

Locality	Total number of barrows and excavated items	Number of inhumations	Number of cremations	Notes
Kaziuliai	? / 2	-	2	
Paginiai	6 / 1	-	2	
Rėkučiai-Paversmīs I	16 / 3	-	2	
Sausiai-Bevandeniškės	10 / 3	-	3	
Zabieliškės	? / 3	-	3	
Римшанцы	7 / 4	-	3	
Vagočiai	15 / 6	-	4	
Будраны	ca. 25 / 10	-	4	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Rėkučiai	? / 1	-	4	
Aleksandriškės-Pukštėnai	4 / 1	-	5	
Понизье	25 / 8	-	5	
Dieveniškės	8 / 6	-	6	There was also a cremation grave dated to the Late Iron Age
Pabarė	50 / 19	-	7	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Vilkonys	20 / 11	-	5-8	
Stakai	54 / 10	-	8	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Sudota I	ca.100 / 19	-	40	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Жэлядзь	? / 12	-	10	
Popai-Vingeliai	30 / 9	-	14	
Paduobė-Šaltaliūnė III	60 / 10	-	15	
Pamusiai	ca.100 / 47	-	15	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Sausiai-Maišinė	ca.100 / 18	-	20	
Vyžiai	Ca.70 / 11	-	14	
Чорная Лужа	40 / 12	-	13	
Пільвіны	36 / 14	-	11	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Grigiškės-Neravai	60 / 50	-	ca. 40	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Karmazinai	ca.150 / 46	-	40	
Засвір	ca.200 / 52	-	ca.40	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age
Kretuonys I	413 / 54	-	ca.35	A number of graves dated to the Middle Iron Age

PRINCIPLES OF ESTONIAN PREHISTORIC RELIGION: WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS TO SOUL BELIEFS

Tõnno Jonuks

The article offers an overview of the development of religion in the areas of present-day Estonia. Two long periods, the Bronze and Iron Ages, are under investigation, and these have been divided into five sub-periods in accordance with grave forms. It will be shown how different phenomena were important in different periods and how these developed. The distinctive element is the cult of ancestors, which was orientated mostly towards the elite. Different concepts of the soul can also be observed. It seems that during the earlier periods, this concept of a collective soul was more important, whereas during later periods, the idea of an individual soul became more and more important. The cult of the skull can also be followed through the analysis of archaeological data. Over a 2000-year period we can follow a constant development of the religion, where different phenomena undergo changes but are nevertheless connected with earlier and later forms.

Key words: prehistory, prehistoric religion, graves, elite, ancestor cult, cult of skull, concepts of a collective and individual soul, development of religious beliefs.

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In this article I will present some principles of prehistoric religion in Estonia during the Metal Ages, between the 11th century BC and the 13th century AD. The article is based on my MA thesis (Jonuks 2003), and only the main results are presented here. Most of the discussion has been removed because of the limitations of the article. A much longer article, together with argumentation will be published in 2005 in the collection of articles *Mythologica Uralica* (Jonuks, in print).

Religion has usually been studied using the phenomenological method, in which a single religious phenomenon is studied; it usually concentrates on the description and development of the phenomenon. The method has been used extensively, not only by historians of religion (Masing 1995; Paulson 1997; Viies 2001), but also by archaeologists (Jaamits 1961; Selirand 1974; Kulmar 1994) in studying Estonian prehistoric religion. Unfortunately, the method allows us to see only one side of religion (see the critique of the method in Hedin 1997; Jensen 2003).

In the following I will attempt to examine religion in one particular period and compare different phenomena, trying to date them, and to analyse which phenomena might have been present and coincided. In doing so, the main purpose is to look at religion as a complete picture, as a narrative of one period (Jensen 2003, 451). The problem that remains is that we can mostly only cover such themes as burying, concepts of the soul and the Afterworld. But this is the problem with our sources and the level of our knowledge, and the broader purpose of the study should still be to examine religion as a system of different phenomena, including deities, rituals and beliefs concerning the society of the living, etc. To achieve this purpose, many other disciplines should also be involved in the study, but if the task is to follow the development of prehistoric religion, the basic discipline should remain archaeology.

