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Choosing church locations during the transformation period: The case of Viru in Estonia, northeastern Europe (12th–13th century AD)

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Keywords

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Abstract

BThis study examines the selection of church locations in Viru, northeastern Estonia, during the Christianisation of the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Integrating archaeological, historical and GIS data, it evaluates models linking church sites to pre-Christian sacred places, burial grounds, power centres and political strategies. Findings indicate that parish churches were rarely placed according to any of these models. It is likely that early chapels may have existed at some cemeteries prior to the crusades, and were tolerated during the transformation period. Stone parish churches were developed during the 13th century according to a different pattern, located in or next to villages, often on elevated terrain or near springs but at a certain distance from the Iron Age power centres. This process reflects a deliberate, multifactorial strategy creating new focal points while reducing the influence of old elites and shaped by ecclesiastical and political authorities rather than local traditions.

Introduction

The establishing of the church system in newly converted regions during the process of Christianisation is a subject which has frequently attracted academic attention (e.g. Brink 2004; Andrén 2013; Kieffer-Olsen 2018; Heinrich-Tamaska et al. 2012; and, more recently in Estonia, Valk 2017; Tooming 2022; Mägi 2025; Markus and Sikk 2025 and references therein). Scholars from different fields of the humanities, however, have often approached the issue from varying angles. Archaeologists have primarily focused on the specific locations chosen for churches and their potential associations with pre-existing or contemporary settlements, with limited attention given to the broader clerical framework. Historians, by contrast, have concentrated more on the functioning of the ecclesiastical system than on the church's spatial placement or architectural form. Architectural historians have examined technological and stylistic features that might be but are not necessarily related to the concerns of the other two fields. Consequently, the discussion of the early church system – both in Estonia and more broadly – has frequently been presented from a single disciplinary viewpoint, emphasising selected characteristics while overlooking the potential of interdisciplinary synthesis (see also Riso et al. 2022).

This article integrates archaeological and historical evidence, drawing on settlement patterns and power structures from the Final Iron Age (12th–early 13th century), as well as 13thcentury written sources – particularly the lists of villages, their owners and taxation data from the 1220s/1240s for the Viru region in northeastern Estonia.

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Combined with selected GIS analyses, this approach offers a unique opportunity to evaluate different church location models and to discuss why these particular places were selected for parish churches.

The earliest written reference to a church in the eastern Baltic is found in the 11thcentury *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum* by Adam of Bremen: 'A church has now been built there [Curonia] through the zeal of a merchant whom the king of the Danes moved to do this by many gifts' (Adam IV:16). No material evidence of such an early structure has so far been discovered in Curonia, although, given the active trading of the period, the possibility of a clerical building constructed for travelling merchants and winter residents should not be excluded. Material evidence of an early church has been documented at the Ravattula Ristimäki 12th–13thcentury cemetery in southwestern Finland, where foundations of a small wooden church, consisting of a nave and choir, have been excavated (Ruohonen 2017). This suggests that other similar buildings may also once have existed in the eastern Baltic in the 12th century and may yet be found.

Documentary sources concerning the establishment and selection of clerical sites on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea are scarce. In 1236, Pope Gregory IX instructed his legate in medieval Livonia, Guillelmus, to ensure the construction of chapels in every parish to meet the needs of recently Christianised populations (DD 1/7, No. 215). In 1252, the bishop of Curonia and the Teutonic Knights made an agreement concerning church construction in four of the nine regions of Curonia (Kurländische Güterurkunden, Bauer no. 014). Curonians of these regions – Vanema, Ventava, Bandava and Bihavelank – had accepted Christianity in 1230–1231 (Auns 2001; Žulkus 2006; Mäesalu 2021, pp. 216–220). Vanema did not partake in the Curonian uprising of 1236 and hence became known as Vredecuronia ('Peaceful Curonia'). The other three regions were conquered by the Teutonic Knights in the 1240s (Baranov 2017). According to the agreement of 1252, there were two parish churches in Vredecuronia, one in the territory ruled by the bishop, the other in that of the Knights, and no new churches were planned. Bihavelank had one parish church in the territory of the bishop, which was to serve the whole region until the Knights built two churches in their territory. Bandava and Ventava were also to have two churches in the territory of the Knights and one in that of the bishop. The bishop and the Knights were also responsible for the upkeep of the parish priests of their territories. According to these examples, the initial parish network was created on the

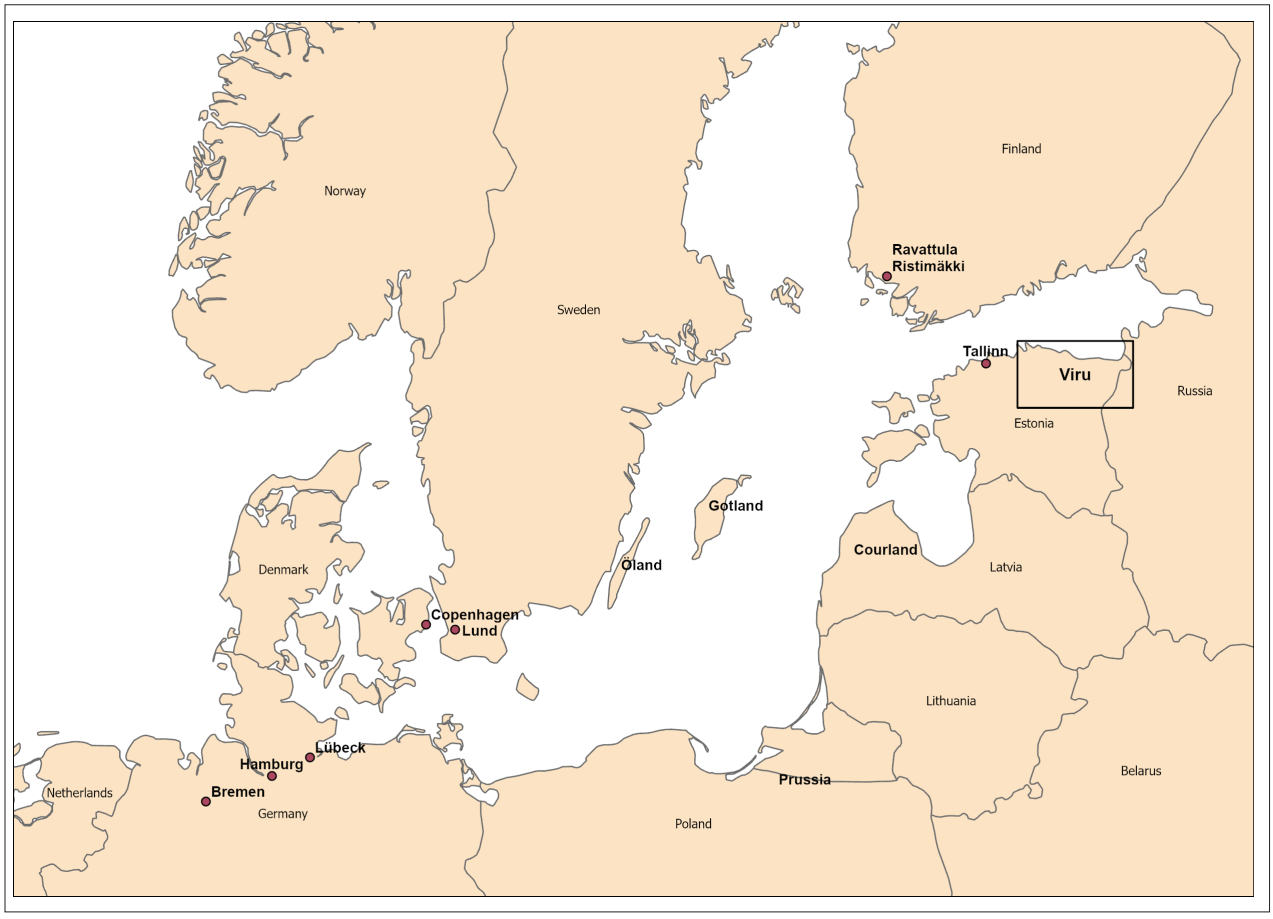


Figure 1. Map of countries around the Baltic Sea with sites mentioned in the text. The study area is marked by the rectangle (map by Martti Veldi).

episcopal level, whereas church-building was an obligation of the ruler (Kuujo 1953, pp. 35–38), suggesting local conditions were of minor importance in the making of such decisions. However, should an agreement concerning the northwestern regions of Curonia be considered representative of the early phase of parish churches for the whole of Livonia? Furthermore, neither of the cited documents say anything about how the actual locations of churches and chapels were chosen.

