

INFORMATION ABOUT EASTERN EUROPE IN OLD NORSE SAGAS AND ITS
ADAPTATION FOR THE NORDIC AUDIENCE BY SAGA-AUTHORS

Galina Glazyrina

Academy of Sciences of the USSR

The history of the Eastern Europe of the 9th - 11th centuries is not fully enough reflected in the Old-Russian written sources. That is why to investigate this historical period one has to rely on the information about this region found in foreign sources, among which the Scandinavian ones take a prominent place. Runic inscriptions, sagas, scaldic poetry, chronicles, codes of law and other types of literary monuments include (in one or another form) the information concerning the ancient history of the East-European part of the USSR territory and of the peoples that lived there¹. The sagas mention the region more often and in a more detailed way than other types of sources. This form of narration proved to be very pliable to include in the plot divergent materials about other countries besides the Scandinavian ones.

The main bulk of information has been forming during the Viking Age, when the North of Europe and Ancient Rus' were most closely connected. As a result of these connections the political, economical and cultural relations were reflected in the narratives based mainly on witnesses' stories. In a few centuries, when sagas were being written down, this information was still easily understood and accepted by listeners or readers. The cause of the stability of the East-European subjects in the Scandinavian narrative sources one may see in the fact that this layer of information was perceived by the audience as part of Scandinavian history and stories about it - as part of its native culture, carefully preserved from generation to generation.

The common cultural tradition and background knowledge lead to formation of the mutual understanding between the author and his audience. In his creative activity the author

relies on the knowledge inherent to the people of his social circle and the audience. He sees no necessity to explain in his stories a number of facts and situations which seem ordinary and clear to him. But for contemporary scholars these episodes are particularly difficult for interpretation.

To illustrate it let us take an example from "Háralds saga Sigurðarsonar", included by Snorri Sturluson in "Heimskringla"². As it follows from the text, the king of Norway Haraldr Sigurðarson serves with the Varangian troops at the Byzantine court and participates in military raids. He sends the treasure he gets in the raids not to his mother country but "to Novgorod (Hólmgarðr)", to the Russian Prince Jaroslav the Wise. One may suppose that the cause of this is in the fact that Haraldr was engaged to the Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of Jaroslav the Wise. The Russian Prince considered Harald to be poor and not a good partner for his daughter. Sending his treasure to the Russian court Harald tries to make Jaroslav to believe that he is rich. This supposition looks like a true one but at the same time - romantic and literary.

A more prosaic explanation to the fact one can get from the analysis of the early Norwegian legislation. Clause 47 of the Norwegian regional code of laws "Gulatingslov"³, written down in the second half of the XIIth century but based on earlier norms, explains the way of inheritance after a person who has emigrated from the country. According to the law the owner of the possessions can appoint in public a person to manage his property for three years. After that time the successors get his property. But if a person emigrates to Byzantium, his belongings come to the successors immediately. In this situation for Harald the Russian court was at the time the safest place to keep his treasure. Having sent it to Norway, Harald could lose it as a person who has emigrated from the country and gone to Byzantium. If we accept the second supposition to be true we are justified to think that in construction of the episode Snorri based on the knowledge of the regional legislation, common both for him and his audience.

The author of "Hemings þáttur Áslakssonar"⁴ also tells us

about Harald's treasure. He notes the fact that Harald, who has restored his power in Norway, asks his wife Elisabeth whom he has left in Russia, to send him his treasure to Norway. The author does not explain in the text what kind of treasure he means. We can suppose that in this case the author of the þáttur alludes to "Háralds saga Sigurðarsonar", well-known both to him and his audience, and speaks about Harald's Byzantine treasure.

Intention of the saga-author to rely on the principle of the common cultural tradition and background knowledge of a social layer doesn't always help the author in his narration about the past events, but sometimes limits his possibilities. Additional limitations may come from the chosen plot of the saga.

Analysing the problem of women's property formation in Scandinavia we used Snorri Sturluson's "Heimskringla" as a historical source⁵. The content of the work restricts the object of our investigation. First, the women mentioned in "Heimskringla" are not the main characters of the book. They are just brides, wives, widows or mothers of the main characters of the book - the kings of Norway and other countries or their retainers. It is interesting to notice that when choosing women characters, one of the criteria for the author was that of "matrimonial relations": with rare exception, women acting in "Heimskringla" a) are married, b) are intended to get married, c) are widows. The fact that most women characters are subordinate in the plot had a bearing on the information about their property and legal status, as the information about it is indirect. Second, as the book of Snorri deals with descriptions of biographies of people belonging to the ruling class or the nobles, most women mentioned in the text belong to the same social group.

Analysis of the facts taken from the sagas of "Heimskringla" that characterize the property and legal status of women in mediaeval Scandinavia allows us to name the objects that women could have in their possession. They are: a) land, b) dwellings (a house, an estate), c) money (especially, taken from the su-

bordinate territories as taxes and revenues), d) dependent people, e) utensils, f) items of luxury.

"Heimskringla" allows also to form an idea as to what were the main sources of putting these material values - both movable and immovable - into woman's possession. A dowry, that is the belongings given by the parents or other relatives to the bride, formed the basic part of that. Property inherited after her dead relatives also played an important role. The bride got from her future husband a bridal gift, that also became part of her property.

Let us look more closely at the latter opportunity to get property. According to the tradition that existed in the Scandinavian countries in the Middle Ages a woman, getting married, received from her husband a bridal gift - mund. Mund was a precious gift or a certain sum of money which a man had to pay before the wedding took place. If mund hadn't been paid the wedding was considered to be invalid. The minimum rate of mund was defined by the law.

Mund as well as dowry and inheritance is often mentioned by Snorri. Not so often he speaks about another kind of bridal gift and uses the term 'tilgjof'. The term appears in the "Saga of Olaf the Saint" when the author describes the terms of a marriage contract between the Swedish princess Ingigerd, the daughter of the king Olaf the Swede, and the Russian Prince Yaroslav the Wise. According to "Icelandic Annals" the marriage took place in 1019⁶. As saga said, Ingigerd asked the Russian Prince to give her Aldeigjuborg (=Staraja Ladoga) and that jarldom that belonged to it to her as a bridal gift (i tilgjof mina Aldeigjuborg ok jarlsríki þat, er þar liggir til)⁷. There are no analogues to Snorri's information about Aldeigjuborg as tilgjof neither in Swedish nor in Russian historical sources. That is why to prove the historical accuracy of it it is necessary to carry out a complex historical and terminological analysis.

The study of the Old-Norse text shows us that speaking about the event that characterizes the connections between An-

cient Rus' and Sweden, Snorri doesn't use either Swedish or Russian terms. He uses a specific Norwegian term 'tilgjof'. It is necessary to remind that in contrast to other Scandinavian countries, where a bride got only one obligatory gift (mund) from her groom, in Norway there existed a tradition to give the bride one more gift - tilgjof. The term is known from the earliest regional law-code of Norway - "Gulatingsslov" that was effective in the South-West of the country. That means that the use of the term was limited. To denote the same kind of gift in the law-code that was effective in the North-West of Norway - "Frostatingslov"⁸(middle of the XIIIth century) - the term 'bridjungsauki' was used. The amount of tilgjof was regulated by the law. If a woman was getting married for the first time, tilgjof should equal the value of the dowry given by the bride's family. If a widow was getting married for the second time, then tilgjof had to be not less than the value of half of her property. It is possible that when husband and wife got children and in accordance with Norwegian laws could form joint property (félag), tilgjof or profits of it could be controlled by both partners.

If we assume that Snorri Sturluson consciously uses the term 'tilgjof' because it reflects the situation more adequately, then we have to admit that Aldeigjuborg and its jarldom had been transferred to the possession of Ingigerd as her bridal gift in accordance with the traditional Norwegian law-terms. It also follows that the value of dowry that the Swedish part gave Ingigerd was equal to the value of Aldeigjuborg and its jarldom or to the value of profits that come of that region.

To rule this land on behalf of Ingigerd a Norwegian jarl Rognvald was installed. According to the "Saga of Eymund"⁹, Rognvald's sons Ulf and Eilif stayed in Aldeigjuborg after their father's death. The existence of parallel information about the installation of Rognvald in Aldeigjuborg both in the "Saga of Olaf the Saint" and the "Saga of Eymund" is not a coincidence: both texts are included in the manuscript of "Flat-

eyjarbók", and that allows us to assume that the same editor made corrections to the plot that concerned Aldeigjuborg.

The question of the type of government established in Aldeigjuborg after the marriage of Ingigerd and Yaroslav is an important one and is still being disputed. Even in the Soviet historiography there are several opinions on the problem: a) in one, the Swedish owned Aldeigjuborg,¹⁰ b) in the second, it was a conditional holding¹¹, c) in the third, the Swedish didn't influence the situation in Aldeigjuborg¹².

If we assume that Snorri deliberately uses the term 'tilgjof' then we have to agree that in this historic period Aldeigjuborg was a joint Swedish-Russian holding. When Ingigerd died c. 1051, earlier than Yaroslav the Wise who died in 1054, the agreement has lost its force.

The legend about the marriage contract between the Swedish and the Russian ruling houses Snorri Sturluson might have learned in Sweden in 1219 when he was a guest of Eskil Magnusson, man-of-law in Västergötland and the first editor of the "Västgötalag". But the cause Snorri uses a term 'tilgjof' from a Norwegian law-code to describe the Swedish-Russian relations could be as follows. Snorri twice had been living for quite a long time at the Norwegian court. Here he had an opportunity to study the norms of "Gulatingsslov" that was effective on this territory and that he might have used in the process of his work on the "Saga of Olaf the Saint". Compiling the history of the Norwegian kings for an Icelandic-Norwegian audience, he sees no need to look for another term and uses the one that was easily understood by his audience, no matter what historical associations are there behind it. However the associations are of special interest for us so that we could prove the historical accuracy of the facts given by Snorri.

