

## Jari-Matti Kuusela & Siiri Tolonen A LATE IRON AGE SITE FROM SIIKAJOKI, NORTHERN OSTROBOTHNIA, FINLAND

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### INTRODUCTION

On Friday 12th August 2011 MA Jari-Matti Kuusela was informed by university lecturer, PhD Jari Okkonen of a Late Iron Age find made by a metal detectorist Jouko Anttila at Siikajoki, Northern Ostrobothnia, Finland (Fig. 1). As establishing the context of Iron Age stray finds in northern Finland has been a long-standing research interest for the Department of Archaeology at Oulu University (e.g. Koivunen 1975; Okkonen 2002; 2007), it was decided that the find warranted further attention. The following day the site was inspected by the authors (Kuusela & Tolonen 2011).

The find consisted of several artefacts typologically dating to the Late Iron Age and the site itself was located on an elevation above sea level corresponding with this dating. Anttila also pointed out a stone from the vicinity, which contained five oblong ‘cups’. The site was test excavated by Jari-Matti Kuusela between 19th and 28th September 2011 and the results indicate that the find is related to a cultural layer which at this moment must be assumed to belong to the Late Iron Age.

### THE SITE AND THE AUGUST FIND

The site, named Rutelo, is located in the municipality of Siikajoki in Northern Ostrobothnia. It lies on an esker on an elevation of ca. 10 m above sea level. Based on the topography and appearance of the sandy ridges at the site (Fig. 1), it is possible that they are dunes formed at the time when the area was closely shorebound. The sediment material consists of fine to medium sand. Using the Raahe-area shoreline displacement chronology (Okkonen 2003: appendices 3 & 11) as a point of reference, the elevation corresponds with a Late Iron Age shoreline.

The Battle of Siikajoki, during the 1808–9 war between Sweden and Russia, was fought nearby

(Hiltunen 1996: 723–8) and according to Anttila artefacts possibly pertaining to the battle have been found around the site (Jouko Anttila, pers. comm.). The soil is podsol with a relatively thin eluvial horizon (1–2 cm) across the whole area. Several evidently man-made pits are noticeable in the immediate vicinity of the site and according to locals these are filled-in remains of an old dumpsite, from the mid- to late 20th century, used by the Siikajoki parish on whose land the site is located on. A forest road cut into the soil crosses the site. The find itself was made immediately adjacent to this road next to a small anthill.

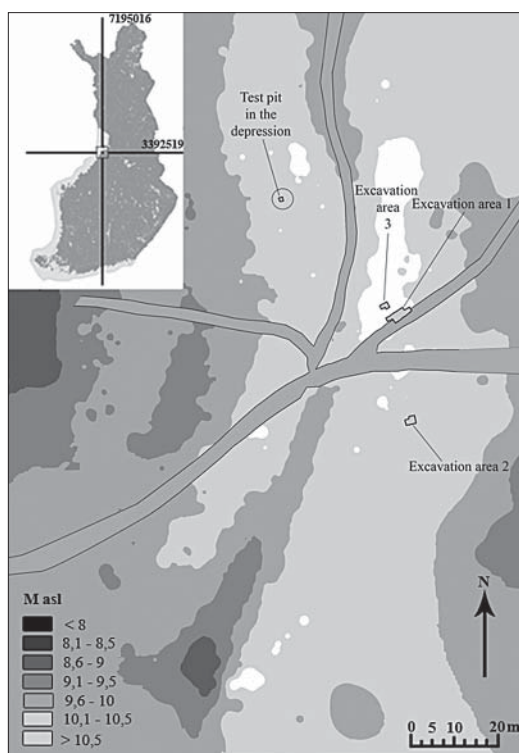


Fig 1. Location, coordinates and a map of the site.

