

THE NORTH OF EASTERN EUROPE  
IN THE ETHNOGEOGRAPHICAL NOMENCLATURE OF EARLY NORDIC TEXTS

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In the due course of the two latest centuries, Russian-Scandinavian relations of the Early Middle Ages have been thoroughly studied. Scandinavian activity in Eastern Europe was simultaneous with the processes of formation of early states in this region. The degree of Scandinavian participation in these processes is still open to discussion.

The fact that the number of written sources practically can no longer be enlarged, puts archaeology to the fore in the study of early history, since every three decades excavations redouble the quantity of the existing data. Consequently, the so-called "Varangian question becomes more and more an archaeological question"<sup>1</sup>. Nobody can deny nowadays Scandinavian presence in Eastern Europe as early as the late 8th and early 9th centuries. Systematic analysis of Scandinavian artifacts from cemeteries and settlements east of the Baltics makes it possible to solve many serious problems, such as the periodization of Russian-Scandinavian relations in the 9th - 11th centuries.

However, the improvement of methods that can be applied to the analysis of written sources helps to reveal some new information. It is due to the complex analysis of written and archaeological materials, as well as of the data supplied by auxiliary historical disciplines, that scholars understood the place and the role of the Vikings in the social and economic processes in Eastern Europe at the end of the first and the beginning of the second millennium.

Toponymical data are among the most important in the evaluation of the character of inter-ethnic relations. The present

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<sup>1</sup>Artsikhovskiy A. Archaeological Data on the Varangian Question, *VI International Congress of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences. Reports and Communications by Archaeologists of the USSR*. Moscow. 1962, p. 9.

paper deals with the East-European toponyms of Old Icelandic literature.

Scaldic poetry, runic inscriptions, sagas and geographical treatises preserved a large amount of ethnic names and different place-names of Eastern Baltic, Old Rus' and European North.

Historians using Old Scandinavian sources meet with certain difficulties that lie in specific features of their genre, moreover there is always a problem of a chronological gap, sometimes five centuries long, between an event and the time of its fixation. Runic inscriptions can be dated mostly from the late 10th - 11th centuries; scaldic poetry composed in the 9th - 12th centuries is preserved mostly within the sagas that were written down in the 12th - 13th centuries, but are available now, as well as the geographical treatises of the 12th - 14th centuries, in much later manuscripts. However, the detailed analysis of runic inscriptions mentioning Eastern Europe carried out by Elena Melnikova shows that all the place-names of these inscriptions belong to the earliest strata of geographical and topographic knowledge the Scandinavians had of these territories<sup>2</sup>. The character of information preserved in *oldtidssagaer* and *fortidssagaer* (in Sigurdur Nordal's terms)<sup>3</sup> makes us believe that we deal with the reflection of some ancient reality. Finally, the study of geographical treatises proves that they give the picture of Eastern Europe of the 10th - early 12th centuries, preceding the Mongol invasion of Rus', the formation of the Lithuanian state, the conquest of the East-Baltic lands by the Teutonic Order<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>Мельникова Е.А. Этнонимика севера европейской части СССР по древнескандинавской письменности и "Повести временных лет", *Северная Русь и ее соседи в эпоху раннего средневековья* Л., 1982, с. 124.

<sup>3</sup>Nordal S. *Sagalitteraturen, Nordisk kultur. B. 8. Litteraturshistorie. B. Norge og Island.* Stockholm, 1953.

<sup>4</sup>Мельникова Е.А. Древняя Русь в исландских географических сочинениях, *Древнейшие государства на территории СССР. Материалы и исследования* (далее - ДГ), 1975 год, М., 1976, с. 156.

Thus, it is evident that the ethnogeographical nomenclature of the Old Icelandic sources is rather archaic. It would be most reasonable to assume that it was being formed simultaneously with the Scandinavian infiltration into Eastern Europe, but there is no chance to elicit the exact date. Still, there is a reliable chronological boundary, a *terminus ante quem*, for finding out the time when the Scandinavians had already acquired their knowledge of Rus' geography. This is, as the Soviet archaeologist Gleb Lebedev points out, the year 839 of the *Annales Berthiniani* that give the first evidence of the Slavonic-Scandinavian relations as already existing<sup>5</sup>.

