

# Curonia in the 'Eastern Policy' of Viking Age Scandinavia

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Written sources and archaeological data of the Baltic region, among other things, offer some information, enabling to a certain degree to determine the place of Curonia in the Scandinavian 'eastern policy'. Although there is no sufficient proof to presume the existence of Viking colonies in the Eastern Baltic, nevertheless the Scandinavian activity in this area was intense, multiple and widespread. This paper aims at determining (1) the principal Scandinavian ambitions in the Eastern Baltic in general and in Curonia in particular, (2) the differences between the Danish and Swedish initiatives in the East and (3) a possibility of the division of the 'spheres of influence' in the Eastern Baltic among the early Scandinavian state formations.

The political aspirations of the Scandinavians are most clearly reflected in the Chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus. It was just for this over-exaggerated politicization of events that *Gesta Danorum* was sometimes treated as a work not at all related to the period it was meant to describe (Weibull 1915:30 ff). Nevertheless it is the political orientation of Saxo that reveals the ambitions of the Scandinavians in Curonia and in the entire Baltic lands. Quite often the Curonians are referred to as acting together with the Estonians, Semigallians or 'Eastern tribes'. These frequent references to the Curonians can hardly be accidental. Already Hilda Ellis-Davidson (1976:19) noted that for Saxo Curonia and the Daugava were inseparable sections of 'the road from the Varangians to the Greeks'.

Describing an unsuccessful Hading's exhibition against the Curonians, ruled by Loker, Saxo lumps together the campaigns to Curonia and to Hellespont (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:24):

Qui cum a Lokero captus omnem praedictionis eventum certissimis rerum experimentis circa se peractum sensisset, Haudrvanum, Hellesponti regem, apud Dunam urbem invictis murorum praesidiis vallatum moenibusque, non acie resistentem bello pertenant.

Curonia, Hellespont and its majestic city on the banks of the Duna (Daugava) are placed next to each other.

This kind of 'geography' could have been conditioned by Saxo's treatment of the Eastern Baltic territories as a section of the route to the East. This supposition is corroborated by the description of Canute's 'Eastern War,' in which the devastation of the Curonians is presented as a constituent part of that war (*Saxonis*. 1931, 1:39). Frothi's campaign against the Curonian king Dorno was unsuccessful.

cessful. After the abortive siege the Danes, according to Saxo, made their way to 'Imperium Orientalis,' where they pillaged Polotsk and Rus (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:37-38). It is quite probable that that time the Curonians were not the main target of Frothi's campaign. The conquest of the Curonians, Sambians and of 'many other Eastern tribes' is assigned to Ragnar Lotbrok (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:231). In Saxo's words, Starkater also had to clash with a joint army of Curonians, Sambians, Semigallians and all the other Eastern peoples (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:115). It is obvious that Saxo Grammaticus did not identify the Curonians, Sambians, Semigallians or Estonians with the 'Eastern tribes,' despite their frequent mentioning in one and the same group. In Saxo's Chronicle those Baltic tribes existed in the common context of Eastern policy. Runic inscriptions also offer some evidence that Eastern Baltic lands were perceived as a component part of that policy.

In the runic enumerations of the eastern Viking routes Byzantium is usually referred to as the ultimate destination, mentioned as many as 23 times (Melnikova 1977:32); sometimes certain locations in Russia are indicated, and sometimes merely the East is mentioned. The Balts and Baltic place-names, however, are found in the runic records only when the Viking travellers failed for certain reasons (mostly meeting their death) to arrive at their destination. Livonia and Curonia were mentioned namely in the cases when the travellers perished there. Sambia seems not to have been recorded in the runic inscriptions. The point is that the south-eastern shores of the Baltic Sea were the area where the Danes were most active. The Swedes mostly concentrated their efforts in the Estonian, Curonian, Livonian and Semigallian lands, trying to gain a foothold along the eastern and north-eastern routes, leading to the Orient. Thus quite naturally Sambia did not attract any greater attention of the Swedes.

Of all the Balts the Semigallians are mentioned most often in the runic inscriptions, while in the forms of writing other than the runes they are referred to much less frequently. In this respect only the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, writing about the Semigallians at great length and in detail, is an exception. The early sources pay particular attention to political events, *Gesta Danorum* being a most typical specimen; Eastern Baltic lands are mentioned only in relation to baptism or military conflicts in so far as they are connected with the policy of the chronicler's fatherland. As the problem of the route to the East became a constituent part of the policy of the early Scandinavian state formations, the chronicles recorded everything inherently associated with that policy and in particular with the territories and the Baltic tribes along that route. Thus the Semigallians remained in the shadow, as the trade with Semigallia did not seem to present any greater interest to the Norsemen. The runic inscriptions, on the other hand, recorded everything that escaped the attention of the chroniclers. Frequent journeys of the traders to Semigallia were too insignificant to be recorded in the chronicles. Thus the evidence of written sources, to be more precise its scantiness, does not only contradict the information contained in the runic inscriptions, in a kind it indicates more exactly the place of the Baltic tribes in the context of the foreign policy of the early Scandinavian state formations and the presence of the representatives of certain layers of Scandinavian society in the Eastern Baltic lands.

The runic inscriptions, containing some information about the Balts, are clustered mainly in Central Sweden – in Södermanland and Uppland. A sort of

parallel spread of the Scandinavian archaeological material in North-Western Russia is to be noted. In a vast territory between the lakes Peipsi (Chudskoe) and Ladoga in the North-West, the river Oka in the North-East and as far as Kiev in the South Thor's hammer rings are found. These objects were brought to the territory of present-day Russia and Ukraine from Scandinavia, more precisely - from Sweden in the Viking Age. In their land of origin they are spread in an exactly defined territory, namely, in Eastern Uppland, Södermanland and Åland (Jansson 1987:781). In Sweden Thor's hammer rings are dated back to the end of the Vendel period<sup>1</sup>, the beginning and the middle of the Viking Age (Jansson 1987:781). The artefacts, found in Russia, are of a somewhat later date - the middle and the end of the Viking Age (Jansson 1987:781). The fragments of the necklaces, discovered in the settlement of Staraya Ladoga, are very old - dating back to the 8th and the beginning of the 9th centuries (Novikova 1992:86). The fragment, found at the hill-fort of Novgorod, dates from the end of the 9th century (Novikova 1992:86). These two chronological exceptions do not change the general situation, i.e., the fact that all the artefacts of this sort, found in Russia, are of later origin than their Swedish counterparts.

The same could be said about the distribution and dating of one more type of ritual artefacts - the so-called 'clay paws'. The overwhelming majority of these objects were found in Åland and in Södermanland. Analogous 'clay paws' were recovered in North-Western Russia (Mikhailovskoe, Petrovskoe, Bolshoe Timiriazovo, etc.) as well (see Callmer 1994: fig 1, fig 18). Again, the objects of Sweden date back to the late Vendel period, those found in Russia - are from the middle of the Viking Age (Jansson 1987:781). Thus, both the Thor's hammer rings and the 'clay paws' were taken to Russia from Uppland, Södermanland and Åland. The runic inscriptions, dealing with the Eastern Baltic lands, are also from the same regions, except Åland. However, neither the 'clay paws', nor Thor's hammer rings are found in the Baltic territories. Taking into account their ritualistic nature it must be acknowledged that they could not have been the objects of trade or barter. Correspondingly, neither Livonian nor Semigallian traders could acquire them. Bartering a clay 'paw' would be illogical, since it had no practical value. These rite objects could reach only those regions where their owners stayed for longer periods of time or settled permanently. Smaller or larger groups of people from Södermanland or Uppland established their settlements along the 'road from the Varangians to the Greeks'. No doubt, they brought with them their material culture as well as their spiritual world and the objects of their rite. In the course of long centuries the latter could have been taken over by the local inhabitants - this supposition is attested by the archaeological materials of North-Eastern Russia. The geographical distribution of these artefacts is indicative in several ways. First of all, it shows that the main stream of Scandinavian traders

