

# Nationally significant archaeological sites – VARK

## What is the VARK project?

The purpose of the VARK project is to define nationally significant archaeological sites. The goal is to prepare a list that the Finnish Government can approve as the inventory referred to in the national land use guidelines. The Finnish Heritage Agency is in charge of the project, which is estimated to be completed in 2021. Excluding Åland, the inventory will encompass archaeological sites that provide as good of an overview as possible of the antiquity of Finnish land areas in terms of time periods and geography across more than 10,000 years. The purpose of the VARK sites is to help create as multifaceted a story as possible of the people and communities that lived here in ancient times, and of their ways of life.

## Who are taking part in the project?

The Finnish Heritage Agency is organising the project in cooperation with museum experts focusing on specialist tasks relating to the cultural environment (regional museums starting at the beginning of 2020), including Siida.

The steering group for the project includes the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, University of Helsinki, Archaeological Society of Finland, Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of the Environment, and representatives of regional museums.

## What are the archaeological sites intended for inventoring?

Almost all sites covered by the inventory are ancient monuments protected by the Antiquities Act. The definition of ancient monuments is laid down in Section 2 of the Antiquities Act (295/1963). It covers remnants of human activity, structures, strata or findings preserved on land or underwater from prehistoric and historic periods. Ancient monuments are protected directly under Section 1 of the Antiquities Act. Their protection is not subject to a separate official decision, and they may not be disturbed without a separate permit necessitated by the Act. The inventory may also involve limited examination of other archaeological sites that constitute abandoned and unused structures with cultural and historical significance that fall outside the scope of the Antiquities Act.

## Where can I obtain more information on the archaeological sites?

The Ancient Relics Register maintained by the Finnish Heritage Agency contains the basic information about the ancient monuments protected by the Antiquities Act and information about other archaeological entities in continental Finland. Links to research and discoveries connected to these entities are also included. The register is continuously being updated. The information is intended to provide an overview of the cultural environment. If relic information is needed for official or planning purposes, the concerned party should contact the appropriate museum authorities.

The Ancient Relics Register is available to all via the Kulttuuriympäristön palveluikkuna ('Cultural environment service window', in Finnish) service managed by the Finnish Heritage Agency. The Guide to archaeological cultural heritage Arkeologisen kulttuuriperinnön opas provides additional information on what archaeological cultural heritage means in Finland and what type of entities it consists of. The guide gives valuable descriptions of what these entities look like in the field and the grounds for their protection.

## What do the national land use guidelines mean?

The national land use guidelines (VAT) are part of the planning system detailed in the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999). The main purpose of the guidelines is to ensure that nationally significant matters are taken into account in land use planning and the operations of state authorities. In addition to cultural environments, the guidelines apply to natural diversity and resources, community development, transport and energy management, among other things. The national land use guidelines are based on Section 22 of the Land Use and Building Act. The latest Government decision on the guidelines entered into force on 1 April 2018.

[https://www.ymparisto.fi/en-US/Living\\_environment\\_and\\_planning/Land\\_use\\_planning\\_system/National\\_land\\_use\\_guidelines](https://www.ymparisto.fi/en-US/Living_environment_and_planning/Land_use_planning_system/National_land_use_guidelines)

## How are the national land use guidelines regarding cultural environments being applied?

The national land use guidelines state that the value of nationally significant cultural environments must be preserved. In practice, what this means is that, in the context of land use planning, areas relevant to the national cultural environment inventories are identified to ensure that they and the values they represent are protected.

The goals pertaining to the cultural environment are fitted together with other national land use guidelines as well as regional and local objectives. This coordination is conducted case-specifically in conjunction with the town planning of regions and municipalities, on the basis of the Land Use and Building Act. In addition to this, state authorities consider national land use guidelines in their operations based on the various applicable acts.

## How will the inventory be conducted?

The VARK inventory is based on the most recent information in the Ancient Relics Register maintained by the Finnish Heritage Agency. Criteria that distinguish the VARK sites from others have been established to serve as the groundwork for the project. The preselected sites are evaluated based on these criteria, and the sites that best meet the objectives of the project are selected for the inventory. As part of the inventory, on-site surveys are conducted where necessary at locations for which the information is obsolete or inaccurate.

