

RUSSIAN-NORWEGIAN RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 13TH CENTURY

AS DEPICTED BY *HÁKONAR SAGA GAMLA HÁKONARSONAR*

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Unique information on negotiations between the Russian Prince Alexander Nevskij (1220-1263) and the Norwegian King Hákon Hákonarson (1204-1263) is preserved in the Icelandic *Hákonar saga gamla Hákonarsonar*. Although this is a paradoxical situation it can be easily explained. One of the most traditional genres of Icelandic sagas is the so called *Kings' sagas*, or *Sagas of Norwegian Kings*, dedicated to the history of Norway, the native country of Icelanders. Some of the *Kings' sagas* narrate about legendary rulers, others about the heroes of the "Saga age", and others about the times close to the period of their written fixation. The latter, the so called contemporary sagas (*samtidssagaer*, in Sigurdur Nordal's terminology¹), although compiled according to the laws of saga genre, are based on quite a different source material.

Hákonar saga gamla Hákonarsonar, describing the historical events from 1204 to 1263, was commissioned by Hákon's son and successor, Magnús lagabætir, and was written by Sturla Þórdarson in 1264-1265. It was based on eyewitness reports and on a wealth of written historical sources and documentary material in the royal chancery. Scholars are prone to treat this saga as "an important historical document"².

¹Sigurdur Nordal, "Sagalitteraturen", in *Nordisk kultur. B. VIII: Litteraturhistorie. B. Norge og Island*. (Stockholm, 1953).

²Paul Schach, "Hákonar saga gamla Hákonarsonar", in *Medieval*

Since the Kings' saga authors depicted Norwegian history in the European context, sagas preserved certain data on the Baltic lands, Old Russia and the Russian North. This is also true of *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. Here follows a passage from this saga:

"Þenna vetr, er Hákon konungr sat í Þrándheimi, kómu austan ór Gardaríki sendimenn Alexandri konungs af Hólmgarði. Hét sá Mikjáll ok var riddari, er fyrir þeim var. Kærðu þeir um þá hluti, er við áttust sýslumenn þeirra Hákonar konungs norðr á Mörkinni ok Austr-Kirjálar, þeir sem skattgildir váru undir Hólmgardakonungr, því at þeir áttust jafnan við ófrid í ránum ok manndrápum. Varu þar stefnur at áttar ok ráð fyrir gört, hversu þat skyidi niðr setja. Þat höfðu þeir ok at erendum, at þeir vildu sjá frú Kristínu, dóttur Hákonar konungs, því at Hólmgardskonungr hafði svá boðit þeim, at þeir skyldu leita eftir við Hákon konung, ef hann vildi gifta frúna syni Alexandri konungs. Hákon konungr gerði þat ráð, at hann sendi menn ór Þrándheimi um várit ok fóru austr til Hólmgarðs með sendimönnum Alexandri konungs. Var fyrir þeirri ferð Viglæikr prestsson ok Borgarr. Fóru þeir til Björgynjar ok svá hit eystra. Kómu þeir um sumarit í Hólmgard, ok tók konungr vel við þeim, ok settu þeir þá frid milli sín ok skattlanda sinna, svá at hvárigir skyldu öðrum ófrid gera, Kirjálar né Finnar, ok

Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York & London 1993), p. 260; ср.: Е. А. Рыдзевская, "Сведения по истории Руси XIII в. в саге о короле Хаконе", в *Исторические связи Скандинавии и России. IX-XX вв.* (Ленинград 1970), с. 324; И. П. Шаскольский, "Посольство Александра Невского в Норвегию", в *Вопросы истории* 1945: 1, с. 112-116.

hélzt sú sætt ekki lengi. Í þann tíma var ófridr mikill í Hólmgarði. Gengu Tattarar á ríki Hólmgarðskonungs, ok fyrir þær sakir var ekki lítit á bönordit, þat er Hólmgarðskonungr hafði flytja látit. Ok er þeir höfðu lokit erendum sínum, fóru þeir austan með sæmiligum gjöfum, er Hólmgarðskonungr sendi Hákonu konungi. Komu þeir austan um vetrinn ok fundu konung í Vikinni.³