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<sup>1</sup> The chronology of the Vendel periods: (1) the early period - the second half of the 6th century - the 7th century; (2) the middle period - the end of the 7th century - the beginning of the 8th century; (3) the late period - the middle of the 8th century - the late 8th century. The opinions slightly differ as to the exact dating of the periods. Previously the year 500 was considered the beginning of the period (Arwidson 1942); now the years 560-570 are taken as the generally accepted beginning of the period (Arrehnius 1983:64).

and possibly settlers flowed to the East from Central Sweden, i.e., Uppland and Södermanland. It also confirms the opinion that the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea was only an intermediate stage in the Scandinavian way to the Russian lands and still further to the East. At the same time it raises more doubts concerning the existence of Swedish colonies in the Eastern Baltic territories. The presence of rite objects would testify to the contemporary existence of Scandinavian settlements. However the absence of such artefacts in the Baltic cultural fields can only speak of temporary stays on the way to the East or just visits for seasonal trade.

The Scandinavian route to the East went past the North-Eastern Baltic lands. That is corroborated by the archaeological material of present-day Latvia, in particular by the distribution of glass beads in the Baltic territories between the 9th and the 12th centuries. In Lithuania they are found mostly along the seashore and especially in the North-West of the region, where a quarter of all the beads of the present-day Lithuania have been found (Kuncienė 1981:84)<sup>2</sup>. The situation is similar in the present-day Latvian territory. In Latvia, however, their concentration is extremely dense along the banks of the river Daugava, i.e., in the area of the transit trade route to the East in the period between the 9th and 12th centuries. Besides, the total number of the beads, found in Latvia, is much bigger than in Lithuania (Kuncienė 1981a:84). On the basis of the research data, available at present, it is difficult to determine the origin of the beads. One thing is certain: the majority of these ornaments are not of local make. They were imported both from the East and the West (Kuncienė 1981a:86-87). The classification of the beads in respect to the issue under investigation is irrelevant. However, it is worth noting that these mostly imported beads were rather more frequently found in the northern Curonian territories and along the banks of the Daugava. That can be taken as an indication that the Scandinavian trade route to the East was the Gulf of Riga and the Daugava, leading in the direction of the Slav lands. It is very probable that the etymology of *Kolkas rags* has something to do with this early trade route. According to one interpretation the name of this promontory could be attributed to an Old Livonian phrase, meaning 'dangerous, deep water' (Boiko 1990:67). The water being 'deep and dangerous' could be a reminder for the Viking Age traders, sailing in these places, too.

The treasures of the 9th to 12th centuries, found in the territory of Latvia, also speak about the Daugava as a segment of the Scandinavian trade route. A map, drawn by Vladislavs Urtans, very clearly indicates the density of treasure clusters in the basin of the Daugava (Urtans 1977:226). The quantitative analysis of these findings shows the intensification of the contacts between the Eastern Baltic peoples and their western neighbours from the early 11th century onwards (Jansson 1992:87). The number of the Latvian treasures definitely correlates with the 11th-century continental Sweden. At the very end of the 11th century these treasures disappeared both in Latvia and in continental Sweden

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<sup>2</sup> Additionally, mention must be made of 58 beads of different types, kept in the Museum of Antiquities, Stockholm, index no. 6565. They were acquired by Oscar Montelius in Lithuania in 1880. According to the catalogue of the Swedish archaeologist the beads are from the settlements of Jazdaičiai and Rūdaičiai.

(Jansson 1992:88). It is noteworthy that some treasures, found in Gotland, date back to the 12th century, although a part of them are interpreted not as results of trade contacts, but as symbolic relics of the former period (Burström 1993:33-37). All that can be accounted for by the above-mentioned changes in the region of the Baltic Sea. In Gotland the Germans became established as merchants, for whom the Eastern Baltic lands did not present any great interest. The political domination of Denmark and the 12th-century activity of German merchants destroyed the former quite intensive trade contacts between Central Sweden and Eastern Baltics. The disruption of the economic relations in the 12th century is also indicated by a marked decrease of silver and bronze objects in the findings of the southern Curonian territories (Žulkus 1987:214). The traders of Central Sweden and Baltic tribes, being only semi-professional and lacking a support of some stronger political force, were soon outrivalled by the Danes and Germans.

One of the most typical ornaments of the Scandinavian Vendel and Viking Age is the oval (tortoise) brooches. In that period they were widespread everywhere in the continental Western Europe and in the British Isles. A number of them were found in the Slav lands between the lake Ladoga, Murom and Kiev. In Latvia about 50 brooches of that type have been recovered, the overwhelming majority of them in the Lower Daugava and the rest – in Curonia (Jansson 1992:78). Local craftsmen also made such brooches according to Scandinavian models. In Lithuania these brooches are not found. True, it must be mentioned that the recovery of a pair of these brooches was recorded in Lithuania (?) in the first half of the 19th century. The Lithuanian archaeologist Eustachijus Tiškevičius (Tyszkiewicz) merely mentioned that they were from Samogitia (Tyszkiewicz 1842, tab. 11:34). The identical information is repeated in the catalogue of the Vilnius Museum of Antiquities, compiled by Fiodor Pokrovsky (Pokrovsky 1892, ill. IV:10-11). Regrettably, the brooches themselves have not been preserved, and their fate is unknown. On the basis of the extant 19th-century illustrations it can be said that they were made by local craftsmen. These ornaments seem to have been made according to the so-called Birka pattern (Paulsen 1933:52 ff.). Oval brooches of this type are not frequent. In Birka itself only seven of them were recovered in four burial places. Four more were found in Eastern Sweden and two in Elbląg (Poland) (Jansson 1985:43). In Sweden these brooches are dated back to the early and middle Viking Age (Jansson 1992:74). The Eastern Baltic imitations of these ornaments go back to the second half of the 11th century. The local production of ornaments according to Scandinavian patterns was greatly expanded namely in the 11th century. Thus, the brooches, found in Samogitia (?), should be treated as locally made ornaments rather than Scandinavian products.

Oval brooches were found in the Prussian lands, too. The dominating type here was different – P 51 according to Jan Petersen's classification (Petersen 1928, Abb. 51). In the main trading centre of Sambia – Kaup (Wiskiauten) – alone at least ten burial places contained the oval brooches of that type (Kulakov, Valuev 1992:100). The authors of the cited papers state that the P 51 type oval brooches were particularly characteristic of the South-West of the Scandinavian peninsula (Kulakov, Valuev 1992:100). However, one can hardly agree to this assertion. The P 51 type is the most common type of oval brooches in Scandinavia. Since this type was widespread throughout the whole of Scandinavia, it is difficult to indicate any particular territory from which these ornaments reached Kaup.

In respect to the spread of oval brooches, the present-day Lithuanian seashore – the southern Curonian territory – is a kind of unique exception in comparison to the neighbouring southern and northern territories. It is difficult to believe that under the contemporary circumstances these ornaments had not been objects of a quite intensive trade or barter. It is worth returning again to the evidence of runic inscriptions and other written records. Without going into details it suffices to recall that Adam of Bremen, Saxo Grammaticus and *Knytlingasaga* present the Curonians not as traders, but only as seafaring pirates or warriors. And to the knowledge of Henry of Livonia the Curonians and the Estonians were not traders, because they only sold out prisoners and booty, captured in wars (*MGH* 1874:269, 329). The Curonian piracy in coastal waters could have been a reason why individual Scandinavian traders avoided the journeys to the southern Curonian lands. That is all the more reasonable to assume if these traders were ordinary bonds of Uppland and Södermanland, without the political or military patronage of their Scandinavian rulers. On the contrary, the interests of the organized Scandinavian trade, supported by the state, were directed toward the East, the Slav lands and Byzantium rather than the Baltic territories.