1. Churchlocating models

Early churches in the Late Roman Empire were located almost exclusively in major towns or communication centres (Marano 2012). As Christianity spread northwards, location strategies diversified. One widely discussed hypothesis links the placement of early Christian churches with preChristian sacred sites. This approach draws inspiration from Pope Gregory I's letter of 601 to Mellitus, later bishop of London, which advised missionaries not to destroy pagan shrines but instead to cleanse them of idols and repurpose them for Christian worship. Although influential, this principle is difficult to verify archaeologically, in particular because preChristian ritual sites are rarely identifiable with certainty. Nevertheless, there are Scandinavian examples where continuity from preChristian sacred contexts to medieval church sites has been proposed. At Frösö church, Viking Age bear bones and postholes have been discovered beneath the medieval structure (Fabech 1989). Postholes and guldgubber – small gold foil figures –associated with ritual buildings have been found beneath the churches of Mære, Eskilstuna, Estuna and Hackås (see Sanmark 2004; Andrén 2013; Sundqvist 2024). Similar ideas have been explored in northwestern Russia (Svirin 2006). Paul Johansen introduced the idea into Estonian scholarship, suggesting that early priests may have tolerated or even protected sacred groves to avoid provoking newly converted communities (Johansen 1933, p. 201). Some specific churches – such as Valjala and Pöide in Saaremaa (Mägi 2002, p. 156) and St Mary's chapel in northern Estonia (Tamla 1993) – have

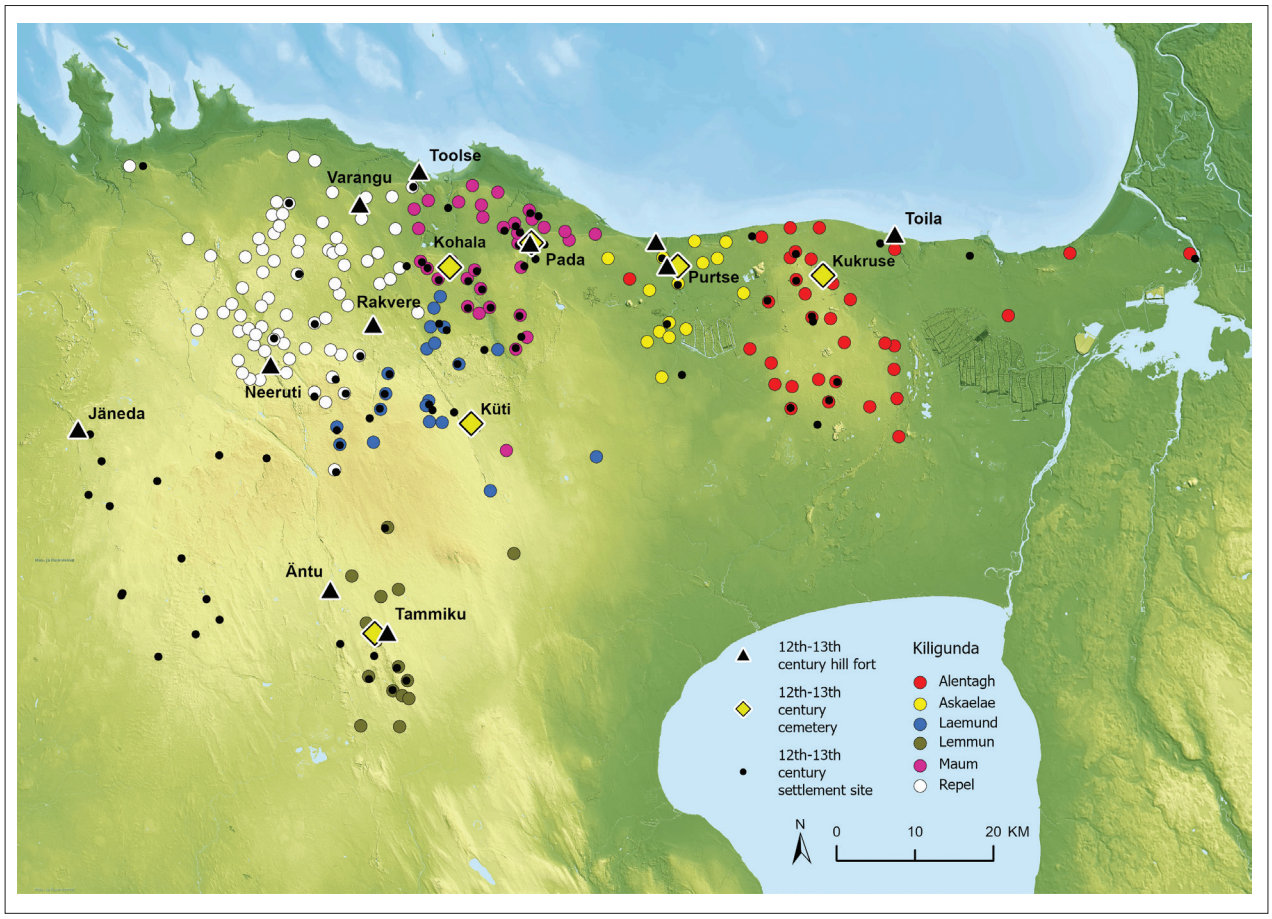


Figure 2. Study area during the late 12th–early 13th centuries. In the early 13th century, the region of Viru consisted of five and Järva of three *kiligunde*. It is not known exactly what this administrative unit was. In some examples, a *kiligunda* overlapped with a settlement unit that concentrated around some power centre (like Maum, Askaelae and Alentagh). In other examples, one *kiligunda* includes several smaller power centres, like in the case of Laemund and Lemmun. Repel is the most complicated to interpret as it includes several power centres, and Rakvere, the most central site in 12th–13th-century Viru, is situated at the edge of the *kiligunda*. Data for differentiating *kiligundas* comes from the LEL (1240) and may thus be slightly different compared to 50 years earlier, but probably not significantly. Black dots mark settlement sites identified according to archaeological finds.

been proposed as potential successors to earlier sacred places, though evidence remains inconclusive.

Another hypothesis proposes that medieval churches were constructed on preChristian burial sites (Andrén 2013; Laakso 2017 and references therein). The Jelling complex in Denmark – where a medieval church stands amid Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, themselves reused in the Iron Age – is a prominent example, symbolically linking the remains of the last pagan king, Gorm the Old, with Christianised Denmark (see Staecker 2004; Jessen 2025). Similar patterns of continuity between ancestral graves, power structures and early churches have been noted at Old Uppsala (Ljungkvist et al. 2011) and elsewhere in Scandinavia. In Estonia, Heiki Valk has developed this association most extensively by arguing that cremated bones and Iron Age ornaments found in medieval churchyards indicate former cemeteries (Valk 2017).

A third model associates early churches with power centres and important villages. Such sites may have been controlled by kings, as in mainland Scandinavia (Brink 2013; Sundqvist 2024), or by local chiefs or wealthy farmers in more remote northern regions (Gibbon 2012; Arneborg and Vésteinsson 2025). The placement of churches in such centres ensured control over religious authority and priestly appointments, adding additional benefits to church owners in relation to the afterlife. In rare cases, when missionaries selected sites themselves, major trading or cultural hubs were usually preferred (Nilsson 2012). Although this model has had limited influence in Estonian scholarship, churches mentioned in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia (HCL, written ca. 1224–1227) are clearly tied to power centres – including the hillforts of Tartu, Otepää and Viljandi (HCL XXVI, 5; Selart 2018, 57–58). Archaeological evidence also shows that the medieval churches of Tallinn and Rakvere were built adjacent to earlier fortifications. Churches were likewise founded in central villages, as demonstrated by multiple HCL passages (e.g. XXIV, 3; XXVIII, 8; XXIX 1, 3) and by archaeological examples such as ViruNigula (Tamla 1993) and Võnnu (Jonuks and Tvauri 2020).

A fourth model emphasises the role of overarching political and ecclesiastical authorities – bishops, kings or military religious orders – in guiding church construction (Johansen 1933, pp. 193–95; Kuujo 1953, pp. 35–38; Herrmann 2002). The bishop's role in Estonia has often been overlooked, despite his legal responsibility for establishing parishes and consecrating parish churches. According to this model, rulers placed the earliest church buildings in central locations and subsequently developed the rest of the church and parish network (Johansen 1933, pp. 203–207; Leimus 2009; Selart 2018, pp. 47–56).

While each of these models is supported by examples, none has been comprehensively tested in Estonia. This leads to the central research questions of this article: how were church locations selected? Can any single model adequately explain the pattern observed in Estonia or should the emphasis lie on a combination of factors? Do other criteria exist that determined church locations?