The general analysis of the Old Icelandic toponymy of Eastern Europe brings us to the conclusion that each source (or a group of sources) has its own toponymic nomenclature. It should be stressed that the chronology of written fixation of place-names reflects the sequence of their emergence in the language of the early Scandinavians. However, this is not a one-to-one correspondence. It just shows the general line of the development of Scandinavian place-names of Eastern Europe. And only the comparison of such data with some datable material can establish the chronology of this development<sup>6</sup>.

From this point of view, it is interesting to look at the place-names with the root *aust-* (*austr*, *Austrvegr/Austrvegir*, *Austrlond*, *Austrriki*) in the light of those data (mostly archaeological) that give concrete information on the time and character of Scandinavian penetration into Eastern Europe and their expansion along "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>Лебедев Г.С. *Эпоха викингов в Северной Европе*. Историко-археологические очерки. М., 1985, с. 190.

<sup>6</sup>*Древнерусские города в древнескандинавской письменности. Тексты, перевод, комментарий.* Сост. Г.В.Глазырина и Т.Н.Джаксон. М., 1987.

<sup>7</sup>Lebedev G.S. On the Early Date of the Way "from the Varangians to the Greeks", *Fenno-ugri et slavi*.1978. Helsinki, 1980, p. 90-101.

First of all, there is a special geographical term *austr* used to denote the East-European territories beyond the Baltics. It appears in this sense in runic inscriptions, the earliest of which is dated from the 10th century<sup>8</sup>, and in the scaldic poems of the 10th - 11th centuries<sup>9</sup>. About 25 runic inscriptions are commemorating men who died *austr*. On the contrary, scaldic strophes with this term, but without a definition, are extremely rare. In scaldic poetry we often meet this term with an indirect object defining the area more exactly: for instance, *austr í Gørdum*. And in runic inscriptions we meet sometimes the same set expression, as well as *austr í Grikkjum*.

The earliest composite with the root *aust-* is the word *Austrvegir* (in the plural) used by Þjóðólfr of Hvin in his *Ynglingatal* (second half of the 9th century). The singular form of this place-name (*Austrvegr*) is used in five runic inscriptions, of which only one has a specification which is read by runologists as "far in Langabardaland".

Glúmr Geirason in his *Gráfeldardrápa* (1975) employs not only the term *austr* while speaking about "bjarmian folk", but also the composite *Austrlǫnd*. In this case, the place-names are likely to denote some northern territories of Eastern Europe.

Thus, the sources of the 9th - 11th centuries (i.e. scaldic poems and runic inscriptions) reflect the initial stage of the development of Norse toponymy with the root *aust-*, when the meaning of place-names was extremely wide and they could denote any territories to the east of the Baltic Sea (from the Eastern Baltic to Byzantium). This meaning could stem only from the first visits of the Scandinavians to Eastern Europe, and, as archaeological and numismatic data show, the earliest period of

<sup>8</sup>Мельникова Е.А. *Скандинавские рунические надписи. Тексты. перевод, комментарий.* М., 1977, №№ 1, 2(?), 8, 9, 12, 13, 24, 26, 34, 37, 39, 41, 42, 46, 47, 48, 51, 59, 62, 63, 68, 70, 71, 73, 75, 78, 79, 83, 85, 90, 93, 95, 96, 97.

<sup>9</sup>See: Джексон Т.Н. Исландские королевские саги как источник по истории Древней Руси и ее соседей. X-XIII вв., *ДГ*, 1988-1989 годы. М., 1990 (гл. III, § II: "Скальдические стихи в королевских сагах").

first visits of the Scandinavians to Eastern Europe, and, as archaeological and numismatic data show, the earliest period of relations between Eastern Europe and Scandinavia can be dated from 750-ies to 860-ies<sup>10</sup>.

The early kings' sagas (*Ágrip af Noregs konunga sögum*, ca. 1190; Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ca. 1190; *Morkinskinna*, 1217-1222) preserve the toponymy with the root *aust-* on the next stage of its development: *austr* is no longer used as a geographical term, but only as a locative adverb; composites *Austrvegr* and *Austrlond*, as well as *Austrríki*, are used to denote the lands on "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks". Thus, we read in *Ágrip* that after the fall of Óláfr Haraldsson his step-brother Haraldr Sigurdarson "flýði... braut ýr landi ok í Austrvega ok svá til Miklagarðs"<sup>11</sup>, and some time later he sailed "heim ór Gardi (Miklagardi. - T.J.) um Austrveg"<sup>12</sup>. *Morkinskinna* describing Haraldr's trip from Miklagarðr says that "þaðan ferr hann um Avstrriki til Holmgarðs"<sup>13</sup>. It is evident that Byzantium no longer figures among the lands denoted by these place-names. On the contrary, as a rule, their only meaning is Rus'; Oddr in his saga calls Visivaldr "Austrvegs konungr"<sup>14</sup> (cp. in *Heimskringla*: "Visivaldr austan ór Gardaríki"<sup>15</sup>); it is said in *Ágrip* that Ingigerðr, the daughter of Óláfr senski, was married to "Jaritláfi Austrvegs konungi"<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Лебедев Г.С. *Эпоха викингов*, с. 260.

<sup>11</sup> *Ágrip af Noregs konunga sögum*, F.Jónsson. Halle, 1929 (=Alt-nordische Saga-Bibliothek 18), s. 33.

<sup>12</sup> *Ágrip*, s. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Morkinskinna*. Pergamentsbok fra første halvdel af det trettende aarhundrede. Indeholdende en af de ældste optegnelser af norske kongesagaer, C.R.Unger. Christiania, 1867.

<sup>14</sup> *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar av Oddr Snorrason munkr*, F.Jónsson. København, 1932, s. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla*, B.Adalbjarnarson gaf ut, 2. Reykjavík, 1945 (=Íslensk fornrit 27), bl. 436.

<sup>16</sup> *Ágrip*, s. 27.

(cp. in *Heimskringla*: "Jarizleifr konungr austan ör Hólmgarði"<sup>17</sup>); *Ágrip* also tells of the noble men from Norway, who sailed to Rus' to fetch the young King Magnus who was brought up there, how they "söttu í Austrvega til Jaritláfs konungs"<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, we can assert that on the second stage of their development, fixed in the early kings' sagas, the place-names with the root *aust-* reflect the existence of the Volkhov-Dnieper "route from the Varangians to the Greeks" and the role played by Rus' on this route. This means that the toponymy of the early kings' sagas was formed in the late 9th - 10th centuries, which coincides with the second and third periods of Russian-Scandinavian relations: the years 860-1016 in Lebedev's classification<sup>19</sup>.

The major compendia of 1220-1230 (*Fagrskinna*, ca. 1220 and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, ca. 1230)<sup>20</sup> consistently use the newly formed place-name *Gardaríki* (the secondary derivation from *Gardar*) to denote Rus'. And through this, the meaning of *Austrvegr* and its synonyms is narrowed, since they are used to denote only the East Baltic lands<sup>21</sup>. The development of toponymy with the root *aust-* on the third stage of its existence is thus related both to the historical situation when "the route from

<sup>17</sup> *Íslensk fornrit* 27, bl.147.

<sup>18</sup> *Ágrip*, s. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Лебедев Г.С. *Эпоха викингов*, с. 260.

<sup>20</sup> I must emphasize that though *Morkinskinna* can, for some formal reasons, be placed among the great compendia of 1220-1230, it can also be viewed as one of those original sagas "which seem to have been composed in a great burst of literary activity between 1190 and 1220" (Theodore M. Andersson, *Kings' Sagas (Konungasögur), Old Norse-Icelandic Literature. A critical guide*. Ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. (Islandica XLV). Ithaca and London, 1985, p. 213, 216-219). The specific character of *Morkinskinna* finds its reflection in toponymics.

<sup>21</sup> Джексон Т.Н. Древнескандинавская топонимия с корнем *aust-*, *Скандинавский сборник*. вып. XXXI. Таллин, 1988, с. 140-145.

the Varangians to the Greeks" lost its meaning and the Russian-Scandinavian relations received a new character (periods 4 and 5 in Lebedev's classification: the years 1016-1240)<sup>22</sup>, and to the "literary life" of the place-names.

The non-terminological character of the toponymy with the root *aust-* results in the fact that it cannot be used in geographical treatises of the 12th - 14th centuries<sup>23</sup>.