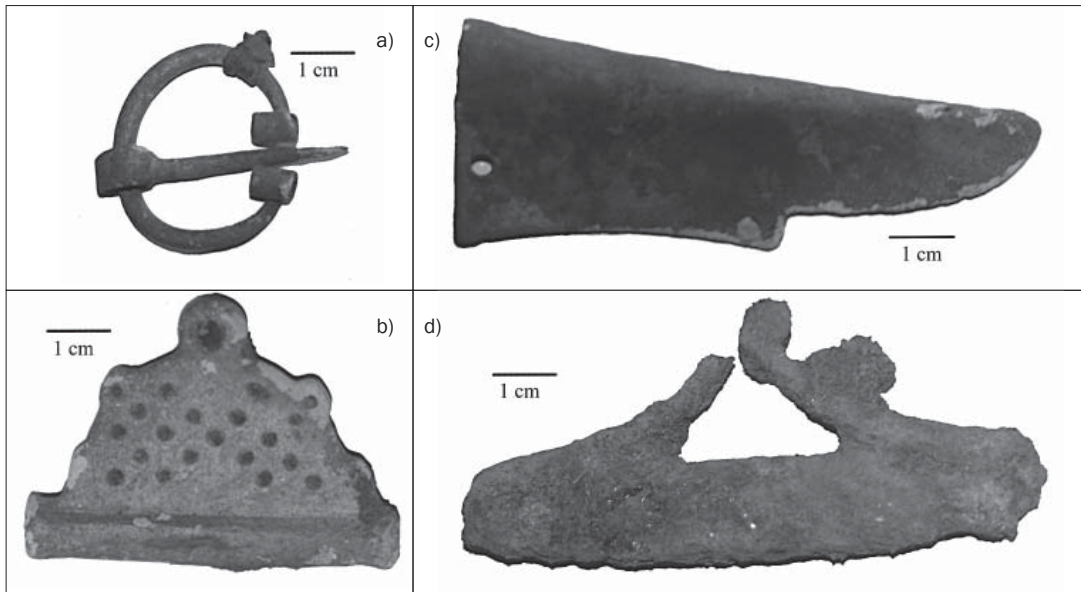


Fig. 2. The August finds: a) bronze brooch, b) bronze pendant with a needleholder, c) knife sheath-shaped needleholder, d) iron lyre-shaped fire-striking steel.

The artefacts found in August 2011 consist of a penannular bronze brooch with a strip of leather tied around the arc, a bronze pendant with a needleholder, a bronze knife sheath-shaped needleholder and an iron lyre-shaped fire-striking steel (Fig. 2a–d respectively). The typological dating for these artefacts falls between AD 800–1200 with the pendant being typologically the eldest having a dating of AD 800–1050 (Pirjo Uino, pers.comm.).

According to Anttila, the finds were found from a depth of 40 cm (Nousiainen 2011) and positioned so that the knife sheath-shaped needleholder was placed through the arc of the brooch. A wooden stick or a handle protruded from the needleholder but this was broken off (Jouko Anttila, pers.comm.). Wooden remains were still present within the needleholder at the time of our inspection in August. The pendant, needleholder and the brooch were found together as a cluster and the fire-striking steel ca. 40–50 cm to the east from a corresponding depth (Jouko Anttila, pers.comm.).

#### CUP-MARKED STONE

Circa 160 m to the southeast from the find site, Anttila pointed out a stone containing five evidently man-made ‘cups’ (Fig. 3). The oblong cups

are uniform in size and shape being on average 4,5 cm wide and 8,5 cm long with depths ranging from 2,5 to 4 cm. The cups are weathered and covered in lichen indicating their relatively old age.

Their shape is however somewhat atypical for a cup-marked stone being very steep and oblong. It is uncertain whether the cups are contemporary with the Iron Age site but the stone’s presence so close does make it interesting.



Fig. 3. Cup-marked stone near the site.

