217–246; 1997, 149–157). Nonetheless, the decisive process that led to the emergence of a medieval society in Finland took place roughly between the years 1000 and 1300. Developments appear to have been at their most intensive between the years 1150 and 1250.

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Abbreviations

FA	Fennoscandia Archaeologica
FM	Finskt Museum
HTF	Historisk Tidskrift för Finland
KLNM	Kulturhistorisk lexikon för nordisk medeltid
SM	Suomen Museo
SMYA-FFT	Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistyksen Aikakauskirja, Finska Fornminnesföreningens Tidskrift

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