The wrecks and artifacts discovered in the excavations indicate that the harbor began gathering silt at its western end soon after the mole was constructed to form the harbor basin. In time, as the silting progressed eastward and south...
Titelmotiv


Aus:
Der Fluss als Spiegel der Stadt.
Archäologie und Amsterdams Nord-Süd-Bahn.
Searching for sunken legends in dark waters

Estonian lakes in archaeology

Kristin Ilves

Abstract – There are around 1200 lakes in Estonia and, for the most part, these are all shallow and muddy with almost non-existent visibility – only around 10 of the 1200 lakes in Estonia are considered suitable for diving. Among these 1200 lakes, there are about 20 that are surrounded by persistent legends telling of or suggestive of old wooden constructions at the bottom of these. Many of these legends are quite imaginative and fantastic, such as those dealing with lakes that fly or appear randomly, occasionally drowning villages. But there are also realistic tales that tell us about local people finding worked logs in lakes; there is an oral tradition about poles tearing fishing nets and about constructions at the bottom which are visible from the surface. In this paper, the questions of how much trust should and can archaeology put regarding the source value of such stories will be discussed.

Inhalt – Es gibt rund 1200 Seen in Estland und diese sind überwiegend seicht und trübe mit praktisch nicht vorhandener Sichtweite – nur etwa 10 estnische Seen hält man für zum Tauchen geeignet. Um rund 20 Seen halten sich hartnäckig Sagen, die von alten Holzbauten auf ihrem Grund reden oder auf solche hindeuten. Viele dieser Sagen sind einfallsreich und phantastisch, so die von fliegenden oder zufällig erscheinenden Seen, die manchmal Dörfer ertränken. Aber es gibt auch realistische Berichte über örtliche Fischer, die bearbeitete Hölzer darin finden; mündlich wird überliefert, dass Pfosten Fischernetze zerreissen und dass Konstruktionen auf dem Grunde von der Oberfläche aus sichtbar seien. In diesem Beitrag wird die Frage behandelnt, wieviel Vertrauen die Archäologie dem Quellenwert solcher Geschichten schenken kann und soll.

Archaeological take-off

Already in the year 1640, when the first known dive in Estonia was organised, it had the purpose of clarifying information known from oral tradition concerning a lake named Valgjärv in Kooküla, in the southern parts of the country (Fig. 1). This is one of the rare lakes in Estonia that has placid water, which also is reflected in the name of the lake, since the Estonian name Valgjärv means White/Light Lake in English. According to the legend, a manor was supposed to lie under water. The legend is that the owner of the mansion wanted to marry his own sister. Against the will of the local priest, the wedding ceremony was carried out in the mansion. But during their wedding night rain started to pour down heavily and the next day there was a lake where the manor had been. This legend has been tested, wooden constructions or other traces of human activity have been found at the bottom of this lake. However, only in 1958 was Lake Valgjärv studied for the first time by a professional archaeologist – Jüri Selirand. With professional divers at his disposal, Selirand established the location and position of a pile dwelling at the bottom of this lake at a depth of only about 2 meters. The main part of the pile dwelling was situated in the middle of the lake, on a long arched underwater ridge reaching from the central part of the western shore. The wooden remains were dated to the second half of the first millennium AD on the basis of the local types of ceramic found at the spot (Selirand 1960).

Later research in the 1980’s and in the beginning of the 1990’s has complemented the archaeological material from the pile dwelling of Lake Valgjärv. For example, a bridge-like feature was localised and more constructional features were discovered. Furthermore, possible Neolithic settlement stages of this pile dwelling were determined. However, the most important aspect in relation to the present discussion is the fact that there was an actual empirical basis for the legends revolving around this lake and „the lost manor“.

In addition to Lake Valgjärv, there are a number of lakes in Estonia of which similar tales are being told about. Besides stories about features which clearly are from more recent history, such as airplanes and tanks, people tell or have told about sunken churches and church towers, about sunken manors and farms, as well as about sunken carriages, church bells and barrels with gold, but also explicitly about really old pile dwellings and bridge remains on the bottom of lakes. Where do these legends come from? Are they based in reality? Why do the legends often survive from generation to generation? With Lake Valgjärv being the exception, these questions have not been of interest to Estonian archaeology. This might
probably be due to the fact that maritime archaeology was considered to be without any future in Estonia for a long time and few archaeologists took an interest in these matters (Ilves 2008). However, in 1999, the situation changed in connection with the joint project of the Estonian Literary Museum and Tartu University. The project had the purpose of investigating folk-tradition in Rõuge parish, in southern Estonia (Potter – Remmel – Valk 2001). During these investigations local traditions of relevance to archaeology were systematically collected and strong attention was drawn to many stories about possible old constructions at the bottom of some lakes in this parish. Notably, there was a remarkable correspondence between legends and archaeological sites on land, and inspired by that fact, the idea emerged to test this correlation regarding locations under water as well. Starting in 2002, minor studies have been carried out in some of the Estonian lakes by the author of the present article with the main purpose to establish the archaeological source value of oral tradition.

Deceitful legends?

In 2002, one of the first studies was carried out in Lake Külajärv in Plaani, situated in the south-eastern part of Estonia. The lake with a maximum depth of only about 5 meters has quite an assemblage of detailed tales that tell about a village with the unfortunate fate of ending up under the lake, and of fishermen both observing and gathering chopped and sawn timber, as well as fishing nets torn by submerged poles. Once, during a fishing trip a fisherman allegedly even found a part of a house wall with a visible door opening. Furthermore, the pile dwelling has unanimously been stated to lie on the underwater peninsula near the eastern shore of Lake Külajärv. Thus, there are great similarities between this lake and Lake Valgjärv in Koorküla – both the character of the legends and the topographical features correspond to each other. That circumstance became the decisive factor in focusing especially on Lake Külajärv as the first lake after Lake Valgjärv in the search for sunken legends.

Despite of the strong folk-tradition, the investigations carried out under water did not confirm the existence of a pile-dwelling on the underwater peninsula, which, on the other hand, does exist on the bottom of this lake, by the eastern shore as stated. In addition to some modern features, the only remains of old wooden constructions discovered in the lake were such intended for fishing – three fish-traps were found at about 2 meters depth. Two of the located fish-traps are located next to each other almost in the centre of the lake, close to the tip of the underwater peninsula. They are built of approximately 2 meter long poles, which are rammed into the bottom of the lake in upright position and connected with densely twinned thinner branches in between. If reconstructed, the features would be kidney-shaped. Such fish-traps were used from prehistoric times until the beginning of the last century; nevertheless, the ones located in Lake Külajärv were left undated.

Thus, the results were not the ones originally indicated by the legends. But if there are no pile dwellings on the bottom of Lake Külajärv in Plaani, why are there so many tales about these? Why do stories about worked logs still circulate? In my opinion, even if no pile dwellings were located at the bottom of Lake Külajärv, the legends are possibly explained in relation to historical reality as there were remains of the fish-traps at the bottom of the lake, built using worked wood. These remains are rather easy to get repeatedly caught in with fishing nets, and they are, under favourable conditions, to some extent visible from the surface.

The possibility to explain legends in relation to historical reality according to the similar principle also applies to the other surveyed lake in the same region – Lake Vaskna. This lake was surveyed concurrently with the works undertaken in Lake Külajärv. In the case of Lake Vaskna, among many different stories about this lake, including alluring tales about hidden barrels with gold, there is also an intense and still living tale about a wooden bridge. The story is arguably supported by timbers noted to occasionally float on the surface. This legendary bridge is pinpointed to have been
The search for traces of human activity under water indicated at in the oral tradition had started with the clear desire for detecting exactly the features signified (Ilves 2003). And, occasionally, precisely these elements were located. However, more often the explanation to the existence of the circulating stories was found in characteristically different elements. Therefore, on the basis of the rationalisations made on the results from the addressed surveys in the lakes of Kulajärv and Vaskna, the hypothesis for following research was principally reformulated. The investigations were now distinctly directed towards testing the hypothesis that lake related oral traditions are based in reality rather than imagination alone.

Lake Kiruvere

The mentioned hypothesis already has some support in the preliminary surveys described. However, it took several years before this hypothesis could be specifically tested further. In 2007 and 2008 archaeological investigations were carried out on Lake Kiruvere, in northern Estonia – a study, which also emerged in the methodological issues to tackle.

Lake Kiruvere is rather big, 22 hectares, and has a maximum depth of 11 meters; but it was considerably bigger before the water level was lowered over a meter in 1938. The legends surrounding Lake Kiruvere, which are dead since generations, were once strong, detailed and built on two main components. Firstly, according to the legends there is a pile dwelling in the middle of Lake Kiruvere. Secondly, there are stories about a road on piles starting at the north-eastern shore and either leading to the stated pile dwelling or just to the other side of the lake. But there are no records of logs, piles or timber in general found. At the same time, the first discovery during the land survey around Lake Kiruvere, was a log boat – rather well preserved, the remaining part being over 4 meters long. This boat had obviously been standing on the waterline for quite some time already (Fig. 2). By radiocarbon method the log boat was dated to 1400-1450 AD, which means that this vessel is the oldest dated log boat in Estonia so far.

Lake Kiruvere lies in an archaeologically interesting area. There are two settlement areas and a possible grave field only 500 meters east of it, all of them unfortunately undated. Finds of iron slag have been documented by the lake. Thus, all things considered, the potential of underwater surveys was obviously huge. However, it soon became clear, that survey by diving is possible only up to 3 meters depth beyond which there was no visibility and strong lamps revealed only 20 centimetres in this extensive darkness. Thus, the underwater survey was restricted to the areas near shore up to 3 meters depth in between rather lush underwater vegetation. For these reasons, the stories about a pile dwelling in the middle of Lake Kiruvere were not tested and the main attention was directed towards the legends about a possible bridge or a road on piles by the north-eastern shore.

During surveys, several relatively modern fishing boats were detected in the shallower parts of the lake. Among these was one that was intentionally sunken with the help of 10 big stones and its location marked with two standing poles by the shore. But most notably, almost around the whole lake, at 2 meters depth, there were lines of poles in different condition at uneven inter-
vals, sometimes reaching over the surface. On some occasions traces of nets were still hanging from these poles and different fishing gear was noted at the bottom. Similar thin worked poles were also documented lying on the shore. Thus, there are remains of fish-trap systems, most likely originating from different epochs, around the lake.

In the north-eastern part of Lake Kiruvere, by the shore where the road on piles would have its beginning, according to registered legends, some odd traces which were difficult to interpret were discovered. In a rather densely vegetated area of approximately 20 × 30 meter reaching from 0.5 to 2 meters depth, a thin and heterogeneous layer of wood, which appeared to be burnt, was located. The layer mainly contained wooden chips with some minor pole stumps in it. These observations led to a hypothesis of the possible existence of a platform close to the shore on that spot (Ilves - Heamägi 2007). But the layer was radiocarbon dated to the Mesolithic, 6110-5900 BC, and a subsequent investigation of the site and the wood revealed nothing referring directly to human activity. However, the find spot was the very same as the location pointed out in the legends. At that location, there are wooden remains although these most likely are remains of some natural feature which is difficult to interpret with certainty. There are also poles belonging to the fish-trap system in the deeper end of the same area. Thus, the legends could possibly be explained based on real facts. But the potential of further investigations of Lake Kiruvere is still obvious. The surrounding cultural landscape, the find of an old log boat, etc., suggest that people were actively making use of Lake Kiruvere, and where humans dwell the traces are left behind – they just need to be found.

Methodological challenges

The simple method of non-intrusive diving has been used in all of the preliminary surveys conducted – up to three divers moving parallel with each other holding compass heading or following the shoreline. However with the urgent problem of low visibility, an alternative method suitable for a small budget had to be found. Especially as the most potential lake for the existence and rediscovery of old pile dwellings, called Mustjärv in Paunküla, in northern Estonia, had no visibility what so ever. The lack of visibility is also indicated already by the name of the lake as the Estonian name Mustjärv means Black/Dark Lake in English.