2. The Christianisation of Viru and establishment of the ecclesiastical system

According to the archaeological finds, Christian symbolism spread to Estonia, particularly to eastern Estonia, at the end of the 11th century. Meanings of objects may change when they are removed from the original context (Schülke 1999) but most apparently those symbols were also perceived as Christian semantics by the local inhabitants in Livonia as early as the 11th century. The early Christian material culture is exclusively connected with wealthy contexts, i.e. hoards and, from the late 12th century, richly furnished inhumations. Christian symbolism is not limited to cross pendants but also includes cross images, either as a single decoration or the prominent motif in broader ornament, as well as Easter egg fragments and pendants with the image of Jesus Christ (for more detail, see Jonuks and Kurisoo 2013; Jonuks et al. 2018). By the beginning of the 13th century, the cross had become the most common ornament element in Estonia, suggesting that Christian culture was broadly known and accepted in society. According to the burial contexts, Christian symbolism was proudly exhibited, and it is likely that the identity of those persons was at least partly associated with the Christian religion. Some extensively excavated cemeteries of the late 12th–13th centuries have a high density of inhumations and relatively large empty areas in between. These empty spots have recently been interpreted as possible sites for early churches (Mägi 2025). If this interpretation is correct, these buildings were most likely light, wooden constructions, without any foundation, constructed and maintained under the control of the Iron Age nobility. Although written documents about early Christianisation are scarce, some references exist to persons having been baptised and participating in pilgrimages even before the beginning of the crusades in Viru in 1219. 'The Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr' by Eysteinn Erlendsson († 1188) speaks of two young Estonians who had recently converted to Christianity and were visiting a church dedicated to Saint Olav (Phelpstead 2001, pp. 67–69). Considering this narrative, there could have been persons in Estonia who identified themselves as Christians and shared the Christian faith, including the practice of pilgrimage, but major churches, and a church dedicated to Saint Olav in particular, are less likely. According to the next record, now specifically on the Christianisation of Viru, the first bishop of Livonia, Meinhard († 1196), intended to crusade against Curonians together with Jarl Birger Brosa (in office

1174–1202) of Sweden, alongside Germans and Gotlanders. Their fleet was caught in a storm and driven to Viru instead, where they looted for three days and left having taken tribute from Vironians (HCL I, 13). More detailed knowledge about the Christianisation of Viru comes from 1219, when crusaders led by the Order of Brothers of the Sword were looting in Viru. Five local political leaders ('elders'/*seniores*) arrived in the crusaders camp to negotiate and accept baptism (HCL XXIII, 7). One of the *seniores*, Thabellinus, was already a Christian, baptised on Gotland (HCL XXIII, 7; Selch Jensen 2024, p. 221). Another, Kyriawanus, was baptised in the military camp of the crusaders. Even if this is not clearly expressed, the baptising of leaders was a symbolic sign that people under these chiefs were also ready to be Christianised, as was the practice across northern Europe.

By the end of 1222, the Danish kingdom ruled most of the northern and western parts of modern Estonia. The archbishop of Lund established two new bishoprics for the area – Tallinn (Reval) in 1219 and Viru in 1220, the latter also encompassing the region of Järva. Bishoprics were usually named after the seat of the cathedral, but since Viru bishopric did not have one at the time, it was named according to its principal region. Bishop Ostrad of Viru was active between 1220 and 1225, or perhaps 1227. Data regarding priests, churches and the parochial network is absent for this period, except for a sole record from the *Chronicle of Henry* according to which Danes built a church in the village of Kettis (modern Järva-Jaani) and in many other villages baptised by Rigan missionaries (HCL XXIV, 5). Assuming that the church of Järva-Jaani was founded as a parish church, Ostrad seems to have started with the establishment of a parochial network immediately after the first baptism of his new Christian flock. A charter from 1234 mentions two parish priests (*plebani*) from the bishopric of Viru – Robert of Järva and Bertram of Viru – and another two – Robert and Philippus from the bishopric of Tallinn (DD 1/7, No. 199, § 52) – which confirms that parishes had been founded. Rakvere, the most central stronghold in Viru, was probably chosen for the centre of the bishopric, although no evidence exists of the building. A circle of parishes was established around it – Haljala and Kadrina (Toruesæuæræ) in former Repel, Viru-Jaagupi (Vov) in Laemund and Viru-Nigula (Maum) to cover all the Viru territory to the east, as far as Narva (see Parochias on Fig. 3). These churches were situated almost at an equal distance of 10–20 km from Rakvere, indicating central planning. Simuna (Kactaekylae), as well as the three oldest parishes in Järva – Ambla, Järva-Peetri (Embere) and Järva-Jaani (Kettis) – situated in the next circle at a distance of 30–50 km. After the Estonian uprising of January 1223 and the following period of wars in northern Germany and Denmark, the Danish king lost all of his Estonian lands to the Order of the Brothers of the Sword and to the bishoprics of Riga and Tartu in 1227 (Mäesalu 2011; 2013b; 2013a). At the instigation of Pope Gregory IX, the Order and King Valdemar II reached a compromise in 1238 by which Revala, Harju and Viru were returned to the king, while Järva was given to the Order, but remained part of Viru bishopric (for more detail, see Mäesalu and Pajung 2022, 205–207). Under the newly appointed bishop Thorkill of Tallinn (1240–1260), the bishopric of Viru was merged with the bishopric of Tallinn and Rakvere became the centre of a parish. Another two charters from 23 September 1253 mention priests Wikberto from Tallinn (Reval), Heinrico from Rakvere (Wesenbergh), Hermanno from Kadrina (Toruesæuæræ), Amelungo from Ambla (Ampele), Friderico from Järva-Jaani (Keitingen) and Luthero from Järva-Peetri (Embere) (DD 2 / 1, No. 126–127). All six are cited as *sacerdotibus* and *domini*, suggesting that all of them were of the same 'rank', i.e. parish priests, and all of them most probably had a church by that time. Finally, in the second half of the 13th century, Lüganuse (Askalæ), Jõhvi (Alentagh) and possibly Narva parishes were detached from the large Maum parish to fit better with the geographic and settlement pattern (see borders of historical parishes on Fig 3; for more detail, see Mäesalu et al., in prep).

3. King Valdemar's Survey and Large Estonian List

King Valdemar's Survey (*Liber Census Daniae*, LCD) contains a number of lists of mostly royal landholdings composed primarily during the final decade of the reign of King Valdemar II (1202–1241) of Denmark (Hybel 2018, pp. 336–345). Its only surviving manuscript dates from the second half of the 13th century and was produced in Sorø Abbey in Denmark, probably by copying the now lost lists. A part of the LCD is formed by the Large Estonian List (LEL), recorded ca. 1240. The list provides data about the Iron Age administrative units named *kiligunde*, newly established church parishes (*parochias*), lists of villages together with their fief-holders and ploughland units in the 13th-century northern parts of Estonia (see Fig. 2). Ploughlands are traditionally interpreted as the amount of land cultivated with a single plough, and equivalent to an average farm, indicating the size of villages (Tarvel 1983, pp. 59–67). There are, however, several problems with this interpretation, including the fact that the extent of archaeological occupation layers of settlements are not necessarily in accordance with estimations of village sizes based on the LEL. Besides, according to the Small Estonian List, the island of Saaremaa had the same amount of ploughlands – 3000 – as Viru (KVJ: 41v; Aakjær [1945] 1980, 55), even though the island was certainly not a major producer of grain. As taxes from the subjugated peoples in Estonia

were gathered on the basis of the ploughland (Mäesalu 2021), the term must be understood foremost as a unit of taxation which was not necessarily in accordance with the size of a field, farm, or a village. Since the wealth of villages may have varied, its sources were solely based on agricultural produce, some villages were taxed more and others less, and thus the 'ploughlands' cannot be taken as indicating of the number of farms in a village. This could also explain why harbours, castles, strongholds and manors are missing from the list, as tax obligations might not have been directly applied to such units.

The list contains several comments regarding religious sites. The entry on the village of Haljala in Viru has the word 'church' (*ecclesia*) written above the number of ploughlands of the village (KVJ: 50v). As Haljala was the centre of a parish, this comment might presumably have meant that there was a church in the village. As the word 'church' is written above the line, it looks like a secondary addition, although it remains unclear whether it was already added to the original manuscript and copied with high accuracy or the word was added for some reason to the later copy. Two further remarks undoubtedly speak of church buildings. The village of Lähtse in Vaskjala (Ocrieale) parish in Revala is said to have 'a suitable location for a church and a cemetery' (*ubi aptus locus ecclesie est et cimiterij*), whereas the village of Saha in the same parish is said to have had a church and still have a cemetery (*ubi fuit ecclesia et cimiterium adhuc est*) (KVJ: 48v; Aakjær [1945] 1980, p. 69). Apparently, in these two cases, the LEL seems to use the word *ecclesia* in the sense of an ecclesiastical building, either a chapel or consecrated church, rather than meaning the bishopric.

The village of Võhu in Viru, which also gave its name to a parochial centre, has a more sophisticated comment: *Lydger[us]. vov. xx. emptos de willelmo de keting. p[ri]us, da dos eccl[es]ie* (KVJ: 53v; Aakjær [1945] 1980, p. 79). Lydgerus was the fief-holder of the 20 ploughlands in the village of Võhu. It seems he had bought the ploughlands from a man named William de Keting. The rest is quite puzzling and depending on how the abbreviations are interpreted, two explanations are possible. It could mean 'the dowry previously given to the church', but it could also mean 'the dowry he [William?] had previously given to the church'. What exactly had been given to the church remains unclear, although perpetual rent is most likely. The expression 'dowry of the church' also appears above the entry for the village of Jõelähtme in Revala, another parochial centre (KVJ: 46v; Aakjær [1945] 1980,65). However,

