

# COURONIAN MILITARY TACTICS DURING THE VIKING AGE AND EARLY MIDDLE AGES (10<sup>TH</sup>–13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

**Guntis Zemītis**

## ANOTACIJA

XIII a. križiaus žygiai Baltijos regione reprezentavo konfliktą tarp skirtingų socialinių sistemų: Vakarų Europos feodalinės sistemos ir socialinio modelio, kuris buvo artimesnis vikingų laikotarpio visuomenei. XIII a. pr. kariniuose konfliktuose kuršiai naudojo taktiką ir patirtį, kuri buvo išvystyta vikingų laikotarpiu. Ši taktika, implikavusi netikėtas jūrines atakas ir greitą kovos jūroje keitimą kova sausumoje, kėlė rimtą grėsmę kryževivių pajėgoms Baltijos regione, įskaitant Rygą, kurią kuršiai užpuolė 1210 m. liepos 13 d.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: kuršiai, vikingų laikotarpis, križiaus žygiai Baltijos regione, mūšis prie Elendo (*Öland*) salos, piratų laivai.

## ABSTRACT

The crusades of the 13th century in the Baltic region represented a conflict between different social systems: on the one hand, the feudal system of Western Europe, and on the other hand, a social model closer to that of the Viking Age society. In the military conflicts of the early 13th century, the Curonians made use of the tactics and experience developed during the Viking Age. That included swift attacks at sea and a rapid change from fighting at sea to fighting on land, tactics that seriously threatened the crusader forces in the Baltic, including Riga, which was attacked by the Curonians on 13 July 1210.

KEY WORDS: Curonians, Viking Age, Baltic Crusades, Battle of Öland, pirate ships

*Dr. Guntis Zemītis*

*Institute of Latvian History at the University of Latvia,*

*Agency of the University of Latvia*

*Akadēmijas laukums 1, LV-1050 Rīga*

*E-mail: guntis.zemitis@gmail.com*

Because of the Viking way of life practiced by the Couronians, undoubtedly also influenced by the location of their territory at the shore of the Baltic Sea, the Couronians are better known than other ethnic groups of the Baltic region. This applies particularly to Northern Europe. Although the Couronian cemeteries have produced the earliest scythes in Latvia, present already in the 3rd century AD, and a plough has been found in a 7th century grave, because the Couronians inhabited an area along the Baltic Sea shore in south-western Latvia and north-western Lithuania that is not noted for its fertile soils, they sought other ways of obtaining wealthy: trade and maritime raiding, in addition to raiding on land. Judging from the grave goods, the frequency of military clashes and raids increased particularly in the 7th–12th century. The year 793 is generally regarded as the starting date of the Viking Age in Europe. A colourful description of raiding is given by literary historian Roberts Kļaušņš in his foreword to the Rhymed Chronicle: “War is a source of profit, food and wealth, a lucrative profession. After raiders had emptied the land, a counter-raid filled it once again with Lithuanian and Russian prisoners, women, children, livestock and expensive goods.”<sup>1</sup> The Viking Age was not only an age of robbery and raiding: it also promoted the development of trade and economic contacts, thus promoting cultural similarity along the shores of the

<sup>1</sup> KĻAUTIŅŠ, R. Ievads un piezīmes. In *Atskaņu hronika. Ditleba Alnpeķes “Rīmju hronika”*. Atdzejojis J. SAIVA. Rīga, 1936, l. XX.

Baltic Sea. Swedish historian E. Nylén writes that this period is characterised by three elements: the sword or axe, the ship and the merchant's scales and weights. This also applies in full measure to the Couronians. For the other Baltic peoples, the horse more commonly took the place of the ship. Horses were also important to the Couronians. Thus, canon and annalist Adam of Bremen (1043/1045–1076) wrote: "The largest of [the islands] is called Couronia, lying at a distance of eight days' travel. The inhabitants are very ruthless, being overly engaged in idolatry, and so are avoided by all. They have much gold and the best horses."<sup>2</sup> Large numbers of scythes have been found in Couronian graves of the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages, along with merchants' scales, axes, swords and horse-trappings.

The Couronians had adapted to warfare on land and at sea. The written sources, which have unfortunately been written by foreigners and are in many cases tendentious, contain quite a lot of information about battles fought by the Couronians. We can certainly gain an insight into Couronian battle tactics on land and sea, and in the combination of both kinds of fighting.

The earliest evidence regarding Couronian battle tactics relates to the early 10th century, although it is recorded much later and is seen as belonging to legend. Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus (born 1140, died c. 1220) writes about the activities of the legendary Danish Viking Frodo in Russia and Latvia.<sup>3</sup> At that time Kurzeme was ruled by a king named Dornis (*rex Dorno*).<sup>4</sup> The Latvian-American historian Edgars Andersons writes that Dorno/Dornis is a real Couronian name, which sometimes still occurs as the family name of seamen and captains from the Kurzeme region.<sup>5</sup> Saxo Grammaticus has him say the following words: "Our military success will be greater if we first make use of hunger. Let hunger guide us, so that we may take on the risk of the first clash."<sup>6</sup> Following the king's advice, the Couronians retreated deep into the interior of the land, abandoning the area under threat from the attackers. Even though this is legendary evidence, such a situation is by no means unrealistic.<sup>7</sup> We know from later events that raiders often found villages empty: the inhabitants, unable to assemble a force large enough to put up opposition, "had entrusted their fate to hid-outs in the forest". Many centuries later, the Russian military leader Barclay de Tolly, a Baltic landowner of Scottish origin, would choose a similar approach, luring Napoleon's army deep into Russia.

With regard to Couronian warfare on land, it is interesting to compare information given in the Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson (c. 10th cent.) with the account given in the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia of the Couronian attack on Riga in 1210. In the Saga of Egill, which describes a raid on Couronia by Egill and his brother, there is a passage telling how the Vikings split up into small groups and started raiding, the Couronians having abandoned their homes. When the Vikings went back into the forest with their booty, they found a fence erected there. Moving along the fence, the Vikings encountered the Couronians, who used a second fence to press the Scandinavians against the first one and, by threatening with spears and throwing items of clothing on the Scandinavians' weapons, were able to capture them.

The Chronicle of Henry, describing a much larger Couronian military campaign at Riga, states the following: "And the Couronians, leaving their ships in the River Daugava, marshalled their army on the field; and each man carried before him a wooden shield made from two planks fixed together, and

<sup>2</sup> *Senās Latvijas vēstures avoti*. Ed. A. ŠVĀBE. Rīga, 1937, Vol. 2, No.16.

<sup>3</sup> SAXONIS. *Gesta danorum*. Recognoverunt et ediderunt J. OLRİK & H. HRĒDER. Haunia, MCMXXXI, I: 1, 4–9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 4.

<sup>5</sup> ANDERSONS, E. Dānijas sakari ar Baltijas zemēm no IX līdz XIII gadsimtam vēstures avotu gaismā. In *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*. 1990, No. 1 (150), I. 36.

<sup>6</sup> SAXONIS. *Gesta danorum*, I: 4.

<sup>7</sup> KURSIS, A. *Mīti un īstenība*. Stockholm, 1998, I. 30.

a pole for supporting it that resembled a shepherd's crook. And the sun lit up the white shields, they were reflected in the water and the field, because it was a large and strong army that was approaching the town."<sup>8</sup> Archaeologist and historian Ēvalds Mugurēvičs has suggested that these could have been white-painted shields, such as one found at the cemetery of Sēlpils Lejasdopeles in the Selonian area.<sup>9</sup> However it seems this was not a large oval shield, but rather a wall that could be assembled in front, supported on poles. This is also indicated by the further course of events. "And when they came out from behind their shelter of shields to bring up timber for burning, very many were wounded by the archers."<sup>10</sup> It seems that in this case a similar tactic was being used to the one described in the Saga of Egill Skallagrímsson.<sup>11</sup> Evidently, when they encircled an enemy, the Couronians would make use of large shelters of planks, behind which they could hide in order to approach the defences. It seems that at the transition from the Viking Age to the Early Middle Ages, of all the Baltic peoples the Couronians had best mastered the tactic of capturing major fortifications, successfully carrying out landings from the sea and using diverse methods of attack: hiding behind temporary defences, burning the defences and so forth. The Chronicle of Henry does not provide detailed information about Couronian raids against Gotland, but mentions them as a historical fact.

In warfare on land, it seems that the Couronians mostly travelled on horseback. This is indicated by the above-mentioned comments that the Couronians had very good horses, and by the horse-trappings found in Couronian graves. There are also saddle supports found at Talsi Hill-Fort.

In the Middle Ages the Viking Age tactics were superseded by new ones. In Western Europe the heavily armed knight on horseback became the decisive military force. More lightly armed horsemen and infantry fought alongside the knights. Even though every knight was a major force in his own right, joint manoeuvring came to play an increasingly important role. It was essential that each fighting unit act in a coordinated manner during battle. This was the reason for the introduction of flags. Their main function was to organise the army. Every unit had to stay with its own flag, something that demanded a degree of discipline and fighting experience. The many accounts of 12th and 13th century battles indicate that at this time fighters often acted individually, relying only on their own physical strength and arms.

The Older Rhymed Chronicle, which tells of events in the mid-13th century, provides evidence that the native peoples, including the Couronians, were entrusted with flags when they fought in battle alongside the Germans. In addition, when the Couronians prepared for battle, they maintained their ancient tradition of a common battle cry. Evidently, dress would also have been important, the dress of each social stratum being strictly regulated in this period.

Had the author of the chronicle given a description of a Couronian flag, as he did in 1279, describing the Latgallian flag of Cēsis<sup>12</sup>, with its white stripe, Latvia would probably be able to boast an even older flag than the one we have today.

The Couronians were without any doubt also skilful fighters at sea. The Chronicle of Henry includes a very detailed account of a sea battle that took place between the northern tip of the island

<sup>8</sup> *Indriķa hronika*. No latīņu valodas tulkojis Ā. FELDHŪNS; Ē. MUGURĒVIČA priekšvārds un komentāri. *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*. Rīga, 1993, XIV; 5.

<sup>9</sup> MUGURĒVIČS, Ē. Komentāri. In *Indriķa hronika*. No latīņu valodas tulkojis Ā. FELDHŪNS; Ē. MUGURĒVIČA priekšvārds un komentāri. *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*. Rīga, 1993, l. 383–384.

<sup>10</sup> *Indriķa hronika*, XIV: 5.

<sup>11</sup> Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar. In *Islendinga sögur*. Reykjavik, 1964, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> *Atskaņu hronika*. V. BISENIEKA atdzejojums no vidusaugšvācu valodas. Ē. MUGURĒVIČA priekšvārds; Ē. MUGURĒVIČA, K. KĻAVIŅA komentāri. *Livländische Reimchronik*. Rīga, 1998, l. 9226–9228.

of Gotland and the island of Fårö beyond it at Easter (18 April) 1210. It has also been suggested that the battle actually took place in the Irbe Strait between Cape Kolka and the island of Saaremaa.

“Suddenly, Couronians – enemies of the name of Christ – appeared near the shore in the Sound with eight pirate ships. When they saw these, the crusaders transferred from their cogs to smaller ships and sailed to meet the pagans, but in their haste and lack of caution, each ship tried to overtake the others in order to meet the enemy first. Meanwhile, the Couronians, having removed all weight from the bows of their ships, raised them above the oncoming craft and at the same time arranged their ships in pairs, leaving an open space between each pair of ships. Because of this, the first two crusader boats or small ships entered the open water between the pirate ships, but since they were in smaller ships they could not reach the enemy, high above them. After the enemy had killed some of them with spears, some had drowned and some more had been wounded, the rest returned to the cogs and were saved ... About thirty knights and other men were killed there.”<sup>13</sup>

A typical Viking-Age battle, where the encounter begins at sea, but the fighting itself takes place on land, is the Battle of Jarnlok on the island of Öland in 1170. It is described in the Knyttlinga Saga (retold here after an account by historian E. Andersons)<sup>14</sup>. Having arrived on the island of Öland, the Couronians pulled their ships ashore and lined them up, creating a fortification (*propugnacula*). The Couronians skilfully made use of the same mistake by their enemies that the Germans were to make 40 years later in the battle of the Sound. The Danish ships, sailing towards the ships, strove to overtake each other, since, just like the Germans, they were either unfamiliar with coordinated manoeuvring or else ignored the need for it. Thus, some ships reached the shore ahead of the others. The Couronians left their shelter and succeeded in killing them all. Holes were hacked in the attacking ships and they were sunk. During the night after the Danes had retreated the Couronians used these ships to reinforce their fortification. They filled the gaps between the ships with blocks of wood and tree trunks. In order to protect themselves against the enemy’s arrows, the Couronians had covered the outside of the fortification with the ship sails. The next day, when battle recommenced, the Couronians made the mistake of leaving their defences. They fell one after another, battling against the enemy’s superior forces.

That the Couronians were capable of greater discipline than their enemies on at least certain occasions and resisted the momentary temptation to gain an easy victory or plunder is also indicated by the attack on Riga on 13 July 1201, which was also a combined land-sea operation. The Couronian fleet was immense for the time: “The next day at daybreak the whole sea appeared as if covered by a dark cloud.” In the River Daugava the Couronians encountered some enemy ships. “However the pagans, hoping to take the city in an unexpected strike, before any news reached it, did not attack the crusader ships, but instead rowed towards the town as fast as possible.”<sup>15</sup>

As can be seen, the Couronians were capable of successfully fighting at sea and on land, and could attack from the sea, continuing the fight on land. The Couronians knew how to encircle strong fortifications and capture them. This is indicated by their joint attack with the Semigallians against the fortified monastery of Daugavgrīva on 20 August 1228, which ended in the capture of the monastery and the killing of the brothers of the order and monks.<sup>16</sup> The Couronians also knew how to establish temporary fortifications on the shore.

<sup>13</sup> *Indriķa hronika*, XIV: 1.

<sup>14</sup> ANDERSONS, E. Dānijas sakari ar Baltijas zemēm no IX līdz XIII gadsimtam vēstures avotu gaismā. In *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, 1990, No. 1 (150).

<sup>15</sup> *Indriķa hronika*, XIV: 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Senās Latvijas vēstures avoti*, I. 154.

Judging from the descriptions, the Couronian ships were had both a sail and oars, permitting them to manoeuvre easily. In the Chronicle of Henry they are described as pirate (*pyraticis*) ships<sup>17</sup>.

The Couronians won great victories and suffered agonising defeats in their many battles. Their skill in battle, courage and audacity has been noted by foreigners on many occasions. The German author of the Rhymed Chronicle has the following words for the Couronians:

“And the proud Couronians too,  
So fond of warring,  
Being hungry for adventure...”<sup>18</sup>

*Translated by Valdis Bērziņš*

#### Literature

- ANDERSONS, Edgars. Dānijas sakari ar Baltijas zemēm no IX līdz XIII gadsimtam vēstures avotu gaismā. In *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, 1990, No. 1 (150).
- KLAUTIŅŠ, Roberts. Ievads un piezīmes. In *Atskaņu hronika. Dīleba Alnpeķes Rīmju hronika*. Atdzejojis J. SAIVA. Rīga, 1936.
- KURSIS, Arnolds. *Mīti un īstenība*. Stockholm, 1998.
- MUGURĒVIČS, Ēvalds. Komentāri. In *Indriķa hronika*. No latīņu valodas tulkojis Ā. FELDHŪNS; Ē. MUGURĒVIČA priekšvārds un komentāri. *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*. Rīga, 1993.

## KURŠIŅŅ KARINĒ TAKTIKA VIKINGŅ LAIKOTARPIU IR ANKSTYVAISIAIS VIDURAMąIAIS (X–XIII AMąIAI)

### Guntis Zemĕtis

Latvijas istorijas institutas prie Latvijas universiteto, Latvija

#### S a n t r a u k a

Vĕlyvuoju vikingŅ laikotarpiu (800–1050 m. po Kr.) ir ankstyvaisiais viduramąiais kurąiai Ņiaurĕs Europos raŅytiniuose Ņaltiniuose minimi gerokai daŅniau nei kitos Baltijos regiono tautos. Nepaisant to, kad daugelis ŅiŅ apraŅymŅ turi legendiniŅ bruoŅŅ, jie bent iŅ dalies leidąia iŅsivaizduoti, kokia buvo kurąiŅ karinĕ taktika jŅroje ir sausumoje. Kadangi KurŅo pakrantĕse nebