

The Vehkalahti township has been a town “without proper harbour” – perspectives about the staple town’s early-modern development into being

Hamina on ollut kaupunki ilman haminaa - näkökulmia tapulikaupungin varhaismodernista taustasta

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ABSTRACT

Hietakylä, the historical trading base of the Vehkalahti armigerous landowners, has been a continuation from the late Middle Ages. It experienced a transitional period from the 1650s onwards. In 1653, a township community, the uusikaupunki ('new town') of Vehkalahti, later called Hamina, was founded in the same village area, i.e. on the edge of the Vehkalahti church.

The aim of my research is to present perspectives on the early modern background of the Hamina staple town: how trade and maritime transport were organized in the region. My research concerns the transitional period that lasted for several decades, from the 1650s to the 1690s.

The only trading posts were maintained in the late Middle Ages and until the 1650s by certain Vehkalahti armigerous families who held hereditary ownership of the domains with best piers and shore storage areas in the area of 'Vehkalahti church village'. This has been the continuous logistical hub of the region since 1320s.

This situation too had come out of a major change in the second half of the 1330s. Swedish-speaking population and landowners had settled on each shore of the Vehkalahti bays. The local elite family of Reitkalli acquired Hietakylä in 1396. The domain was soon divided among all the diverging branches of this armigerous family.

The shores in vicinity of the mouth of Vehkajoki River became established as a trading area controlled by certain families between 1336 and 1653. A separate township administration was not established at the trading spots until 1653. Each nobility property in Hietakylä practically functioned as a trading post for a specific armigerous family branch, rather than as farm. The privileges of the armigerous lords included trading sailing.

Hillonniemi belonged to the Poitz gentry family from the 1460s. Hillonniemi would have been an excellent place for a port and therefore as the location of the new town. But the budding township had no possibility to take its possession either since Hillonniemi was nobility-held land.

By the 17th century, the commerce by the local noble lords was an established old social institution in the region and had been providing the region's population with the benefits of exchange for centuries. Before the 17th century, there was no burgher class in the region's social structure. When mercantilism became the main rule of trading rights in the legal order of the Swedish Realm, the privileges of the nobility nevertheless included tradership.

My research focuses on the previously poorly and incompletely discussed trading places that operated under the privileges of the noble lords in the mouth of Vehkajoki River and on effects of the establishment of the town of Vehkalahti in the region. What has been presented in the published research literature has here been critically examined.

In 1653, the bourgeoisie class and the political body of burghers began to be formed in the community, practically a new societal group in the region. These two commerce-practizing institutions actually competed with each other in the very same location.

There were hardly any good harbours made available for the newly founded town. Only the domain number 4 of Hietakylä was given to the ownership and use of the town. So the new harbour town of Vehkalahti "had no harbour", at least not a proper nor a sufficient one. That lack dampened the functioning of the town.

The thoughtless founding plan can be interpreted as evidence of the inability of Governor-General Petteri Brahe and the official machinery to grasp the infrastructure needed for trade and transportation. The urban community repeatedly complained from 1653 to 1937 of the inadequacy of whatever respectively served as the port.

My research here centres on the second half of the 17th century, when the nobility privilege for trade and merchant shipping was in conflict against, on the one hand, and the privilege of the urban community's burghers for the procurement of goods from the regional countryside and for "everything" traded, on the other hand.

In 1678, the township's bourgeoisie received a sort of victory over the squirearchy of Vehkalahti - who yet owned the best berths. The right to trade of several armigerous owners in Vehkalahti was terminated. Only a few of the armigerous lords in Vehkalahti were allowed to retain full noble privileges. As a result of the measure, some owners abandoned their land ownership in Hietakylä. Several competing foreign trade operators were thus eliminated from operating as competitors and bypassing the bourgeoisie and the town.

Some of smartest burghers had each rented a quay plot from one of the owner lords. Approximately the period 1650-1678 had seen relentless conflict and quite a bit of controversy on both sides. The town community and its burghers sought to destroy the lords' right to privileges and tried to get the lords to become financially indebted to burghers.

The administration of the township community became known for its inability to organize a functioning harbor. In 1722 the town community received the privileges of a staple town and port, but since that time, the inadequacies of harbor places, the fact that "Hamina has no hamina", was even more tangible.

The study argues for knowledge about the transformation of Hietakylä, the historical trading place of the Vehkalahti noble lords, into a bourgeois community.