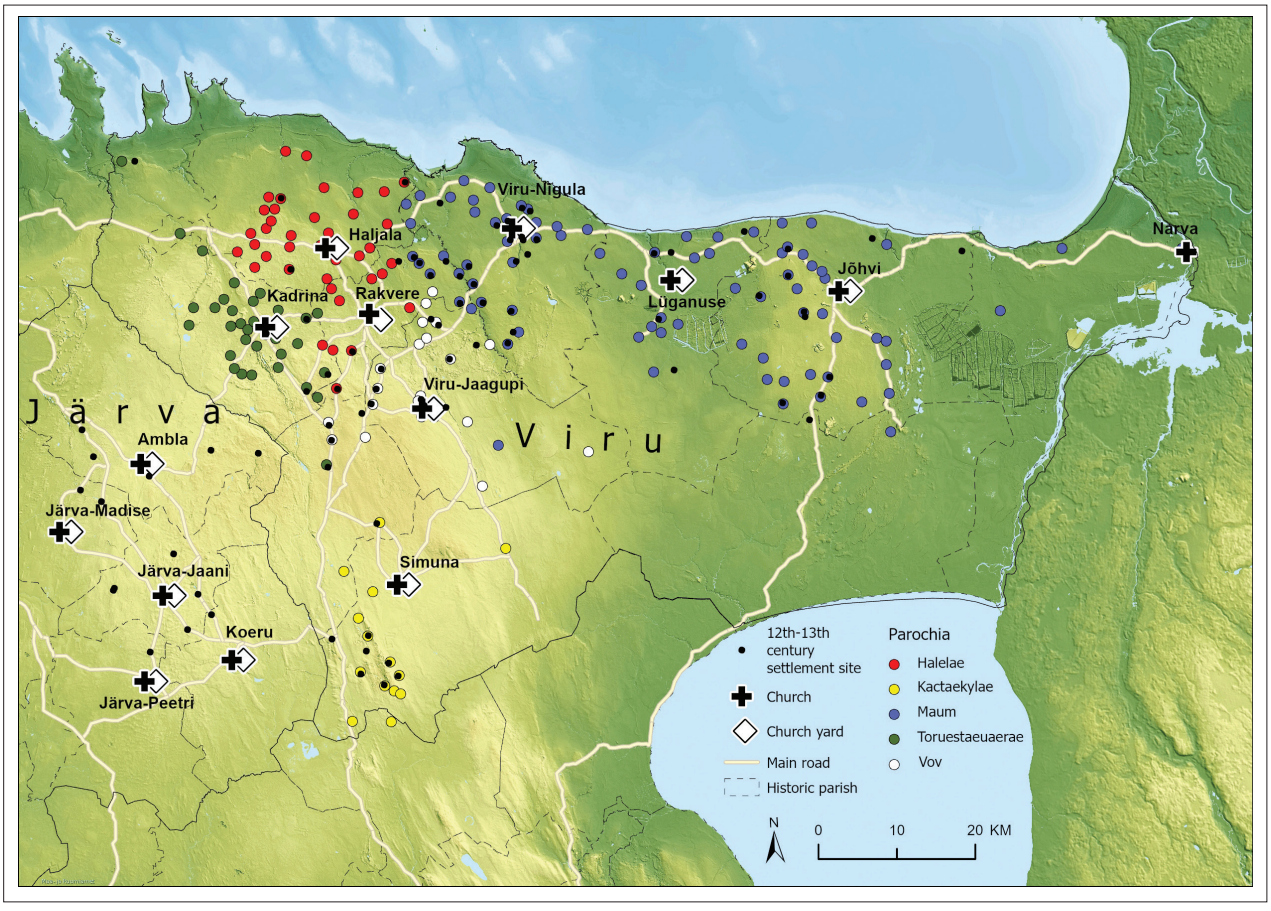


Figure 3. Study area around 1240, at the time the LEL was recorded. Note the difference in data about villages between Viru and Järva region. Parishes Ambla, Järva-Madise, Järva-Jaani, Koeru, Järva-Peetri, Lüganuse, Jõhvi and Narva are not mentioned in the LEL and these borders come from later sources (map by Martti Veldi).

such comments were not limited to parochial villages; the same has been added to the village of Tõrma in Haljala parish in Viru (KVJ: 50r; Aakjær [1945] 1980, p. 72). The expression 'dowry of the church' in the case of Võhu, Jõelähtme and Tõrma suggests that certain income, possibly a rent from these villages, had been endowed to the parish church or to the bishopric in the 1220s.

The villages of Maardu and Saarna in Jõelähtme parish have the remark *Johannes et Walter hos habent de Thiderico quos ecclesia de jure possidet* (Johannes and Walter have those [ploughlands] from Thiderich which the church rightfully owns). Thiderich de Kivæl, the wealthiest fief-holder in Viru (Kaljusaar 2023), who held the ploughlands of these two villages as a fief from the Danish king, had apparently given them over to Johannes and Walter, but the church was noted to have been the rightful owner. Does this represent a case of contested lordship between the church and the fief-holder? One might imagine a scenario where the fief-holder had previously donated the ploughlands to the parish church but thereafter given them instead to two laymen. Another interpretation could be that Thiderich de Kivæl had assigned Johannes and Walter as administrators of the ploughlands he had donated to the parish church.

Finally, the LEL contains a small note regarding a pagan sacred site. The village of Võrkla in Mahu parish and *kiligunda* in Viru is said to have a sacred grove: *ibidem lucus sanctus. helruisep. violenter.* The meaning of *helruisep* is obscure. Paul Johansen interpreted it as a scribal error for the contraction *hnc ruit epc*, meaning *hunc ruit episcopus violenter* (the bishop had violently destroyed it) (Johansen 1933, p. 201). However, there is no additional supportive evidence for such an interpretation. There are alternative ways to read the word *helruisep* – it could be an abbreviation, an Estonian or Danish word, a personal name or a toponym. Yet this interpretation falls outside of the scope of this article. Besides, the sacred grove near Võrkla was recorded as still standing. The violence related to the grove should thus not be interpreted as meaning its destruction. According to the above-cited agreement of the bishop of Curonia with the Teutonic Knights from 1252, priests were forbidden to take wood from the forests which were 'previously considered sacred' (Kurländische Güterurkunden, no. Bauer014). Thus, the connection between violence, the word *helruisep* and the sacred grove of Võrkla remains obscure.

4. Medieval churches in Viru

As parishes were founded in the 1220s, we may expect that Viru was covered by a church network during the 13th century. The oldest existing church buildings in the region are stone constructions that date from the second half of the 13th century. It is possible that these stone churches replaced earlier wooden buildings, although direct archaeological and architectural evidence is missing.

Of the medieval churches in Viru, Viru-Nigula is suggested to have been built in the late 13th century (Markus 2023, p. 266), although the church of Maum/Maholm parish is first mentioned in 1268 (Hermannia Wartberge Chronicon Livoniae, p. 46). The church was located in the middle of Akedolae (now Viru-Nigula) village, consisting of 11 ploughlands, belonging to Thetwardus (5) and Albern de Kokael (6). The latter was also one of the largest holders of ploughlands (89) in Viru in ca. 1240 (Johansen 1933, pp. 805–806; Kaljusaar 2023, p. 56).

Just 700 m from the Viru-Nigula church lay the ruins of another 13th-century chapel, dedicated to Saint Mary. The origin of the chapel has remained obscure and scholars agree only that this construction, which references Eastern church architecture in several aspects, does not fit with the rest of sacred building in Estonia (see Hein 2013 and Markus 2023 for further discussion). The location of the chapel is most intriguing – on top of the Late Iron Age cremation ground, in between the parish church (Viru-Nigula) and an Iron Age power centre (Pada) (see Fig. 4). Here we can observe a rich and complicated 13th-century religious landscape, where the parish church in the village, the chapel dominating the pagan cremation burial ground, and the 12th–13th-century hillfort, together with local Christian inhumations, interacted. By the end of the 13th century, the position of the old inhumation cemetery and the hillfort seem to have been lost, and the administrative centre of the region became Akedolae.

Another major parish centre was established in Haljala. Unlike the previously mentioned site, Haljala seems to be rather 'empty' of major archaeological sites, leaving the Iron Age power centre in Varangu at a distance of 6 km. According to the LEL, Haljala consisted of 11 ploughlands, belonging to a man called Norte. The church was built on a small hillock, right next to a wetland that possibly also included springs. Several finds, particularly the decorative pins from the churchyard, confirm inhumations of the 13th to 14th centuries. A partially preserved foundation of a stone building, dated to no later than the 14th century, was found beneath the floor of the present church, which was created around this building in the early 15th century (Kadakas 2017; Jonuks 2023). The date of the earlier foundation, however, does not exclude the 13th century either and could thus correspond to the word 'church', marked as a secondary addition in LEL.

A church in *Toruesæuæræ* parish, in the modern Kadrina village, probably also has a history dating to the 13th century. Like the previous example, Kadrina church is also built on a hillock next to a river and springs. A selection of Late Iron Age objects has been found right next

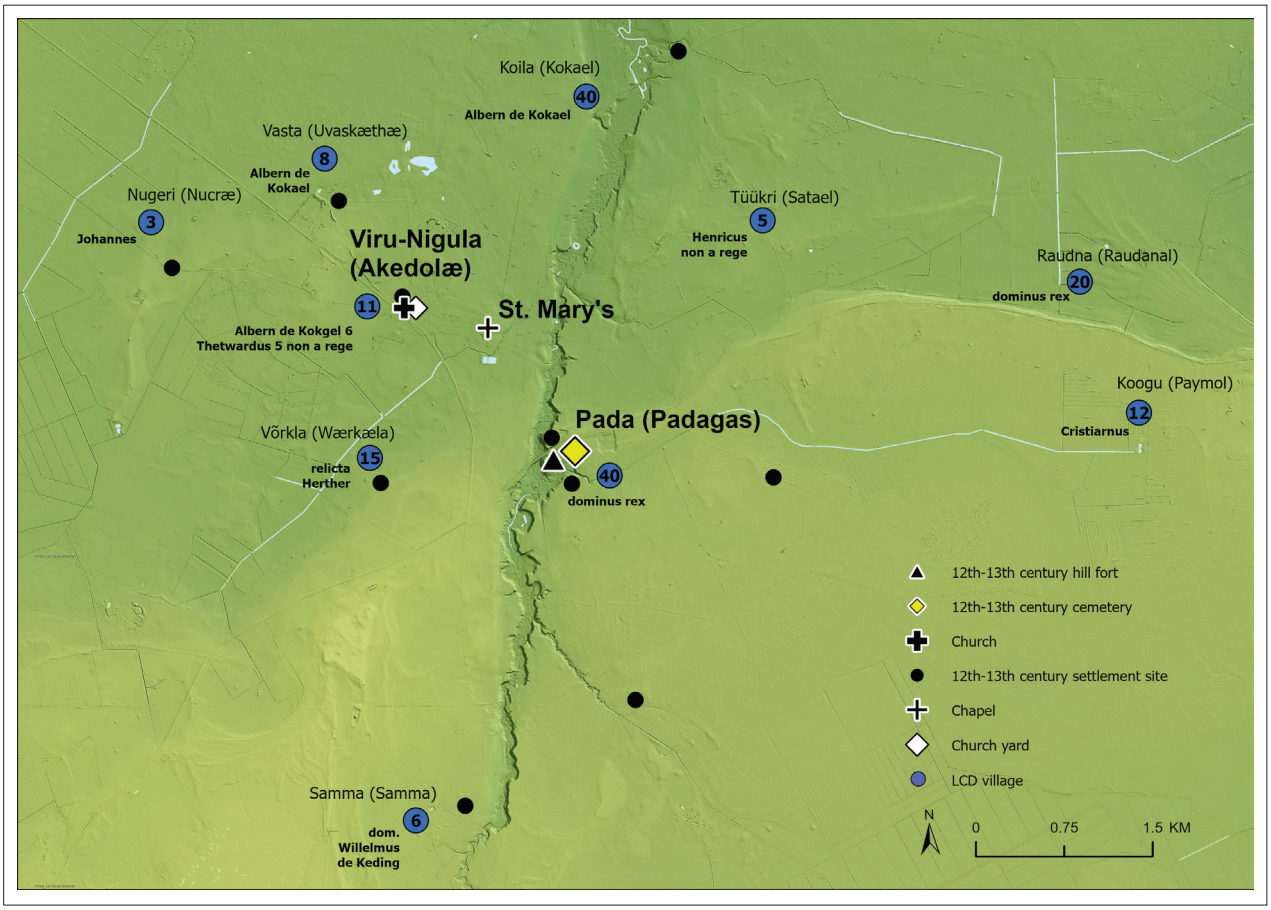


Figure 4. Viru-Nigula area. Note the closeness of Viru-Nigula church and St Mary's chapel while the Iron Age stronghold Pada and an inhumation cemetery with Christian symbolic objects remain at a distance of 2 km distance – all simultaneously in use. (map by Martti Veldi).

to the church (AI 2560: 1–12), together with an inhumation, suggesting early burials. Most of the finds belong to female decorations and can be associated with the 13th-century inhumations. A spearhead and two axes are rare finds from churchyards. Weapons and other objects indicating elite status, however, have been found from 13th–14th-century Christian burials in Prussia (e.g. Biermann et al. 2011; Shiroukov 2012, pp. 249–51; Großler and Jahn 2013) and the Teutonic Knights tolerated certain traditions of native Prussians, which clerics deemed as pagan customs (Szweda 2019). It cannot be excluded, however, that some early male inhumations from the churchyard also included weapons as status objects according to the Iron Age traditions. The present church, dedicated to Saint Catherine, is from the 15th century and the extensive building activity has not preserved any remains of possible earlier construction.

An Iron Age hillfort is situated 3–4 km from Kadrina church, indicating a power centre, and a settlement site has been found just 500 m from the church. As the parish was called *Toruestæuæræ* in 1240, this settlement was presumably named so in the 13th century. However, no such village is mentioned in the LEL.

The centre of *Kactækylæ* (later Simuna) parish is also not mentioned in the LEL, neither do we know much about the Iron Age sites from the vicinity. Several villages remain within a 5–10 km distance, while the power centre of the region was probably within 6 km, in Tammiku, together with a 13th-century inhumation cemetery with some cross pendants and possible stronghold right next to the cemetery. The church is located at the edge of arable land, right next to extensive bogs, while a large system of springs opens next to the church. The latter has also given the name to the Katkuküla village (katk = wet and soft place in a bog). The right of patronage over the parish church of Saint Simon the Apostle and Saint Jude the Apostle in Katkuküla belonged to the king of Denmark (DD 3/2, No. 248).

Viru-Jaagupi church has a rather complicated history. The earliest name for the parish, Vov, derives from the 20 ploughland village Võhu, about which the LEL remarks that a dowry from the village was given to the church. This record refers only to the estate and not to the church building. From the year 1345 until at least the 17th century, the parish and the church were named Kehala (DD 3/2, No. 149; LUB 5, No. 2306; Brieflade I, Nos. 245, 582, 623, 826, 1054; Brieflade II, Nos. 346 and 526), according to a

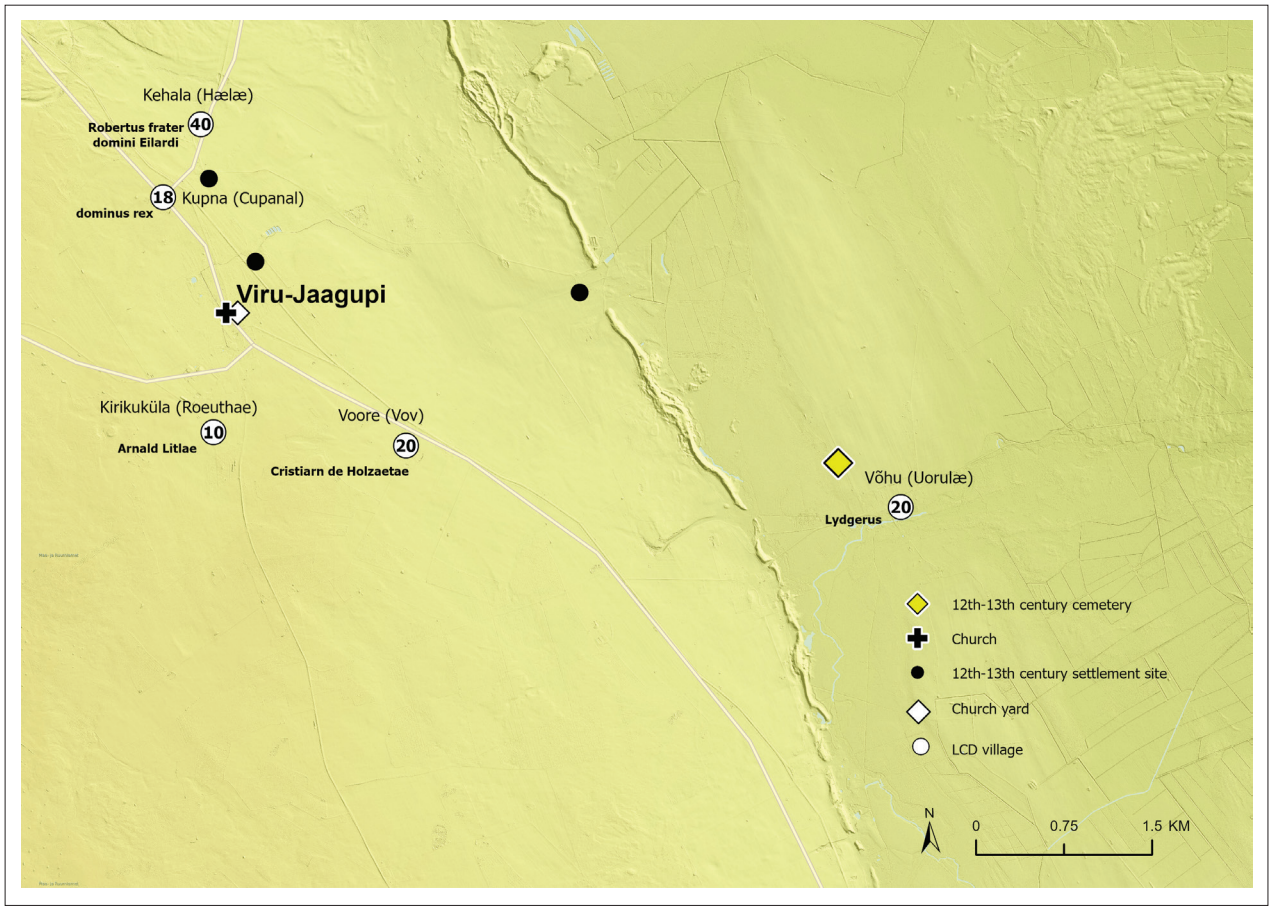


Figure 5. Viru-Jaagupi – Kehala – Võhu region. Note the island with village and cemetery Võhu as a separate settlement unit, surrounded bv wetland, donated to Viru-Jaagupi church and giving name to the 13th-century parish (map by Martti Veldi).

major village in the region, ca. 12 km northwest of Võhu. The church itself is in a third village, originally Rõhu, now called Viru-Jaagupi, just 1 km south of Kehala. The present church building dates to the 15th century (Alttoa 2022, pp. 352–353) and nothing is known about the previous history of the site. The common interpretation has been that the church building was relocated from Võhu to Kehala to Viru-Jaagupi between the 13th and the 15th centuries (Johansen 1933, p. 200; Markus and Sikk 2025, p. 222). Written sources, however, do not speak of the relocation of the church building, but a charter from 1453 says that the church of the parish of Kehala is in the village of Rõhu (Estonian National Archives, EAA.3114.1, no.14). Thus, it is more likely that the church building was at the same site from the 13th century, but church dowries and the name of the parish changed over time – this would mean that the church being named after a particular village does not necessarily locate it in that village.