## What criteria are used to select nationally significant sites?

The significance of the sites is assessed based on their cultural and historical value:

- How well each site represents the phenomena, processes and events associated with its time period.
- The site's archaeological potential: how important the site is for the interpretation of antiquity and what its scientific value is.
- The sites are also assessed in terms of their prevalence or rarity in the area as well as their diversity. Some sites are limited in their scope, represent a relatively short period in time and comprise only one type of ancient relic. Others have taken shape over millennia across vast areas, resulting in an amalgam of structures representing different types and time periods.
- The condition of a site is factor in terms of its significance.
- The extent to which the surrounding environment is relevant to examining the site and understanding its importance.

## What are the grounds and level of accuracy for delineating sites in the inventory?

The delineation of the sites is based on the following:

- The scope of the area containing the relevant structures and 'cultural layers', i.e. layers of soil that show signs of ancient human activity. These include discoloured sooty soil, stone structures, burnt stones and items or pieces of them.
- Archaeological studies or test studies conducted at the site and discoveries made.
- Observations made above ground. Ancient sites are often identified based on pits, stone structures, terraces or soil embankments. The topography of the terrain may also shed light on the span of the ancient site or relic.

In terms of technical means, a variety of methods, such as GPS measurements, aerial photos or fluorescence imaging, are used for delineation.

## How can I have a say on the project activities?

The Finnish Heritage Agency organises hearing events where all those affected by the project can present their views on the sites identified in the VARK inventory. After the hearing, the sites are assessed based on the feedback received and a finalised list of the VARK sites is prepared.

## How does a site being included in the VARK inventory differentiate it from other ancient monuments?

A site being included in the VARK inventory does not directly change the relevant preservation scheme since all ancient relics are protected by law. The Antiquities Act states that the consideration of a permit to disturb an ancient relic takes into account its significance, which means that the criteria may be stricter for VARK sites than other similar locations. In addition to

this, the granting of research permits for VARK sites may require more detailed consideration than normal. VARK sites may sometimes be prioritised in the allocation of maintenance grants.

## How are sites included in the VARK inventory taken into account in town planning?

According to the Land Use and Building Act, one of the aims of land use planning is to promote the protection of cultural values (Section 5, 132/1999). The regional and municipal planning activities must consider national land use planning guidelines and the relevant content requirements for various plan levels in such a way that ensures the protection of the values of nationally significant cultural environments. The VARK inventory is intended to be taken into account in regional planning, which steers the more detailed planning in accordance with the Land Use and Building Act. The ancient monuments protected by the Antiquities Act are indicated in as protected sites, at the level of accuracy required by the level of the plan in question.

As stated above, all ancient monuments are immediately protected under the Antiquities Act (295/1963) starting from their discovery. Separate protection decisions are not made. Any deviation from the protection arrangement requires a disturbance or research permit granted under the Antiquities Act. In other words, protection decisions are not made in conjunction with planning, but planning solutions can be used to secure the preservation of ancient relics.

## To what extent does a VARK site restrict construction in the area?

An ancient monument being protected under the Antiquities Act means that it may not be excavated, covered, altered, damaged, removed or otherwise disturbed without permission. The land use restrictions imposed by the Antiquities Act must be taken into account in all operations in areas containing ancient relics. If land use is being planned in an area of this kind or its immediate vicinity, a statement must be requested from the museum authorities, regardless of whether or not the site in question has VARK status. If an ancient monument causes unreasonable detriment in proportion to its significance, the project organiser may sometimes apply for a permit to disturb the monument.

## Is forestry or agriculture allowed at a VARK site?

Existing land use in ancient relic sites is permitted. Forest management activities are mostly also allowed in such areas. Sometimes they may even be desirable since trees above ancient relics may damage the structures should they happen to fall. Soil preparation activities, such as ploughing, harrowing or stump removal, is prohibited, however, since they cannot be conducted without damaging the ancient relic.

Field agriculture is also permitted. However, if a field is forested or measures more extensive than normal ploughing are being planned (e.g. excavating new open trenches), this requires a museum authority assessment of whether or not the measures will damage the relic.

## Where can I get more information on the progress of the VARK project?

More information on the project is available on the Finnish Heritage Agency's website:

<https://www.museovirasto.fi/en/cultural-environment/archaeological-cultural-heritage/nationally-significant-archaeological-sites-vark>

Additional information on the cultural environment can be found through the [www.kyppi.fi](http://www.kyppi.fi) service. The service maintained by the Finnish Heritage Agency contains archives, registers and collections of information on archaeological cultural heritage and built cultural environments. The service provides free downloads of geographical information and research reports on the sites.