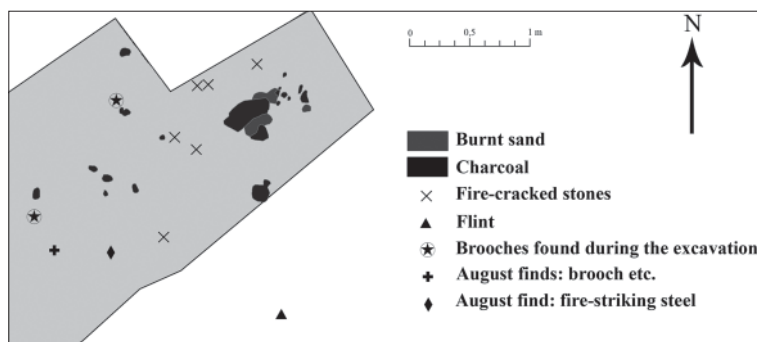


Fig. 4. Eastern end of excavation area 1 with finds and features

#### EXCAVATION OF SEPTEMBER 2011

Following the inspection in August, it was determined that further study of the site was justified to establish the context of the artefacts. Three small excavation areas and one test pit were opened and the total excavated area amounted to 16 square meters (Fig. 1). In addition soil samples were taken from a wider area. The result of the phosphate analysis of these samples is still pending. Excavation area 1 was opened on the site where the August find was made. What turned out to be a possible Iron Age cultural layer was observed in excavation areas 1–3 and possibly from the test pit as well. Immediately below the turf a grey sand characteristic of an eluvial horizon of podsol was observed but this continued only approximately 0,5–1 cm before changing into a sooty and dirty layer.

At first, it was assumed that this layer might be more recent than prehistoric but this assumption was quickly disproved when two penannular bronze brooches were discovered from excavation area 1. The first brooch was found from under a rotten tree root ca. 30 cm to the northwest from where the brooch, needleholder and pendant had been found in August (Fig. 4). It was obvious that 40 cm, which Anttila had announced as the depth of the find, was incorrect. The signs of Anttila's digging were clearly visible on the excavation level and disappeared completely relatively quickly – after 10 cm at the latest they were not observable at all. It is possible that because the ground was slightly inclining and because the adjacent anthill created a 'hump' on the find site, Anttila misinterpreted the depth he made his discovery from.

The first brooch was found from a depth of ca. 10 cm from the surface of the mineral sediment, corresponding with the disappearance of the signs of Anttila's digging. The typology of the brooch is,

as of yet, undetermined but it appears to be of Late Iron Age type. It is noticeable that like the brooch found in August, this one also has a strip of leather tied around its arc. The second brooch was found ca. 1,2 meters northeast of the first brooch (Fig. 4) from a depth of ca. 4 cm from the surface of the mineral sediment. Unlike the other brooches, this one does not have leather tied around its arc.

Other finds were sparse and only two fragments of flint can be assumed to be prehistoric. The first one was found from excavation area 3 and the other one from the surface of the road outside excavation area 1 (Fig. 4). Considering the fact that the Battle of Siikajoki was fought nearby, one has to acknowledge the possibility that any flint found may be from flintlock muskets but this seems unlikely – the flint from excavation area 3 was found from the depth of ca. 8 cm from the surface of the mineral sediment and the other fragment bears somewhat clear evidence of retouching and could be characterised as a small flint blade.

Excavation area 2 revealed a similar layer from a corresponding depth as excavation areas 1 and 3 but no finds were made from area 2. Still, considering the fact that the layer was similar in appearance as in areas 1 and 3, it has to be, at present, assumed to also have a similar dating. Characteristic of the layer is that it was relatively thin ranging from 1–5 cm across the whole studied area. This would seem to indicate that whatever the activity on the site was, it was likely neither continuous nor very intense.

No clear evidence of solid structures was observed in any of the excavation areas but soot and, in places, very large patches of charcoal seem to indicate fire on the site. On excavation area 1 a feature that could be interpreted as a site of a campfire was observed (Fig. 4). A patch of burnt sand was surrounded by large black patches

*Fig. 5. The anomalous feature observed in the test pit.*

of soot and charcoal. Whether this is a site of a hearth is uncertain as fire-cracked stones were not found in numbers, although those that were found do seem to centre near the feature.