Rakvere forms the exception to all the previous examples as this is the only site where the Iron Age power centre continued into the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the 13th century, Rakvere had a hillfort and at least two villages at the foot of the hill (Jonuks 2020). The stronghold Tharwanpe (modern Rakvere) is last mentioned in the year 1226 and the royal castle Wesenbergh (modern Rakvere), serving as the administrative centre for the Danish lordship in Viru, is first attested in 1252 (DD 2/1, No. 80). The location of the stronghold remained the same and wooden palisades were replaced with stone walls from the late 13th century. At the same time, the two Iron Age villages joined a large settlement that received civic rights from King Eric VI in 1302 (DD 2/5, No. 205). The church and churchyard were established at the southern side of one of the Iron Age settlements. The present church building was probably constructed in the late 14th–early 15th century (Alttoa 2022, pp. 348–350), but an earlier church at the same location is most likely. Around the church was a cemetery, where the earliest two inhumations date to the 13th century (Aguraiuja-Lätti et al. 2025).

There is no mention of the cathedral of Viru bishopric, nevertheless one would suppose that Bishop Ostrad at least chose a site for the cathedral. Cathedrals had been built in towns since Late Antiquity and in medieval Livonia they were located either next to a castle or within a walled town. Out of all the strongholds of Viru and Järva, Rakvere hillfort has the most central location (Siig 2022), suitable also to serve as an administrative centre for a bishopric. It is possible to assume that right next to Rakvere

the 70 ploughland village Tõrma, with the accompanying remark *dos ecclesiae*, was a dowry for the Viru bishop. Rakvere castle and the two settlements next to it are not listed in the LEL, suggesting that these were free of taxation. Thus, it seems that after establishing Viru bishopric, the cathedral was planned in the 1220s to the southern side of the would-be town of Rakvere, on top of a small plateau, overlooking a riverbed and springs to the arable lands. As the Danish crown lost control over Viru in the 1220s, the cathedral was not built and after the changed plans of the ecclesiastical administrative system in 1240 Rakvere was reorganised as a parish centre. This was executed by 1253, when priest Henrico from Wesenbergh is mentioned in the same line as other parish priests from Viru and Järva (DD 2 / 1, No. 126-127).

Probably during the same reorganisation of the clerical administrative structure in Viru, the large Mahu parish was divided into Mahu (Viru-Nigula), Lüganuse (previously *Askælæ*), Jõhvi (previously *Allentakh*) and Narva (previously also *Allentakh*). No documentary proof exists for this process and all three of the latter parishes are first mentioned only in the 14th century: the church in Lüganuse in 1373 (LUB 3, No 1087), Jõhvi in 1354 (LUB 3, No 951a) and Narva in 1342 (Renner's Livländische Historien, 84). It is highly improbable, however, that these regions were without churches throughout the whole 13th century.

Lüganuse church was constructed inside the Iron Age village, on top of a high ridge in between two river branches. The ridge has been interpreted as an Iron Age hillfort (Tamla 1996, 229), although no material evidence exists for this. The LEL records 45 ploughlands in the village, belonging to Harbertus. Next to the church foundation, two inhumations were found with 13th-century decorations, also suggesting the date of construction of the church (Kadakas and Jonuks 2014).

Further to the east, a church was constructed in Jõhvi (*Gewi*), a village of 20 ploughlands, which belonged to the king. It has been speculated that the small hillock in the middle of flat ground, where the church was built, could have been a stronghold already back in the Iron Age. So far, no finds are present to support this and there is also no evidence to support the 13th-century construction of the church until it is first mentioned in 1354 (LUB 3, No 951a).

The easternmost parish had its centre in Narva, the most suitable location for crossing Narva River, where a village probably already existed in the Iron Age. According to the LEL, the eight ploughlands of Narva village belonged to the king (Aakjær [1945] 1980, 77). To protect the eastern border of Danish Estonia, as well as the river crossing, the king had a royal castle built in Narva between 1270 and 1277 (Kadakas 2022). According to Valdemar IV's donation in 1345, the royal bailiff of the castle of Narva was to provide the parish priest with food, clothing, two horses, and everything else the priest needed, as well as give him a place at his table at the expense of the king (DD 3/2 No. 123). Apparently, the upkeep of the priest relied on the royal bailiff. Such a close link between the church and the castle would suggest that the parish and the castle were founded concurrently.

Järva was under Danish lordship between 1220 and early 1223, and part of the bishopric of Viru ever since. At the time when the LEL was recorded with all its valuable details, Järva was ruled by the Teutonic Order and was thus not included in the LEL, although it remained a part of Viru bishopric. Thus, we know significantly less about its settlement pattern, although all parish churches in Järva – Ambla, Järva-Jaani, Koeru, Järva-Madise and Järva-Peetri – are suggested as stone constructions in or right next to villages from the middle of the 13th century (Alttoa 2017, 2022; Markus 2023, pp. 256–268). The church in Järva-Jaani (*Kettis*) is the earliest mentioned in written documents (HCL XXIV, 5) and its location also refers to a central position in Järva. Such early construction of stone churches is particularly remarkable, as all stone churches in Viru seem to have been built later. The reason why Järva was furnished with new and massive stone constructions while churches in Viru, a central and wealthier region, were smaller and lighter buildings, is as yet unknown. The massive wave of church construction in the middle of the 13th century may be related to the Teutonic Order's efforts to establish and manifest the border zone with the Danish kingdom.

5. Choosing church locations in Viru

The official Christianisation of Estonia took place in a period of major change in Catholic Europe in the early 13th century. At that time, the church parish system, created in the late 11th century by the Gregorian Church Reform to eliminate the influence of laymen on ecclesiastical institutions, was introduced and stricter rule was settled at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. As a result, the proprietary churches were replaced by a network of parish churches and their subordinate chapels and auxiliary churches between the late 11th and 13th centuries. Laymen in northern and western Europe nevertheless continued to have influence over churches and chapels, but now in the form of rights of patronage, which included both the right to name the parish priest and to receive certain income from the parish (Bünz 2017; Kieffer-Olsen 2018).

Presumably the concept of the 'obligatory parish' instituted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 (Aimone Braida 2022) was known to the missionaries active in 13th-century Estonia and implemented by them. As the

Christianisation was led by institutional organisations in 13th-century Estonia, it is highly unlikely that any proprietary churches, analogous to northern and western Europe, ever emerged. Nevertheless, church- or chapel-like light wooden ritual buildings could have been constructed at burial sites to serve the semi-Christian worldview, although any hard evidence, in either archaeological or textual sources, is still lacking (Jonuks and Kurisoo 2013; Mägi 2025). The most likely locations where such constructions could have been from the study area are the 12th- to13th-century power centres, with inhumation cemeteries with Christian symbolism – at Pada, Tammiku, Kukruse, Võhu and possibly also Purtse. These cemeteries include Christian symbolic objects, were located close to the central stronghold or settlement, and controlled and maintained by the higher local nobility, and the medieval centre was formed in the vicinity. Unlike the previous Iron Age traditions, whereby a burial ground was most likely used only for the local nobility, these inhumation cemeteries included a broader selection of members of the communities, indicating a changed worldview. We do not know whether the possible private churches and cemeteries were consecrated and if they were established prior to official Christianisation, and if so by whom. The ritual function could have been performed by some social leader, like in transformation period Scandinavia (Sundqvist 2024). Most likely these constructions and rituals were not in accordance with official Latin Christian traditions, as ordained priests' services were either irregular or available only when a missionary happened to visit the site. The function of such churches was most probably first related to deceased members of the communities. Some of these semi-Christian churches may have been tolerated by the early clerical institutions during the transformation period, until the parish church system was properly established. A note about the once existing Saha chapel, of which only a cemetery was preserved by the time LEL was recorded (ca. 1240), probably refers to one such building. As Saha is not a parish centre, and the parish church was built just 7 km away in Jõelähtme in the early 13th century, this record likely rather refers to a private church at an Iron Age cemetery. Some central sites with inhumation cemeteries and Christian symbolism in Viru remained active throughout the 13th century, like Pada and Purtse. This means that in the early decades after the crusader conquest and large-scale baptism of the populace, existing local churches could have been used and accepted by the Christian clergy. In such a case, the priest would have been itinerant, going from one chapel/private church to another celebrating Mass and providing the necessary Christian services. Proper parish churches could have been built decades later, and a new location was most likely considered. Perhaps herein lies one of the possible answers as to why stone churches were constructed earlier in Järva than in Viru – Viru already had Christian sacral buildings, which could have been tolerated and used during the first decades. Thus, it was more urgent to build churches in the region where such buildings did not exist prior to the official Christianisation. Moreover, inhumation cemeteries with Christian symbolism are not known from Järva. At the same time, building large stone churches right next to Danish territory, was also a manifestation of power by the Teutonic Knights.