The analysis of the available archaeological material leads to the conclusion that the Scandinavian trade with the eastern Baltic region should be localized in the south-eastern territories, around the Gulf of Riga and in the basin of the river Daugava. Though the archaeological material of the Southern Curonians is more plentiful than that of the other Baltic tribes in the territory of present-day Lithuania, however in comparison with the southern neighbours (Sambians) or the northern Curonians it is inferior to the latter. At present it would be difficult to assume that the commerce between southern Curonians and Scandinavians was flourishing. The contacts between them possibly were more extensive in terms of military clashes as is clearly evidenced by the tradition of written records. Further analysis of the archaeological material could confirm this supposition or bring forth different arguments. At present dealing with the relations between the Scandinavians and the Curonians one should only treat differently the southern and northern parts of the Curonian territory. Possibly only the northern Curonians could be said to have been more active in the commerce with the Scandinavians. As regards the southern Curonians, their contacts with the Scandinavians were military rather than commercial due to their geographical situation and peculiarities of their social development.

Runic inscriptions and archaeological data indicate the differences of the Scandinavian impact on particular East Baltic territories between the 9th and 12th centuries. One could even speak about certain 'spheres of influence' of individual Scandinavian countries in the Baltic territories. As was already mentioned, Adam of Bremen very clearly distinguished between the Curonians and the Sambians (*Adami* 1876:164; 165-166). Similar differences are also quite evident in the characteristics of these Baltic tribes in other written sources. It is noteworthy that not a single of them refers to the Sambians as pirates. The Curonians, on the other hand, are invariably associated with pillage and trade in written records, and no mention is made of any joint Curonian and Sambian undertakings. Saxo Grammaticus was the only writer to have mentioned once these two tribes together. That was a description of the peaceful reception (possibly expressing recognition) of Ragnar Lotbrok in Curonia and Sambia (*Saxonis*

1931, 1:257) and the enumeration of the lands, conquered by Canute IV, including the Curonians, Sambians and Estonians (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:319). However, the rest of the information, related to the Eastern Baltic lands, keeps the Sambians and the Curonians apart. Recounting the battle of Brávala Saxo speaks about the Curonians and the Estonians fighting on the side of the Swedes (*Saxonis* 1931; 1:217). The Estonians and Curonians are pirating together at the island of Öland (*Saxonis* 1931, 1:477-478). They are also known to Henry of Livonia for their raids on Denmark and Sweden (MGH 1874:246). Marauding Curonians (but not Sambians!) are familiar to Snorri Sturluson (*Heimskringla* 1919-1925, III:41). Written sources offer differing characteristics of the activity of the Curonians and the Sambians. The same tendency is also evident in the description of Scandinavian 'conquests' and 'subjections' of the Eastern Baltic territories. The credibility of these actions has already been dealt with, however the very tradition of the different treatment of the Curonians and the Sambians is significant. According to Saxo Grammaticus Estonia and Curonia were conquered by Olimar (*Saxonis* 1931, I:32). In the second half of the 7th century this conquest is attributed by the sources to Ivar Vidfadmi (*Hervarar saga* 1873:290-291). Snorri Sturluson considers that Finland, Karelia, Estonia and Curonia were subjugated by Erik (*Heimskringla* 1919-1925, II:143). Starkater also 'conquers' Estonians, Curonians and Semigallians (*Saxonis* 1931, I:227). According to the *Rhymed Chronicle of Sweden* Erik Segersel subjugated Estonia, Curonia and Finland as early as the end of the 10th century (SRS 1818, 1"255). Meanwhile, the geography of the Danish activity in the Eastern Baltic was quite different. The annals of Ría mention Danish domination in Prussia and Sambia in the early 10th century (MGH 1858:398). The campaign of Canute the Great at the beginning of the 11th century was also directed against (Western) Slavs and Sambians (*Saxonis* 1931, I:285). Svein Agon's information is similar: Canute the Great subjugates Slavia and Sambia (*SRD* 1772, I:54). Already describing the first expeditions of Canute IV to the Eastern Baltic lands Saxo Grammaticus distinguishes the Sambians and the Estonians (but not the Curonians!), having been harassed at the time when he was still a prince (*Saxonis* 1931, I:315). All these sources provide substantial evidence about the Norse tradition of written records, dividing the Viking Age Scandinavian conquests in the Eastern Baltic into the Danish and Swedish 'spheres of influence'. Thus, the Danes were more active in Sambia, Prussia and the Western Slav lands, while the Swedes operated in Livonia, Semigallia and Curonia.