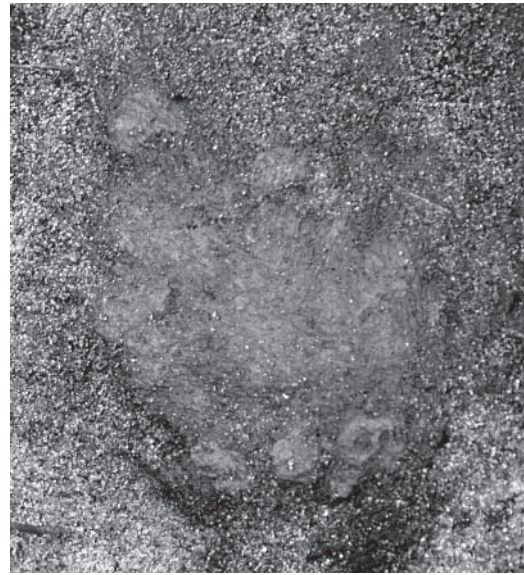
On the initial inspection in August the authors were shown a depression nearby the find location that appeared to be somewhat rectangular measuring ca. 14 x 18 m (Fig. 1). The depression was not very evident in its appearance and it was suspected to be a natural formation. To exclude the possibility that it was man-made one square meter test pit was opened at its centre. After deturfing a grey sand characteristic of an eluvial horizon of podsol was observed. Circa 1 cm below this turned into a dirty and sooty layer containing an interesting feature – a lump of apparently clayey hard material in sediment otherwise consisting of medium sand (Fig. 5).

This feature could be a posthole though it would be atypically shallow as it was only 3–4 cm thick (see Vuorinen 2009: 137–8). However, postholes are sufficiently heterogenous (Vuorinen 2009: 137–8) to make this interpretation a viable possibility. The anomaly was excavated as a feature and then removed for further study. The lump turned out to consist mainly of sand but contained several fragments of what is apparently either burnt clay or unidentified ceramics.

If the fragments are ceramics, then the clay has likely been mixed with organic material; no mixture can be detected on the clay's structure, but it is somewhat porous. Whether ceramics or burnt clay, the find indicates that the depression seems to contain signs of human activity and therefore warrants further study in the future.

## DISCUSSION

The apparent question concerning Rutelo is, of course, what is the function of the site? Arguably a natural assumption would be that of a burial, however no signs of such were observed – none of the artefacts showed signs of being burned and no burnt bone was recovered therefore ruling out a cremation burial. Inhumation is of course a possibility, but attention must be drawn to the fact that the finds have been located rather close to the surface. Furthermore in sandy sediments an inhumation should leave observable traces (see e.g.



Mikkola 2009), none of which were found during the excavation. The next traditional interpretation is therefore that of a dwelling site, but this time attention must be drawn to the fact that evidence indicating a dwelling site is also circumstantial at best – the few pieces of burnt clay or ceramics in an ambiguous depression and a possible site of a campfire or a hearth unrelated to other structures do not, in our view, build a convincing argument for a dwelling site. Of course the area excavated was very small, only 16 square meters, so it cannot be said that clear solid structures do not exist on the site, only that they were not observed in the area excavated in September 2011. On the other hand, should the site be interpreted as a dwelling site, we are tempted to draw attention to the somewhat peculiar artefact assemblage which includes several metal artefacts, mostly bronze jewellery, which are atypical for what we would normally expect to see from a dwelling site (however see Vuorinen 2009: 158–60).

The possibility of a secondary deposition warrants serious consideration – the cultural layer was located very close to the surface, albeit below an eluvial horizon, and the area has seen intense activity during the historical period – the Battle of Siikajoki and the construction of the dump-site being the most evident. The question that must be posed is therefore: is the observed cultural layer linked to the recovered finds? The Battle of Siikajoki as the cause of the layer and its features can, so we believe, be ruled out as it was fought