However, the presumed Iron Age churches were not suitable for the new system of parish churches, even if tolerated at the beginning. Such churches had to be relocated, and this is also demonstrated by the example of Ravattula Ristimäki in southwestern Finland (Ruohonen 2017). Most likely the function of churches as buildings also changed. Churches in Latin Europe were preferably constructed in towns and villages – at places where people lived. Several churches were also established in villages in Estonia during the 13th century. Rakvere was probably selected for the centre of a bishopric alongside an Iron Age village, Viru-Nigula church was built in the middle of the Iron Age village, an Iron Age village lies right next to Lüganuse church, and an occupation layer has been found some 500 m from Kadrina church. From Järva, the church of Järva-Peetri was built in the immediate vicinity of Ämbra village.

In the case of Viru, it is also noteworthy that villages chosen for church sites were not the largest according to LEL ploughland numbers (e.g. Tõrma, Hulja, Varudi-Vanaküla, Kehala, Koila, Ojaveski, Ohepalu, Pada, Selja – all of these villages consisted of more than 40 ploughlands). The only exception to this pattern is Lüganuse, with 45 ploughlands, which was chosen for a new parish centre. All parish centres were in villages of modest size in terms of ploughlands (Akedolæ/Viru-Nigula 11, Haljala 14, Jõhvi 20, Rõhu/Viru-Jaagupi 10, Narva 8, while no record was made in the LEL about Simuna, Kadrina and Rakvere). If interpreting ploughlands as a taxation unit, it seems that villages with parish churches were less taxed and major tribute was put on other villages. In some cases, it has even been specified that taxes are meant for parish churches, like in the case of Võhu and Tõrma. Two villages with a parish church are not mentioned in the LEL – Simuna and Kadrina – suggesting that they were exempt from taxes to the king. Maybe they were exempt because the taxes had been donated to the parish priest? Another possible reason may be that the local elites who controlled these two villages had received a tax-exemption privilege from the king. Since the manors of the nobility were exempt from taxes in 13th-century Danish Estonia (Tarvel 1983, p. 88), such an explanation seems plausible.

Most of the churches were located at a decent distance from the Iron Age power centres. This is most apparent

in Pada – Viru-Nigula region – where a hillfort, large settlements and inhumation cemetery were present in Pada, but a much smaller village at a distance of 2 km was chosen for the church and parish centre (see Fig. 4). The same phenomenon appears in Haljala, where Varangu represents the Iron Age centre and a small village 6 km away was chosen for the parish church. Tammiku was probably the Iron Age centre in southern Viru, but a church was built at a 6 km distance at *Kactækylæ* (Simuna). Kadrina church was also situated 3–4 km from the Iron Age hillforts. A large stronghold in Purtse, which most likely also controlled the local harbour and sea route, was not chosen for a parish centre and instead a church was built 4 km away in Lüganuse. Only Rakvere forms an exception as this was originally planned as a centre of the bishopric.

In general, the model of 13th-century parish churches being situated in a village in a larger settlement unit, but at a certain distance from the previous power centre seems to also apply in other regions in Estonia and in other countries. As a well-known example, the centre of the bishopric in Lund was established just outside Uppåkra, the Iron Age central place in Sweden. Such a location suggests that a new focal point was deliberately created in the 2–10 km distance that could function as a strategic buffer zone to set a church on neutral ground, make it autonomous from old social structures, but yet able to dominate over the populated land. The number of immigrant knights and noblemen from Latin Christian lands was probably too few to replace the existing local nobility in Estonia. This led Danish authorities to collaborate with the local nobility who gave loyalty oaths to the king (Kaljusaar 2022). Possibly this is also key to why parish centres were relocated – such a deliberate shift from the Iron Age power centres lessened the importance of previous centres and presumably the influence of old families, who still populated these villages. Thus, many of the Iron Age strongholds persisted until the end of the 13th century (Pada) or even to the 14th century (Purtse) and lost their importance in favour of new administrative centres only in the following century. The continuity of old centres, however, was a different situation. It is interesting to note that large parts of Viru, like the area around Jõhvi, paid their taxes directly to the king. In some major centres of Viru which had been given as fiefs, the king still retained a portion of the taxes, as in Pada (40), Purtse (32/6) and Tammiku (21/9). Of the Iron Age centres of Viru, recorded in the LEL, only the taxes of Varangu had been completely enfeoffed, to a Danish magnate named Harbertus. It thus seems that previous centres kept their influence and that keeping direct royal taxation rights over those villages, even partially, was important for the king.

Only parts of Saaremaa represent an alternative model, in which churches were in the Iron Age power centre (e.g. Kaarma, Valjala). This is probably a result of different power relations in Saaremaa, where the local nobility held a significantly stronger socio-political position after Christianisation compared to other parts of Estonia.

The major land routes seem not to have been important when selecting locations for parish churches. The most important medieval, and possibly also Late Iron Age, land route from Tallinn to Narva crosses the study area, in which Rakvere as a parish centre, together with Haljala and Jõhvi churches, remains on the route. In the cases of Pada and Purtse, the route goes through the Iron Age centres, but not through the parish centres nearby in Viru-Nigula and Lüganuse. To the south, a major route goes towards Tartu, not passing through the parish centres Simuna and Viru-Jaagupi. These, together with Kadrina, seem to be on routes of only local importance. Only Väike-Maarja parish, established in the 15th century remains on this route, probably indicating a different, late medieval, church location pattern, where centrality and traffic routes may have been decisive.

Most of the parish churches in Viru and Järva are located on the highest landscape feature. As Estonia, and the study area in particular, is flat, without substantial hills or mountains, the height differences are sometimes difficult to observe and remain only a few metres. For this reason, visibility models were not tested in this research. Yet the consideration of visibility was certainly reflected by elevated church locations, either on top of a significant or modest hillock, like in Rakvere, Kadrina, Lüganuse, Ambla, Järva-Jaani, Järva-Peetri, Koeru, Jõhvi, while a hillock was used but became invisible due to later construction activity in Haljala. An exception is represented by Simuna and Järva-Madise, both constructed on the edge of flat arable fields and right next to a complex of springs and wetlands. Springs and rivers also feature at Kadrina, Lüganuse and Rakvere, and had once been apparent in Haljala. The only exception, where neither elevated landscape nor a spring is present, is the church in Viru-Nigula, which was on completely flat ground, inside the village. St Mary's chapel, only a few hundred metres away, was positioned on top of a small hillock and thus aligns with the pattern of churches built on top of a hill. Such a location supports the interpretation that St Mary's chapel was built first, followed by the church Viru-Nigula only later (Markus 2023, p. 266). This perhaps means that St Mary's served as the original parochial church of Viru-Nigula and when a larger building was needed, a new church was constructed in a nearby village at the end of the 13th century, leaving the previous one to continue functioning as a chapel.

Some church locations also indicate a connection with a pagan sacred site, yet any hard data about Iron Age sacred places in Estonia are missing or are speculative at best. . The 13th-century documents only refer to forested areas, mentioning *heilige Hain* or *lucus sanctus* as pre-Christian

sacred places, and clear archaeological finds relating to pre-Christian sacred places are absent (Jonuks 2009). Only finds at St Mary's chapel and possibly at Kadrina church propose an earlier burial ground at the place, but these are not necessarily sacred places. The hillocks could have indeed functioned as sacred places for the Iron Age religion, as confirmed by Henry, describing priests baptising in Viru and witnessing a hill with a beautiful forest with idols (HCL XXIV, 5). There are, however, several problems concerning the continuity from pre-Christian sacred sites to Christian churches. The functions of such places were significantly different and thus the same location was not suitable (see e.g. Słupecki 2009; Andrén 2013). Moreover, building a church in a sacred place is in sharp opposition to the record from 1252 Kurland, whereby priests were prohibited to use forests that were 'previously considered sacred'. It is likely that a similar attitude was spread wider during the 13th century in Livonia, although the *Chronicle of Henry of Livonia* also mentions plundering episodes at sacred sites.

Occupying the dominant landscape was also important for church builders, either to create a landmark (Riso et al. 2023) or to emphasise the feeling of awe and piety. The small hillocks in Estonia do not raise the churches significantly above the rest of the landscape, but that was sufficient to follow church building rules and highlight the authority of a church as visitors had to walk uphill. Likewise, springs certainly had a role and meaning in Iron Age religion, as well as in medieval Catholic liturgy and in later folk religion (Tamla 1985; Valk 2020). As a result, we cannot exclude the possibility that medieval parish churches could have been located at previous sacred places, although there is no hard evidence to support it.

