

**From the Hill-Fort of Iru to the
Convent of St. Birgitta
Maritime Cultural Landscape on the
Lower Reaches of the Pirita River**

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Summary

Abstract: This article gives an overview of the development trends of maritime landscapes in the Nordic countries and in Estonia, and examines the role of the most significant buildings on the lower reaches of the Pirita River – the Iru hill-fort and the Pirita convent – in the development of the cultural landscape surrounding the Bay of Tallinn.

The author offers an interpretation of the ancient Iru complex; there was a trading centre already in the Bronze Age, especially starting from the pre-Viking period, and Iru was not a settlement concentration point as has been suggested previously. Its subsequent development proceeded hand in hand with tendencies observed elsewhere in the Baltic Sea region, i.e. with developing social relations, and with the foreign trade concentrated in single larger harbour sites that later became medieval towns. In the course of this process, the harbours moved closer to the sea and the previous harbour sites lost their significance, although they remained the trading centres of local areas. One such place was the estuary of the Pirita River; the convent established there in the 15th century can be seen, in addition to having a sacral function, as a manifestation of power and a defence structure for the nearby trading centre.

Keywords: trade centres, landscape archaeology, maritime landscapes, prehistoric harbour sites

The cultural landscape in northern Estonian coastal areas is closely connected with maritime activities, including harbour sites suitable for international trade. Where exactly the harbours emerged was determined by both topographical and cultural criteria, which varied in different social conditions. Harbour sites and centres thus moved accordingly.

The current article examines the lower reaches of the Pirita River, relying on the maritime, and especially trading, significance of the region. The Iru hill-fort, about 8.5 km as the crow flies from the Old Town, has often been called the predecessor of Tallinn. How justified this claim is and which role was played by the estuary of the Pirita River, together with the 15th century convent, are precisely the topics of the current article.

Considering the boats of the time, which had a rather low draught, the Viking Age and earlier harbour sites were usually situated in the most accessible inland locations, which also provided for security. In larger rivers, estuarine areas suited best, and these were occasionally places several kilometres upstream. The 11th–12th centuries in the Nordic countries were, on the other hand, characterised not only by a concentration of trading in bigger centres, but also by the fact that harbour sites and coastal centres moved closer to the sea. In addition to the strengthening of central power, this process was enhanced by the land mass upheaval in north-western Europe and the sinking water level of the Baltic Sea, beginning in the late 11th century. The radical enlargement of cargo vessels' draught from the 11th century onwards often made the old harbours inaccessible. When favourable conditions occurred in the Middle Ages, the harbour and trading sites that had gone through the settlement shift in the 12th century developed into towns.

In a topographical sense, the Bay of Tallinn is one of the best locations for a harbour site in northern Estonia. In addition, the Pirita River flows into it, and even about one hundred years ago had a much bigger flow mass. In the late Bronze Age, just 2.5 km upstream from the coastline at that time, a fortified settlement was established on a high and steep hill in Iru, in a bend of the Pirita River. In the 6th century, a stronghold was built in the same place, and a trading site emerged next to it. As far as we know, the whole complex was abandoned in the early 11th century. Some finds, nevertheless, indicate later human activities.

According to Valter Lang, the Iru hill-fort and the settlement next to it formed a settlement centre where local inhabitants concentrated between the 7th and 10th centuries. The current article offers an alternative opinion, namely that the settlement on the whole stayed in its former area, whereas a trade centre developed in Iru and was probably fully used only seasonally. At the same time, larger trading centres appeared elsewhere in the Nordic countries. It is likely that the Iru stronghold was meant to control the trading site, but also functioned as a political, military and cult centre. In addition, the stronghold functioned as a means of demonstrating power through cultural landscape.

No harbour sites connected with the Iru stronghold are known for certain, although the narrow western terrace between the stronghold and the river could have easily been a landing site at the time of the fortified settlement and the stronghold. Archaeological excavations carried out there have revealed traces of buildings along the riverbank, as it then existed, and evidence of extensive levelling work with sand before the construction of later buildings. From the last Iru stronghold with stone ramparts, a narrow gate led

to a terrace, which might have been used when the main gates were closed.

At the time when the hill-fort at Iru was used, there was probably a reloading place at the estuary of the Pirita River that developed into a proper harbour only after Iru was abandoned. In the 11th–12th centuries, a trading site emerged at the site of medieval Tallinn. This met the requirements of 12th century harbour sites, and became the most important trade port of a wider region.

Cult places, burial mounds or other sacral establishments were often located near ancient harbour sites. During the Middle Ages, they were replaced by churches, chapels and monasteries. The remains of a chapel have also been discovered on the lower reaches of the Pirita River, although the Brigittine convent was founded there only in the early 15th century.

The trading site in the estuary of the Pirita River functioned as a harbour for the lands of the river basin all through the Middle Ages. One of the aims of establishing a monastery there was to manifest power. In addition, the monastery complex made it possible to use various buildings for storage or shelter, thus providing the trading centre with a sense of security. The functions and location logics of the Iru hill-fort and Pirita convent thus contain various similarities, and we can conclude that both medieval Tallinn and the Pirita convent are descendants of the Iru stronghold.

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