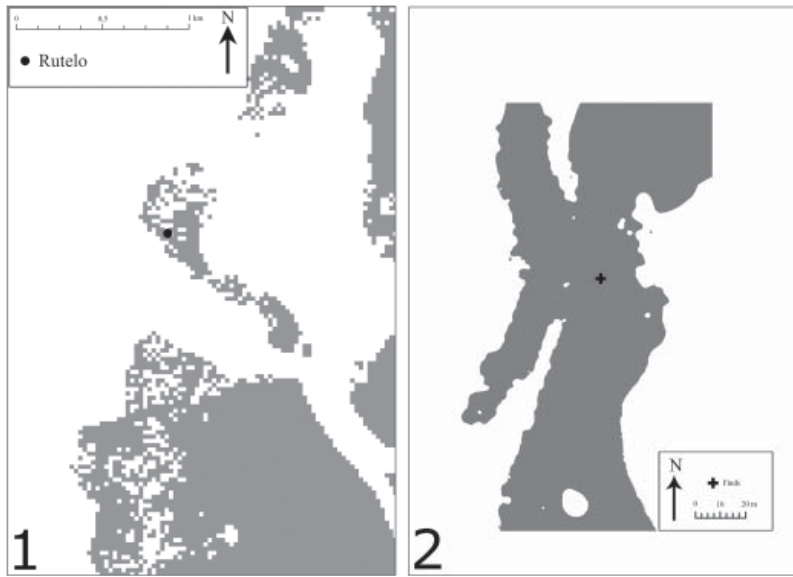


Fig. 6. 1) Shorelines near the site in AD 800, 2) Close-up of the shorelines around the site in AD 800.

in April while the ground was apparently covered in thick snow (Hiltunen 1996: 726). Furthermore a battle may be an intense event but it lasts for a very short period of time and activities that may leave observable traces in the soil are likely to be restricted to small areas. The dump-site is a more likely possibility as the cause of the layer – several deep man-made pits were observed around the site. However, no recent disturbances were noticeable in any of the excavation areas and excluding the cultural layer, normal podsol horizons seemed to be present. Finds dating to historical period were very few and were recovered either from within or somewhat immediately below the turf. It is therefore the opinion of the authors that secondary deposition cannot be proved at the moment and the observed layer, before evidence to the contrary is produced, must be considered as being of Iron Age origin.

If secondary deposition is, for the time being, ruled out, we must make our interpretation based on a limited set of data. Shoreline displacement chronology and artefact typology agree on a *terminus post quem* dating of AD 800 at which time the site would have been on what appears to be a water-logged islet at the mouth of the Siikajoki river (Fig. 6: 1–2). A century later the site would have been on dry land on a relatively large island where it would remain until AD 1000 (Fig. 7). Between AD 1100–1200, the assumed *terminus ante quem* date based on artefact typology, the site has been located deeper inland though still

relatively close to the shore (Fig. 7). Because the cultural layer seems to indicate relatively extensive, albeit perhaps not continuous, human activity on the site it seems unlikely that AD 800, at which time Rutelo would have been on an islet,

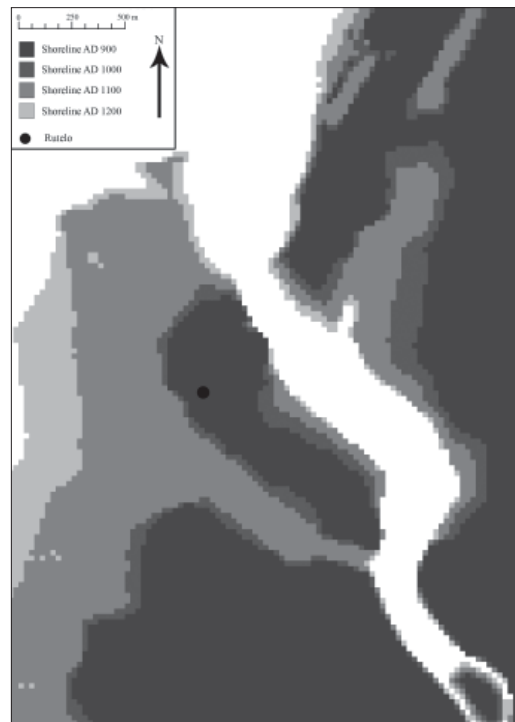


Fig. 7. Shorelines near the site in AD 900, AD 1000, AD 1100 and AD 1200.

would be a proper dating. Also as the finds were made close to the surface, which indicates it is likely that the site was already under sufficient vegetation to prevent wind erosion which would have covered the finds under a thicker layer of sand, we suggest that AD 900/1000–1200 is a reasonable approximation for the dating of the site. In any case it is clear that the site seems to be shorebound and the activity on the area may have been linked either to the seashore or the Siikajoki river. The nature of the site, however, still eludes us and only further field studies may reveal more data that may help in determining its function. What the study conducted in 2011 demonstrates is, that it is of paramount importance to conduct fieldwork on stray find sites in order to establish their context.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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