The analysis of the toponymy with the root *aust-* allows to establish the time of the formation of the geographical nomenclature of several groups of sources. Probably, a more detailed picture is available. Nevertheless, the study of the whole complex of place-names on each chronological level is likely to be of certain interest.

The first toponymic stratum, that has found its fixation in scaldic poetry and runic inscriptions, includes several hydronyms: the names of the Baltic Sea (*Austmarr*, *Eystrasalt*) with the Gulf of Finland (*Hólmshaf* ?), the White Sea or the Arctic Ocean (*Gandvík*), the two Dvinas - the Western (*Duna*) and the Northern (*Vína*). Here we also meet a number of ethnic names, or place-names derived from ethnonyms, on the territory from the Western to the Northern Dvina: *sæmgallir*, *Lifland*, *eistr*, *Eistland*, *Virland*, *Finnland*, *Tafeistaland*, *bjarmskar kindir*. The Baltic toponymy is related to the sea: these are the names of islands *Ruhnu* and *Saaremaa* (*Runö*; *Sýsla*, *Eysýsla*), of Cape *Kolkasrags* (*Domesnes*), as well as the expression *allar Sýslur* which was left by the scald undeciphered but now is read by scholars as the name for both *Eysýsla* and *Adalsýsla* (part of Estonia mentioned in the kings' sagas). The Rus' toponymy includes only two town names - that of *Ladoga* (*Aldeigja*) and *Novgorod* (*Hólmgarðr*) - and the name of Rus' (*Gardar*) that originated as a designation of a line of fortified settlements on the banks of the Volkhov, the initial section of "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks", namely - on the way from *Aldei-*

<sup>22</sup>Лебедев Г.С. *Эпоха викингов*, с. 260.

<sup>23</sup>Мельникова Е.А. *Древнескандинавские географические сочинения. Тексты, перевод, комментарий*. М., 1986, с. 196.

gja to Hólmgarðr<sup>24</sup>.

Thus, we see that the first toponymic stratum comprises the reflection of the Scandinavian acquaintance with the three "entrances" to the East-European Plain: via the Western Dvina; via the Gulf of Finland and Ladoga; via the Northern Dvina.

Ethnic and geographical nomenclature of the early kings' sagas is inherited by them from scaldic poetry and runic inscriptions. Gandvík, Vína, Bjarmar and Bjarmaland denote the European North; Rus' is called Gardar, though this name is being consistently replaced by the secondary derivation of the X-riki type - Gardaríki; the main town names of Rus' are Aldeigjuborg, a derivation from the scaldic Aldeigja, and Hólmgarðr, although the later kings' sagas mention two times each Kiev (Kænugarðr), Polotsk (Pallteskia) and Suzdal (Sudrdalaríki, Súrdalar), under the influence of another tradition that will be discussed below. In the Baltic area the early kings' sagas name Eysýsla and Adalsýsla (i.e. the scaldic allar sýslur), Eistland, eistr and finnar, while the large compendia *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* add Kúrland and Kirjálaland.

The geographical treatises of the 12th - 14th centuries contain larger information about Eastern Europe. Among the Baltic lands and peoples there are also (but Virland, kirjálir, Kirjálaland, Kúrland, Lifland, Tafeistaland and Eistland) re-falir, Samland and Ermland. These treatises know eight Old Russian towns: Murom (Móramar), Rostov (Rostofa), Suzdal' (Súrdalar), Novgorod (Hólmgarðr), Polotsk (Pallteskia), Smolensk (Smaleskia), Kiev (Kænugarðr) and Gnezdovo (Sýrnes Gadar)<sup>25</sup>, while Ladoga is no longer mentioned. Rus', apart from its main designation Gardaríki, has two "bookish" names: Svíþjóð hin mikla / Scythia and Kyfingaland. The number of East-European rivers increases as well: we find the Western Dvina (Dýna), the Dnieper (Nepr), the Neva (Nyia), the Volga or

<sup>24</sup>Джаксон Т.Н. О названии Руси Gardar, *Scando-Slavica*, t. 30, 1984, p. 133-143.