As for the sources, the article is based more on archaeological data than on folk-

lore, which has so far been predominant in the study of Estonian religion. There are several reasons for this. One is that folkloristic data was mostly recorded at the end of the 19th century or during the 20th century. Thus we have no proof as to how to date the information we obtain from folklore. We do not even know how much of the oral tradition could be dated back to pre-Christian times. It is very likely that there are motifs originating from the prehistoric period, but there has nevertheless been too little research done on the subject. And even if we find something what definitely belongs to the prehistoric times, we cannot date it more precisely than simply to the pre-Christian era. These are therefore the main reasons why I have based my work on archaeological data and use folkloristic sources only as comparative material.

So far Estonian prehistoric religion has been studied in this way only once. In Oskar Loorits doctoral thesis (Loorits 1959) development of religion was divided according to archaeological periods: Bronze Age, Early Iron Age and Late Iron Age. But results of the research were made according to folkloristic data and linguistic and archaeological results were just used as an illustrative material. But the main problem of the thesis was that too much attention was paid to ethnopsychology and the idealized conception of the common culture of all Finno-Ugrian tribes. It all made the results of the thesis too subjective and thus doubtful.

As the starting date I chose the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, the 11th century BC, when aboveground stone-cist graves were taken into use in Estonia. It seems that in this period some very basic changes took place in religion and in the broader mentality. Although many phenomena were active since the Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages, it seems that the principles had changed, and so much that was new was accepted; thus we can take

1100 BC as a starting point of a new religious concept. One important new idea seems to have been that the ancestor cult, which definitely also existed during the Neolithic Age, had changed a lot, and the new above-ground stone graves were probably used more as cult places rather than burial places. This is the viewpoint which has been stressed by several archaeologists, especially in Scandinavia (Kaliff 1997; Widholm 1998; Victor 2002). Unfortunately, stone graves can give more information, mostly about ancestor worship, than about other religious phenomena. Contemplations on anything outside of that sphere, especially the concepts of deities, are highly speculative. As it is not credible that ideas of god did not undergo any changes, we must be content with the conclusion that we are unable to trace this information.

The final data on the period under investigation dates from the beginning of the 13th century, when Estonia was conquered by the Danes and the Brethren of Swords Order. After that we can no longer speak of the natural development of religion but rather of some new factors that were influencing the development of religion.

As graves were the main sources for the long period under investigation, the period was divided into five parts: stone-cist graves (11th–2nd centuries BC), early *tarand*-graves (6th century BC – 1st century AD), typical *tarand*-graves (1st–5th centuries AD), stone settings (5th–9th centuries AD) and the Late Iron Age (9th–13th centuries AD) as a period of multiple grave forms that did not have as much of a ritual purpose as the previous stone graves. Main sources of the study, i.e. stone graves, give also the borders of study area – mainly northern and western Estonia, where stone graves were spread.

With the purpose of reconstructing religious beliefs, I am proceeding from the idea that graves and other archaeological data can offer us information about ritu-

als. If we understand the ritual we can also make assumptions about the ideas. Of course, that is the ideal view and we will probably never be able to reconstruct the concept of prehistoric religion. We can only guess.

In the period of stone-cist graves the dead bodies of the majority or at least one part of the population seem to have been cremated and the remains scattered. Evidence of this has been found under some stone graves (Vehendi, Lagedi IX, Rebala II and III). Although it needs much detailed analysis, it is possible, that during the Bronze Age dead bodies of either majority or elite of the society were burned and cremation remains were scattered on the ground at a special place. As the remains were left on the ground they disappeared and were preserved only in places, where stone grave was built and protected these. The background ideology of this behaviour may have been the belief in one collective soul made up of the souls of all of the departed ancestors of the lineage. That is why it was not important to keep one body separate, and burned bones were mixed in graves and also at scattering places. The concept of the collective soul was probably also the reason why not to preserve the body at all: it was important to free the soul from the body.

There may have been another way to deal with dead bodies: to leave the body on the ground together with grave goods. This is the way some Finno-Ugric peoples have buried their dead up to very recent times. Unfortunately, this kind of behaviour does not leave any traces to investigate. If this manner of burial was widespread, it probably had a different background, and most likely had Late-Neolithic roots. If these two burial customs were used at the same time it would be plausible to suggest that dead bodies of elite were cremated and remains handled according to the collective soul belief. The latter means strong

solidarity with the family, together with stronger relationship and worship of ancestors.

In the Late Bronze Age this tendency was accompanied by a religious-social system called the sacral kingship (see more about the concept in Sunqvist 2002 and references therein), expressed in stone-cist graves. The grave-form is rather static and canonical. There is a central cist in the centre of grave and a stone wall (or several walls) surrounding it. Seldom there can be several cists but in this case there is always one in the centre. The graves are rather “empty” of grave goods and usually just ornaments or ceramics can be found. There are mostly inhumation burials in the cists and inhumations or cremations between the cist(s) and the wall(s). There can be one or two burials in the central cist, rarely more.

In the concept of sacral kingship there was a custom of rendering prominent a single ancestor that was not only exceptionally inhumed, but also given a separate stone coffin. From linguistic sources it is also probable that Estonian word *kuningaz*, the king, was borrowed in these times (Ariste 1981, 474). Etymologically the word is also connected with ancestor and religion, meaning “the leader of the kin” (Puhvel 1987, 193) or “son of the outstanding man” (Sundqvist 2002, 76). The sacral kingship rituals probably included the presentation of genealogies, creation myths and also rituals with bones; at some stage of these rituals the cists may have been opened. It seems that at the beginning of this period few stone-cist graves were built, and the circle of people who could be buried in them was limited.

Consequently, not all generations necessarily built stone-cist graves, but rather every second generation or so; not all heads of families acquired the status of kingship, but it could instead have been one antecedent over several generations. At the end of this particular era, dur-

ing the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age, the number of stone-cist graves grew, and a larger proportion of the population belonged to the sacral chiefdom. It is likely that at the same time as stone cist graves, sacred groves were included as loci of religious practices, possibly as sites for deity worship (for example, the cult of the god of thunder). It is likely that the cult of the Sun was also important at the same time, as is indicated by the orientation of stone-cist graves (Lõugas 1996, 102). The importance of the Sun may already have been raised during the Neolithic, when the agrarian economy caused the rise of agrarian cults, in which the Sun usually has an important role.

In the period of early *tarand*-graves the overall concept of the soul appears to have remained unaltered – as in earlier times, the majority of the dead were buried outside the stone graves, and the burial customs and their religious background had most probably been preserved. There persisted the idea of a collective ancestral soul with the exceptions of certain individuals, most probably kings.

Early *tarand*-graves seem to have continued the tradition of stone-cist graves. Although the grave form has been changed – we are dealing now with man-sized stone cists that might have been situated either irregularly, forming a system of cists built one after another, or regularly, forming a row of cists –, there are usually inhumation burials with quite a few grave goods. Some of the graves of this period are single *tarands*, which are bigger in size and consist mostly of cremation burials, whereas the remains of cremations have been scattered between the gravestones.

The sacral kingship is most evident in the early *tarand*-graves of irregular structure on the islands of Saaremaa and Muhu and in western Estonia. In the early *tarand*-graves with regular structures and in single *tarand*-enclosures, the form of

worship of the dead king seems to have differed. Although inhumation into individual and thus distinguished coffins continued, the early *tarand*-graves appear to represent the last manifestation of sacral kingship in the way it used to be expressed. The disappearance of the emphasis on the dead king does not have to mean that the phenomenon of sacral kingship had been diminished, but it had just been changed. It was no longer important to emphasise the king in the grave, and there were probably other ways of showing this.

Single *tarand*-graves express the first signs of the approach that would become wide-spread in the next era – an individual was rarely distinguished, and the religious role of the king (most probably the power that was inherent in his soul and body) was extended to his kin. The lineage of the king was distinguished from the rest of the community, and was buried in a separate burial ground. In this period, cult places were being created at the northern or north-eastern sides of graves, for the performance of a variety of rituals connected with the worship of the dead. One expression of the cult of the dead was skull idolization (examples can be found at Tuulingumägi grave of Tõnija in Saaremaa (Mägi 2002b, 57), Tõugu grave (Lang 2000, 213) and Hiiemägi grave of Kunda in Virumaa. In each of them it was possible to follow special attitude towards skulls. There was a single skull placed on one cist wall in Kunda, a single skull was buried under the north-eastern corner of the oldest *tarand* in Tõugu, and lot of skull fragments were found in upper layer of the grave in Tõnija.

In the period of typical *tarand*-graves and single *tarand*-graves, the religious background of the grave type represents most likely the strengthening and changing of the idea of preserving the soul(s) and the power of the sacred/dominating family and its use for the good of the com-

munity. Typical *tarand*-graves and single *tarand*-graves were the main grave-forms. The former have been formed of rectangular enclosures, built side by side in one row, while cremated burials are dominating. Remains of cremations have been scattered between stones and a single burial is seldom discernable. Grave goods, mostly ornaments, have been scattered between stones as well. The skull cult was practised on the grave, and it is probable that some of the grave margins were used for cult purposes, as they extend beyond the rest of the formation with their thicker stone layers. It is possible that there were post-holes at the margins of the grave (like at Tuulingumägi of Tõnija (see Mägi 2001), indicating the worship of skulls or other kind of idols.

On the basis of the different ornament designs found on artefacts, one may presume the worship of certain atmospheric or cosmologic phenomena (e.g. the Sun) that may have originated from the southern Baltic region. This does not mean that people did not worship atmospheric phenomena before that time, but we only have data of it from this period. There are classic symbols of the Sun (such as swastikas) on brooches and ring and dot signs on other artefacts. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that Sun worship has never been important in the area occupied by present-day Estonia (Mägi 2002a, 129). Moreover, ring and dot signs are not necessarily symbols of the Sun, but may also have had many other meanings.

In spite of the strong religious influences originating from Scandinavia during the earlier periods, not all of the grave forms were adopted (e.g. only one *bauta*-stone grave with separated burials has been found); the conclusion would be that only the ideas that fit earlier local concepts were integrated into the local belief system.

Throughout **the period of stone settings**, especially at its instigation, important changes occurred in religious views,

the most prominent of these being the rise in the significance of the individual soul alongside the collective soul. It may be that this change was brought about by Baltic or northern European influences. In connection with this comes the concept of the Afterworld, different from the previous one, as a separate space that inspires the furnishing of graves with other items except of ornaments (e.g. weapons, horse equipment, etc.), and the hiding of hoards, quite many in burial grounds, but this may also be the reason for the presence of hoards in water bodies. The earlier view of the collective soul still held ground and was dominant, but the progress towards the subsequent surfacing of the concept of the individual soul can be followed throughout this era.

The structured stone graves of earlier types were no longer erected, and nor were the old graves intensely used as burial grounds. In their place there appeared structureless stone settings into which bones were scattered in accordance with earlier “collective-soul” beliefs or, proceeding from the new views, bones were buried in small “nests” (see Mandel 2003). Infrequently, inhumations occurred that also conveyed the concept of individual souls.

Typical *tarand* graves were still used as cult and burial places, but new graves were no longer built. Outstanding members of the community or members of old lineages were probably buried in the *tarands*, and thus the old myths were represented, and traditional contacts with ancestors were fortified. Although there have also been later, even medieval burials in *tarand*-graves as expressions of ancestral worship, these should be considered marginal. The main reason of these one can see in the expression of belonging into old family and strengthening of older myths of origin and genealogies of the family.

In Scandinavia, it seems that in this period, villages and the farms of prominent

chiefs probably acquired the status of cult places (Gaimster 1998). Disappearance of aboveground stone structures probably indicates also in Estonia that stone graves were no longer in use as ritual places and turned to be more as "burial places". It is a general tendency that great collective cult festivities seem to have become more and more important, the most important of these probably being agrarian calendar celebrations. Deities and their cults most likely had a significant role to play in village rituals. So it is probable that also villages in Estonia took over the place of ritual activity. Moreover, quite a many of Estonian late-prehistoric villages, as we know, have been settled during this period. But sacred groves were probably also in continuous use during this era.

Unlike in Scandinavia, which up to that time had been the origin of the main influences, figural or pictorial representations of gods were not considered essential here. This may indicate that in the period of stone settings, Scandinavian belief systems had begun to develop in a different direction – or that the importance of Baltic influences grew. The latter may be implied by the increasing frequency of occurrence of Baltic-type artefacts in the *tarand*-grave period.

In the Late Iron Age, the Viking Age seems to have been the turning point for the disappearance of the collective spirit belief system and a break in the *tarand*-grave tradition. In the forthcoming period, individualism in both inhumation and cremation burials in all grave types increased (Mägi, in print). In addition to the separated nature of the burial, the graves on the ground were also separated from the surroundings, again indicating stress on individuality. As of the Viking Age, inhumation burials began to arrive on the scene once again. Burials in stone graves and ground pits both indicate the prominence of the Afterworld concept, which

conditioned the furnishing of graves. It seems that the Afterworld concept reached to its peak in the 10th–11th centuries. In that period, well-equipped inhumation burials appeared where there were tools, weapons and other items as grave goods (Raatvere, Inju, Iila and others) (Jonuks 2003, 125).

It seems that all ritual practices except for the memorial feasts on graves ceased in the Late Iron Age, and villages and probably also groves finally became the predominant places of worship (Sundqvist 2002).