Saxo Grammaticus indicates that in the first half of the 9th century Curonia belonged to the Danes (*Saxonis* 1931, I:73). The 'recognition' of Ragnar Lotbrok in Sambia and Curonia (*Saxonis* 1931, I:73) is to be dated not later than 844-845. Rimberto, however, considers that in the middle of the 9th century the Curonians were ruled by the Swedes (Rimberto 1884:60). Saxo's statement about the Danish rule in Curonia could have been conditioned by the Danish political interests. The difference in the information, presented by Rimberto and Saxo Grammaticus, is open to other interpretations as well. Rimberto, describing specific events, geographically associates them with the northern Curonian territory. It is namely Grobiņa and Apuolė – the northern Curonian territories – that are attributed to the Swedes in Rimberto's work. What concerns Sambia, the chronicler seems not to have known anything at all about it. On the other hand, Saxo Grammaticus, describing Ragnar Lotbrok's campaign into the Baltic lands and stressing

Sambia's dependence upon Denmark (that can be observed more than once in the work), somehow includes here the Curonians, or more precisely, their southern part. Thus it can be surmised that Rimberto asserts the dependence of northern Curonians on the Swedes in the 9th century, while Saxo Grammaticus at the same time speaks about the dependence of the Curonians (in this case – the southern ones) on the Danes. The existence of such a division into 'spheres of influence' is confirmed by the differences of the archaeological material of the Latvian and Lithuanian sea-shores. The boundary between the territories of these 'spheres of influence' could be determined by a specifically orientated archaeological research. Attention should also be paid to the wildernesses between separate Curonian lands, established by Vladas Žulkus on the basis of the mapping of archaeological findings (Žulkus 1991:18). In the analysis of the inter-tribal and inter-territorial wildernesses not only the sacralization of these localities, but also their politicization in respect to the Scandinavian impact, would be significant issues.

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## Kuršas Skandinavijos vikingų „Rytų politikoje“

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#### Santrauka

Politiniai skandinavų siekiai rytinėje Baltijos jūros pakrantėje ryškiausiai atsispindi Sakso Gramatiko kronikoje. Pastarosios duomenis papildo kitų rašytinių šaltinių žinios, skandinavų runų įrašai, archeologinė medžiaga. Nei rašytiniai šaltiniai, nei archeologinė medžiaga neleidžia teigti baltų gyventose teritorijose egzistavusias skandinavų kolonijas, tačiau aktyvi pastarųjų veikla rytiniame Pabaltyje akivaizdi. Daugiau nei kiti baltai su skandinavais susidūrė kuršiai, tačiau jų teritorijos nebuvo galutiniu aktyvios skandinavų vikingų veiklos tikslu. Šios teritorijos tebuvo tik tarpinė grandis kelyje į Rytus, viliojusius skandinavus nepalyginamai didesniais turtais, nei baltų kraštai. Rašytinių šaltinių ir archeologinės medžiagos analizė leidžia daryti prielaidą, kad pietinėse kuršių teritorijose daugiau veikė danai, šiaurinėse – švedai.