Conclusions

Church distribution in Viru demonstrates several models of locating a church during the 13th century. Some depend on local conditions and decisions; others reflect broader patterns and traditions. In the earlier historiography, the early 13th-century crusade in Viru was seen as a sharp transformation from a pagan to a Christian worldview within a few years. We now know that the whole process was much more complex. Christian ideas had been adopted significantly earlier (Jonuks and Kurisoo 2013), and the Iron Age power centres preserved their position for the following century (Valk 2014). Christianisation and the establishing of the ecclesiastical system in Estonia should thus be seen as a long period of transformation, which could have included tolerating the local semi-Christian system in the beginning until replacing it with a central clerical administrative system by the end of the 13th century. During this period, church parishes were established and parish churches built, both apparently under the guidance of the bishop, the king or a military religious order of knights. The actual church locations depended on the local conditions, but, if possible, a higher location in the landscape was preferred, with access to springs. A village, or its immediate vicinity, seems to have been the most preferred location in Viru. With rare exceptions, pre-crusade power centres and dominant villages have been avoided. The number of ploughlands in villages with parish churches is usually modest, or these villages are not listed in the taxation list of the LEL at all. If interpreting ploughlands as a taxation amount, that means that for villages with a central church the tax burden was reduced or completely removed. In the example of Viru and Järva, we could see only one definite case where a chapel has been built on a previous burial ground (the chapel dedicated to Saint Mary) and one possible example where Iron Age inhumation burials could have predated the church (Kadrina). We could not find any clear connection between the pre-Christian sacred site and the parish church either. This, however, may be a research problem, as we do not know how to identify an Iron Age sacred site archaeologically.

Although we tend to use broader models to interpret social and religious processes, this study rather demonstrates how context dependent such processes are. Selecting a location for a church depends on local temporal, spatial and cultural conditions and thus none of the models can be fully applied to another context. The model that appeared in this study – parish church outside the power centre – was not unique, and analogous placings have been noted elsewhere. Yet it was a deliberate and multifactorial strategic decision to set a new dominion over the country and simultaneously lessen the influence of old power centres.

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Abbreviations

AI –Archaeology collection at the Tallinn University

Archeol. Baltica – Archaeologia Baltica

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KVJ – Kong Valdemars Jordeborg (medieval manuscript)

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Bažnyčių vietų parinkimas virsmo laikotarpiu – Viru atvejis Estijoje, Šiaurės Rytų Europoje (XII–XIII a.)

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Santrauka

Šiame tyrime, integruojant archeologinius duomenis, rašytinius šaltinius ir GIS pagrįstą erdvinę analizę, nagrinėjami principai, kuriais remiantis XIII a. pradžioje, krikščionybės plitimo laikotarpiu, buvo steigiamos parapijų bažnyčios Viru regione, šiaurės rytų Estijoje. Tyrime derinama gyvenviečių archeologijos metodai, istoriniai šaltiniai ir kraštovaizdžio analizė, siekiant įvertinti keletą ankstesnių hipotezių dėl bažnyčių išdėstymo. Buvo teigiama, kad bažnyčios buvo sąmoningai statomos ikikrikščioniškose šventose vietose, ankstesniuose kapinynuose, kaimuose arba vadovaujantis bendromis politinėmis ir bažnytinėmis Viduramžių strategijomis. Rezultatai rodo, kad nė vienas sukurtas modelis tinkamai nepaaiškina susiklosčiusio gyvenviečių tinklo. Bažnyčių vietos būdavo nustatomos atsižvelgiant į kraštovaizdį ir platesnius politinius bei religinius aspektus.

Istorinė konteksto analizė atskleidžia, kad krikščionybės įsitvirtinimas Estijoje neturėtų būti suvokiamas kaip greitas pagonybės išstūmimas po XIII a. pradžioje vykusių danų ir vokiečių kryžiaus žygių. Priešingai, įrodymai patvirtina ilgą pereinamąjį laikotarpį, kurio metu krikščioniškosios idėjos jau buvo įsitvirtinusios dar prieš karinį užvaldymą, o daugelis geležies amžiaus politinių ir socialinių struktūrų toliau veikė dar dešimtmečius po jo. Kai kurios koplyčios galėjo būti pastatytos dar prieš kryžiaus žygius ir aptariamuoju laikotarpiu gyvavo kartu su pagoniškaisiais religiniais papročiais, kol buvo sukurtas išplėtotas parapijų tinklas, pavaldus vyskupų ir pasaulietinei valdžiai. Dalis koplyčių, tikėtina, iškilo dar prieš kryžiaus žygius ir gyvavo kartu su pagoniškaisiais papročiais, kol galiausiai susiformavo vyskupams ir pasaulietinei valdžiai pavaldus parapijų tinklas. Todėl tyrime išskiriami trys etapai: pirmasis – krikščionybės įvedimas XII a., antrasis – oficialus krikščionizavimas per 1220-ųjų dešimtmečio kryžiaus žygį ir trečiasis – stabilios bažnytinės administracijos sukūrimas.

Viduramžių kraštovaizdžio rekonstrukcija grindžiama keliais vienas kitą papildančiais duomenų rinkiniais, įskaitant karaliaus Valdemaro surašymą, „Didįjį Estijos sąrašą“, archeologinius duomenis apie gyvenvietes, kapines ir valdžios centrus, taip pat šiuolaikines GIS analizes (2 ir 3 pav.). Siekiant nustatyti galimus ryšius tarp bažnyčių išdėstymo ir ankstesnių arba to meto kultūrinių kraštovaizdžių, buvo tiriamas erdvinis kaimų, mokesčių vienetų, pagrindinių kelių, upių, šaltinių, piliakalnių, priešistorinių kapinių ir Viduramžių bažnyčių pasiskirstymas.

Bažnyčių vietų analizė rodo, kad parapinės bažnyčios paprastai būdavo statomos kaimuose arba šalia jų, dažnai ant aukštumų ar netoli gamtinių šaltinių. Tokios aplinkos charakteristikos kartojasi visame regione ir tikriausiai rodo tiek praktinius, tiek simbolinius sumetimus. Bažnyčios retai iškildavo pagrindiniuose geležies amžiaus galios centruose ar didžiausiose gyvenvietėse. Dažniausiai jos būdavo statomos atokiau – taip siekta įkurti visiškai naujus religinės bei administracinės kontrolės taškus, atsiribojant nuo senųjų elito telkimosi vietų (4 ir 5 pav.).

Tyrime taip pat analizuojama dažnai keliama hipotezė, kad krikščionių bažnyčios sąmoningai buvo statomos šalia pagoniškų šventų vietų ar kapinių. Turimi archeologiniai duomenys šios interpretacijos Viru regione beveik nepatvirtina. Nustatytas tik vienas neabejotinas pavyzdys, kad koplyčia buvo pastatyta ant ankstesnių kapinių, o kitas atvejis lieka nepatvirtintas. Taip pat nepavyko nustatyti įtikinamo erdvinio ryšio tarp parapinių bažnyčių ir ikikrikščioniškųjų šventų vietų. Tačiau autoriai pabrėžia, kad ši išvada iš dalies atskleidžia metodologinį ribotumą, nes priešistorines šventas vietas dažnai sunku identifikuoti archeologiškai arba visiškai to padaryti neįmanoma. Todėl aiškių įrodymų nebuvimas dar neleidžia teigti, kad tokie ryšiai niekada neegzistavo.

XIII a. mokesčių duomenys suteikia papildomų žinių apie bažnyčių išdėstymą. Kaimai, kuriuose stovėjo parapinės bažnyčios, paprastai turėjo palyginti nedaug ariamos žemės, o kai kurie iš viso nebuvo įtraukti į mokesčių mokėtojų sąrašus. Šis modelis leidžia manyti, kad bažnytinių centrų reikšmę galėjo lemti mokesčių lengvatos ar ypatingas administracinis statusas, o ne jų, kaip ekonomiškai svarbiausių regiono gyvenviečių, vaidmuo. Todėl parapinių bažnyčių steigimas, regis, buvo glaudžiai susijęs su naujos teritorinės ir administracinės struktūros formavimu, o ne su ankstesnių politinių hierarchijų tęsimu.

Apibendrinant galima teigti, kad Viduramžiais parapinių bažnyčių vietos Viru regione buvo pasirenkamos neatsitiktinai – tą lėmė įvairūs veiksniai: topografija, gyvenvietės struktūra, pasiekiamumas ir gamtiniai ypatumai, o platesni bažnytiniai ir politiniai tikslai formavo besikuriantį parapijų tinklą. Užuot tiesiog perėmę ankstesnes šventas vietas ar esamus valdžios centrus, bažnyčių statytojai kraštovaizdyje kūrė naujus židinius, kurie prisidėjo prie krikščioniškosios valdžios įtvirtinimo ir kartu užgožė geležies amžiaus politinių struktūrų reikšmę. Taigi, tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad kitiems regionams sukurti modeliai negali būti nekritiškai taikomi Estijai, ir pabrėžia, kaip svarbu integruoti archeologinius, istorinius bei erdvinius įrodymus, rekonstruojant krikščionizacijos ir kraštovaizdžio transformacijos procesus.