<sup>25</sup>As far as the last name is concerned see my paper: Джаксон Т.Н. Sýrnes и Gadar: Загадки древнескандинавской топонимии Древней Руси, *Scando-Slavica*, t. 32, 1986, p. 73-83.

the Volkhov (*Olkoga*) and the Kama (*Kuma*)<sup>26</sup>.

A number of East-European rivers is named in one of the *pulur* of the late 12th century. As Elena Gurevich proves in her study, these scaldic lists include a large number of synonyms that had never been used in scaldic poetry<sup>27</sup>. And indeed, all river names in this *pula*, with the exception of *Vína* (the Northern Dvina), are unknown to scalds (*Dun* - the Don, *Olga* - the Volga [?], *Nepr* - the Dnieper, *Dröfn* - a river near Polotsk) and belong to an ethnogeographical tradition differing from that of scaldic poetry, runic inscriptions and the early kings' sagas.

At the same time, it is quite evident that both *pulur* and geographical treatises, aiming at a detailed description of the surrounding world, stem from a common tradition other than the early one. The information included refers to a larger territory: to the west of the Western Dvina one can find *Kúrland*, *Samland* and *Ermland*; to the east of the Northern Dvina there is the *Kama (Kuma)*; to the south of Novgorod there appears the Dnieper (*Nepr*) with *Smolensk* and *Kiev (Smalenskia, Kænugardr)*. These sources mention the main river routes across *Gardaríki* and name the biggest towns that, according to the *Primary Chronicle*, were the most ancient ones.

The mythical-heroic sagas<sup>28</sup> that often develop the plots of the kings' sagas, have the same toponymic nomenclature, so that again there is *Ladoga (Aldeigja, Aldeigjuborg)* among the Russian towns. However, it is quite evident that they have much in common with the geographical treatises: thus, the Baltic lands

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<sup>26</sup>The last name is understood this way by Omelian Pritsak: *The Origin of Rus'*, vol. I, *Old Scandinavian Sources other than the Sagas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981, p. 549.

<sup>27</sup>Гуревич Е. А. Древнескандинавская поэтическая синонимика. Традиция и ее ученое осмысление в XII-XIII вв. Автореф. канд. дисс. М., 1984, с. 8.

<sup>28</sup>Their toponymy was studied by Galina Glazyrina: Глазырина Г. В. География Восточной Европы в сагах о древних временах. ДГ, 1986 год. М., 1989, с. 229-235.

are Ermland, Eistland, Kirjálaland, Kúrland, Refalaland, Virland and Vindland; Rus' is called Gardar and Gardaríki; the Russian towns are Hólmgarðr, Kænugarðr, Móramar, Rádstofa, Pallteskia, Smálenskia, Súrðalar. Still, this source preserves some additional toponymic data, that have to be explained: specifically, the latinized names of Rus' (Russia, Russialand), Novgorod (Nógardr) and Kiev (Kio), as well as the names of the two other towns - Álaborg and Danparstadir.

On the basis of these facts one may speak of the two different ethnogeographical traditions reflecting a concrete chronological sequence of Scandinavian penetration into Eastern Europe. The problem has to be investigated more thoroughly and in several directions: first, it is not enough to study the North of Eastern Europe only; second, the latin and local "bookish" influences should be taken into account; third, the mythical-heroic sagas should be researched in more detail. Nevertheless, one can draw only one general conclusion that the formation of the two different Norse ethnogeographical traditions (those of scaldic poetry, runic inscriptions and the early sagas on the one hand and of geographical treatises, *pulur* and the late sagas on the other) represent the result of the succession in which the Scandinavians moved along "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks".

To cap it all, I would like to give only one example. The fact that we meet the Norse name of Ladoga (Aldeigja) in scaldic poetry, the name of Novgorod (Hólmgarðr) in runic inscriptions and the early kings' sagas, and the name of Kiev (Kænugarðr) - only in the later sagas and geographical treatises answers to the already discussed succession of the Scandinavian expansion along "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks". And here lies the answer to the question why Hólmgarðr, and not Kænugarðr, is known to be the main town of Gardaríki (Rus'). It is quite evident that Hólmgarðr, that was frequented by the Scandinavians somewhat earlier than Kænugarðr, must have found its fixation in the tradition, earliest between the two above mentioned.