Lake Mustjärv in Paunküla is a small lake, being only 2.6 hectares with a water depth up to 8 meters and a surface visibility of 15 centimetres. Together with several other small lakes it lies well hidden in a vast marshy forested area. However, the area is crossed by a narrow ridge which historically has acted as a road through the territory. This ridge also runs on the right side of Lake Mustjärv. The territories around this marshy forested area have many archaeological traces of rather extensive prehistoric and historic settlement. And besides all the detailed legends and stories, an actual pile dwelling was recorded in Lake Mustjärv in recent times; for example, in the 1960’s by the hydrobiologist Aare Mäemets, who in his book about Estonian lakes notes that remains of a pile dwelling in Lake Mustjärv, estimated to be over 800 years old, recently have been removed from the water (Mäemets 1977, 159). Also, elderly local people still remember the former existence of a wooden construction on this lake. Obviously, because of the non-
existing visibility diving was considered meaningless on this location. Inspiration for an alternative was found from the Stourhead Lake Project in England implemented in June 2004. In this project, David Johnston devised and built a simple remote sensing system for rapid deployment and survey of the lake. Johnston’s system comprised a Garmin Fishfinder (Echo Sounder) mounted on a retractable arm attached to a kayak. The Echo Sounder transducer emits an acoustic pulse directed down from the kayak which then bounces back from the lakebed to the transducer. A small screen mounted on the kayak shows the profile of the lakebed beneath the kayak. Within the Stourhead Lake Project the described remote sensing system was successfully used to survey for drastic depth changes of this artificial lake with the purpose of finding traces of old fishponds (Bowens 2004, 5-6).

With several modifications, a similar system, which was suitable for the use on a bigger rubber boat and had considerably longer usage time in field, was constructed (Fig. 3). Along with one diving equipment and after one kilometre long hike through marshes (because that was the closest one gets to Lake Mustjärv by car), a camp was set up by Lake Mustjärv in the summer of 2008 to preliminarily test the technique and examine the matter of the possible pile dwelling.

It was clear from the start that using the Fishfinder in Lake Mustjärv which lacked extensive underwater vegetation had clear advantages in comparison to diving. With the intention of building a frame of reference, firstly, the main characteristics of the bottom of the lake in relation to the picture on screen were identified. These were primarily underwater turf formations, trees fallen into the water and remains of fish-traps consisting of thin, worked poles rammed into the bottom. The entire lake was roughly oared from shore to shore checking the anomalies visible on screen, and then the survey concentrated on the specific location near the southern shore that was pointed out as the spot where the pile dwelling used to be.

Severe disturbances at the bottom were clearly identified on the screen starting 15 meters from the shore – in between the picture of the bottom was clean and uninterrupted (Fig. 4). The area with the disturbed bottom was approximately 20×20 meters big and the depth for distinctively disturbed bottom relief was according to the indicators on Fishfinder, from 2 up to 4 meters. According to the information from the diver, who for safety reasons could only carefully feel his way forward, the lakebed on this area was covered with a big pile of wood – more than that the diver dared not to state. Nevertheless, there is definitely something beyond univocal interpretation on the bottom of Lake Mustjärv; but are these the remains of a pile dwelling? Further investigations are required to answer this question and to pose more. However, the issues of suitable methodology need to be solved first. A simple remote sensing system with the Fishfinder is definitely appropriate for the rapid surveys to discover anomalies on the lakebed, especially in the case of lakes lacking lush underwater vegetation, but it is not enough for answering further questions. The investigations of Lake Mustjärv will continue.

Conclusion

There are many strong indications in the oral tradition about the existence of traces after different man-made constructions and other features at the bottom of several lakes in Estonia. Even though there are examples of discovering the features specifically told about in the oral tradition, the archaeological investigations conducted does not always result in the outcome originally indicated at in the legends. However, all the legends studied so far are still possible to explain in accordance with reality. Therefore, in my opinion, Estonian lake-related oral tradition has rather great archaeological source value and is definitely useful for applying as a starting-point for further investigations. Although, in the continuation of surveys, the issues of suitable methodology should be worked further with as the lack of underwater visibility is the main obstacle for proper archaeological investigations.

References


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Credits of figures

Fig. 2: photo by Priit Pärnmaa; figs. 1, 3 and 4 by the author.

Address

Kristin Ilves
Department of Archaeology and Ancient History
Uppsala University
SE-75238 Uppsala
Sweden
Phone: +46 18 471 7553
Mobile: +46 73 672 65 76
E-mail: kristin.ilves@arkeologi.uu.se