Thus, the saga tells us about the exchange of messengers between Russian and Norwegian rulers which is dated by scholars to 1251/1252. The negotiations were focused on the attacks of Norwegian tax-collectors in Finnmark on the Karelians that were already controlled by the Old Russian state. This information is parallel to that of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* on Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson's raids from Finnmark, where he was responsible for collecting tribute, on Karelian settlements to the south⁴. It is evident that the Norwegian attacks on Karelians, documentary fixed by *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* in the 1260s, started at least half a century earlier to be reflected in *Egils saga* recorded somewhere between

³"Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar", in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Akranes, 1945), b. III, bl. 537. English translation which is quoted further in my text is by Sir G. W. Dasent in *Icelandic Sagas, and Other Historical Documents Relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen on the British Isles* (London 1894), vol. IV, p. 277-278

⁴"Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar", ed. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk fornrit 2* (Reykjavík 1933), k. 14, 17.

1200 and 1230⁵. As *Hákonar saga* reads, by the middle of the 13th century these attacks were mutual since Karelians also organized military raids on Finns and Norwegian officials to rob them of the tributes they managed to collect in Finnmark. The participation of the Old Russian state in these conflicts was the natural result of the fact that the Norwegian officials collected tributes not only from the Saami population of Finnmark, but also from those Karelians "who paid tribute to king of Novgorod", so that the fiscal interests of Novgorod were infringed upon⁶.

The Russian messengers "had also this errand, to see the lady Christine, king Hacon's daughter; for the king of Novgorod had bidden them that they should try to find out from the king if he would wed the lady to the son of king Alexander". The match-making, however, had no continuation.

Some scholars consider this match-making to be of minor importance and estimate it as a means of achieving peaceful relations between the two states⁷. I would rather agree with the Russian scholar Vladimir Pashuto who sees here not only an intention of the Russian diplomacy to strengthen border relations with Norway but also an attempt of Alexander Nevskij to establish a Russian-Norwegian union as opposed to the Swedish-Norwegian one, commemorated by the conclusion at Sulberg in 1250 of an agreement on everlasting peace between Sweden and Norway and by the wedding in

⁵ Kurt Schier, "Sagaliteratur" (Stuttgart, 1970), S. 50-51.

⁶ See: И. П. Шаскольский, "Договоры Новгорода с Норвегией", в *Исторические записки* (Москва, 1945), т. 14, с. 58-60.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

1251 of Ríkisa, the daughter of Earl Birger, and Hákon, the son of Hákon the Old⁸. In fact, if we remember about the active foreign policy of Prince Alexander Nevskij, then in the match-making described by the saga we can see one of the steps of the prince towards the fortification (through dynastic marriages, among other ways) of Russian frontiers with the realms of Sweden, Denmark and Norway, which could provide the Novgorodian Russia's security in the north-east.

The reasons why Vasiliij, the son of Alexander Nevskij, and Kristína, the daughter of Hákon Hákonarson, were never married are worth being discussed. One of them is formulated by the saga ("the Tatars were attacking the realm of the king of Novgorod. And for that sake there was no looking for the wooing which the king of Novgorod had made them ask for") and is supported by the majority of scholars. The other motive is suggested by those who consider this match-making to be primarily a diplomatic device: "When it turned out that the necessary agreement could be achieved and could be relatively stable even without the dynastic marriage Alexander abandoned this complicated and expensive undertaking on some plausible excuse"⁹. One more reason was put forward by the 18th century Swedish historian O. Dalin who argued, on the basis of his understanding of the logic of international relations, that the Russian messengers received a refusal from the Norwegian king¹⁰.

Thus, there are three explanations of the fact that this marriage

⁸В.Т. Пашуто, "Александр Невский" (Москва 1974).

⁹И.П. Шаскольский, "Договоры Новгорода с Норвегией", с. 115, прим. 1.

¹⁰O.Dalin, "Svea rikets historia" (Stockholm 1747), del. 1.

has never taken place: 1) Alexander had no time and resources because of the Tatar attack (which is close to what the saga says), 2) Alexander put aside his initial plan as the peace treaty has already been signed (which can be supposed on the basis of the saga text), 3) Hákon rejected this proposal since he did not want to give his daughter to the tributary of the Tatars (which has nothing to do with the narrative). I would like, on my part, to suggest one more explanation proceeding from chronological calculations.