Thus, it follows from Snorri's text that in the beginning of the XIth century a Swedish princess Ingigerd got in her possession a large territory - a part of Ancient Rus' - from Yaroslav the Wise. Either in accordance with the law that hasn't been preserved till our time or according to practice Ingigerd

had disposed of this territory and transferred it to her relative Rognvald. Here we come to the problem of the property and legal rights of women in the beginning of the XI th century. Could a woman at that time be so economically independent that: 1) she could own land and 2) she could dispose of her land?

The property and legal situation in Scandinavia at the turn of the Xth century is clearly seen from a work published recently by a Swedish historian B.Sawyer¹³. The author analyzes this problem on the material of runic inscriptions. It is clear that runic monuments being memorial in character do not contain any inscriptions about bridal gifts. Nevertheless the results of B.Sawyer's work are very demonstrative because they define the essence of property relations that existed in Sweden on the eve of the XIth century. Runic inscriptions definitely show a dependent position of a Swedish woman. During all her lifetime she was under the guardianship of a man - a father or a guardian before the wedding, and a husband after the wedding. These men managed and disposed of her property that only nominally belonged to the woman. There existed only two situations when a woman could become an independent manager of her property: 1) when an unmarried woman of age had no men-relatives and 2) when a widow had no men-relatives to take upon themselves the management and disposal of her property. It is obvious that both situations are rare in real life, for usually there exist close or distant men-relatives.

The situation as it is described by Snorri Sturluson contradicts to the facts characterizing the property and legal status of women both in Scandinavia and in Russia in the beginning of the XIth century. The first facts of noble women owning land are known in Sweden only in the end of the XIIth century¹⁴. In Russia women got the right to own land and to dispose of it approximately at the same time¹⁵. That means that Ingigerd could not take in her possession a large territory as tilgjof, neither could she dispose of it and transfer it to her distant relative. Retelling the episode of Russian-Swedish relations of the beginning of the XIth century Snorri modernizes his information about early history and describes the events on the basis of practice that existed in Norway in his time.

What was said above allows us to conclude that the information given by Snorri Sturluson in the "Saga of Olaf the Saint" about the transition of Aldeigjuborg by the Russian Prince Yaroslav the Wise to his bride, the Swedish Princess Ingigerd as tilgjof is not exact. It contradicts the data available on the property and legal status of women in both Swedish and Russian societies on the eve of the XIth century. Our conclusion is indirectly supported by the fact that up to the present moment Soviet scholars didn't find any archaeological evidence about Scandinavians in Aldeigjuborg in the first half of the XIth century, though they showed the presence of the Scandinavian troops here since the end of the VIIIth century.

The method of relying on the common knowledge and modernization of past events, one may think, is typical not only of Snorri Sturluson, but also of other mediaeval authors. That is quite natural that authors of the XIIIth century describe the events of early history in the light of laws and customs formulated and effective at the time of composition of their works. Norms that were characteristic of later periods are subconsciously shifted by them to earlier relations, to make the narratives to be easily understood by the audience.

-
1. Мельникова Е.А., Глазырина Г.В., Джаксон Т.Н. Древнескандинавские письменные источники по истории Европейского региона СССР // Вопросы истории. М., 1985. № 10. С. 36-53.
 2. Háralds saga Sigurðarsonar // 'Íslenzk Fornrit. B. XXVIII. Reykjavík, 1945.
 3. Gulatingslov // Norges gamle Love indtill 1387. B. 1. Christiania, 1846.
 4. Hemings þáttur 'Aslakssonar // Flateyjarbók. B. IV. Akranes, 1945.
 5. Glazyrina G.V. Some Aspects of Woman's Property in Mediaeval Scandinavia // La donna nell'economia. Secoli XIII-XVIII. Prato, 1989.
 6. Islandske annaler indtill 1578. Utg. G.Storm. Christiania, 1888. S. 106.

7. Óláfs saga helga // 'Islensk Fornrit. 9. XXIX. Reykjavik, 1945.
8. Frostatingslov // Norges gamle Love, B. I.
9. Eymundar Saga // Flateyjarbók. Akranes, 1944. B. 2. 3. 217.
10. Лебедев Г.С. Эпоха викингов в Северной Европе. Л., 1985. С. 215.
11. Глазырина Г.В., Джаксон Т.Н. Из истории Старой Ладogi /на материалах скандинавских саг/ // Древнейшие государства на территории СССР. Материалы и исследования. 1985 г. М., 1986. С. 108-115; Кирпичников А.Н. Ладога и Ладожская земля VIII-XIII вв. // Историко-археологическое изучение Древней Руси. Л., 1988. С. 55-60.
12. Толочко П.П. Древнерусский феодальный город. Киев, 1989. С. 57-58.
13. Sawyer B. Property and Inheritance in Viking Scandinavia: the Runic Evidence. Alingsås, 1988.
14. Diplomatarium Suecanum. Vol. 1. Stockholm, 1829. N 51.
15. Пушкарева Н.Л. Женщины Древней Руси. М., 1989. С.104-139.