Miscellaneous pendants of obviously cultic background occur over a large area; their simultaneous appearance may be connected with concurring processes in Europe. It is plausible that this process was at least partly connected with the spread of Christianity, as is also suggested by other regions (Staecker 1999, 227). It is common to relate cross-shaped pendants with Christianity. It seems that other pendants can also be directly or indirectly related with Christianity. The 10th century, when in most areas of northern Europe the wearing of all kind of pendants increased, is the same period in which Christianity spread to the Nordic countries and Russia. Thus the wearing of crosses may also have influenced people to wear other kind of religious symbols.

Although there is reason to believe that religious views in Estonia supported polytheism, our information on the subject is limited to the famous Tharapita from the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia chronicle. The image of that god as a superior heavenly being probably already gathered ground in the Neolithic (Kulmar 1994; Sutrop 2002, 31), but there is no evidence for detecting and characterising it prior to the 13th century. It is also obvious that the god Tharapita has undergone changes over the centuries. The original superior heavenly being has probably changed into some more concrete god.

By the end of the Iron Age, theism in Estonia most likely had two kinds of objects, which we know from the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia – higher gods (*deus*) and lower deities (*anima*). The latter group apparently comprised both fairies and guardian spirits, with various deities belonging among the fairies. Although there is almost no information about a proper "pantheon" among the Estonians, it is possible that Tharapita was not the only superior god of heaven at the end of the Iron Age, and that he was complemented by a god of thunder that may have been known by the name Uku (Ukko) in northern and western Estonia. Such a division may already have occurred during the Late Neolithic or the Early Bronze Age, when the heavenly superior being began to divide (Kulmar 1994), and the cult of the thunder-god became important.

More may be construed about the sacred groves. Sacred groves were not originally burial places (Valk 1995, 460); this connection seems to have been a later development. After the acceptance of Christianity, churches were erected on the sites of some sacred groves or social gathering places. As most such churches were parish churches, one may assume that there may also have been parish groves or other cult places for larger communities.

From the 10th–11th centuries, a change took place in the belief system – this was the time during which Christianity arrived. As with the processes that occurred in the neighbouring areas, in Estonia it was also the local elite that was the first to embrace the new faith (Selirand 1974, 186; Mägi 2002a, 151). It is quite probable that the elite had the first churches erected in Estonia, even before the 13th century conquest (Kala 1998, 44).

As follows, the acceptance of Christianity also evolved similarly to the changes that religion underwent in the preceding periods. Just like the changes in spiritual matters that had taken place in the Viking

Age, the spread of Christianity brought about many innovations. The most important of these was the new concept of the soul – all of the members of the community were believed to have a soul, and it was necessary to take care of all of them, and not just those of the elite, as before. This new concept led to alterations in the overall mentality, and was the basis for the prevalence of the concept of the individual soul. The process reached its climax in the 13th century, when large inhumation burial grounds appeared.

There are several reasons why it would be justifiable to speak of Estonian Christians even prior to the 13th century (see Mägi 2002a), and it is likely that the process that was launched would gradually have resulted in the Christianisation of the whole country. On the other hand, Estonian Christians could not have been considered properly orthodox, due to their lack of a Christian social organisation, and in spite of their having been baptised, they would have remained outsiders for the *Oecumen*. Thus it was justifiable in religious terms for the Crusaders to conquer these lands in the name of the Holy Faith.

Conclusions

The discussion above suggests that the topic under examination in this study – i.e. that of Estonian stone graves – has constituted a part of the cultural area of the northern part of the Baltic Rim, while still displaying certain differences from its neighbours. From this cultural area, material and religious influences reached Estonia. At the same time, no concept was adopted in its entirety, but was rather fitted to the earlier background.

The theories expressed in this work must not be seen as applying in all cases to all of Estonia, as most of the districts have had their own distinct cultural and social history. The generalization mainly con-

cerns northern and western Estonia. The research also allowed me to draw the conclusion that although the change in grave types that inform us of ritual behaviour has been rapid, the grounds of the religious system in Estonia remained more or less uniform from the Late Bronze Age to the Migration Period. In this period, new concepts of the soul began to spread; the

evolution of the concept of the soul as one of the basic concepts in religion was a very long process that only ended in the Latest Iron Age.

I would like to thank the referees who helped me a lot and gave valuable advices how to present this material in such a short and compressed article.

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