According to the saga, the Russian messengers came to Trondheim in winter. This means that they went by land. (Another indication to this fact is the word *riddari*, applied to the head of the Russian messengers, which originally meant a *rider, horseman*, since the title *riddari* was introduced in Norway only in 1277¹¹, that is later than *Hákonar saga* was written.) When the spring came the Russian and the Norwegian messengers "fared to Bergen and so by the east way". This means that they went by sea round the Scandinavian Peninsula and further on via the Baltic Sea. As it is pointed out in *Konungs Skuggsiá* men could "venture out upon almost any sea except the largest as early as the beginning of April"¹². According to the data published by Joachim Herrmann (on the basis of D. Ellmers' calculations), such a trip from Trondheim to Novgorod, about 4 thousand kilometres long, could take, because of the navigational

¹¹Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, "An Icelandic-English Dictionary" (Oxford 1957), p. 497.

¹²"Konungs skuggsiá", ed. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, *Norrøne tekster 1* (Oslo 1983), s. 37. English translation by Laurence Marcellus Larson: "The King's Mirror" (New York 1917), p. 161.

peculiarities of the 13th century, up to three months¹³. The saga tells that in summer the messengers came to Novgorod (which corresponds to the calculations) "and the king received them well".

But could Alexander receive the messengers in the early summer of 1252? As it has been proved by the Russian historian Sergej Solovjev¹⁴ and is accepted by the majority of scholars¹⁵, Alexander himself provoked the Tatar attack on his brother Andrey: at the beginning of 1252 Alexander went to the Tatar state, Orda, with a complaint about his brother and, as a result, even before Alexander could return home, the Tatar raid on Russia took place: "On the eve of Boris' day the godless Tatars were in the environs of Vladimir... Next morning, on Boris' day, the Great Prince Andrej met them with his troops..."¹⁶. Alexander came back to Russia with the title of the great prince only after the flight of Prince Andrej, i.e. after the Boris' day which is August 6. I think that the words of the saga

¹³ Joachim Herrmann, "Slawen und Wikinger in der Frühgeschichte der Ostseevölker", in *Wikinger und Slawen* (Berlin 1982), S. 122-123.

¹⁴С. М. Соловьев, "История России с древнейших времен", т. 3, гл. 3 и примеч. 299 к т. 3, в *С.М.Соловьев, Сочинения* (Москва 1988), кн. II, с. 152, 324.

¹⁵See for instance: А. В. Экземплярский, "Великие и удельные князья Северной Руси в татарский период, с 1238 по 1505 г." (Санкт-Петербург 1889), т. I, с. 27, 35; В. Л. Янин, "Новгородские посадники" (Москва 1962), с. 143; В. Т. Пашуто, "Александр Невский", с. 113.

¹⁶My translation from: Полное собрание русских летописей (Москва 1949), т. XXV, с. 141.

"and the king received them well" are nothing but a set expression which answers to a literary topos widely spread in the sagas¹⁷. It is very important to point out that in the short version of this saga, in the manuscript AM 45, fol., "the king" (i.e. Prince Alexander) is not mentioned in this context: it is said there that the Norwegian messengers "were well received" when they came to Russia, while there is not a word about the "worthy gifts" which were sent by one king to another¹⁸. It is quite evident that the messengers came to Russia before the return of Prince Alexander and, having solved the territorial problems, they could not continue the negotiations on the match-making in the absence of the prince and the father of the bridegroom, who had initiated the whole affair. It is also very likely that with the first news about the Tatar attack the Norwegian messengers rushed home without waiting for Alexander to come back.

The question why Alexander did not renew his attempts at getting his son married to the Norwegian princess (who was sent to marry in Spain - "gípt út j Spán" - only in 1257¹⁹) is still to be answered. Apparently, the reason for the failure of the proposed Russian-Norwegian dynastic union was the revision by Alexander Nevskij of his policy towards the West which took place in the 1250s.

¹⁷See examples in my paper "Скандинавский конунг на Руси (о методике анализа сведений исландских королевских саг), в *Восточная Европа в древности и средневековье* (Москва 1978), с. 284-285.

¹⁸"Fornmanna sögur eptir gömlum handritum" (Kaupmannahöfn 1835), b. X, s. 44.

¹⁹"Islandske Annaler indtil 1578", ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania 1888), s. 133 (Annales regii), 192 (Skálholts-Annaler).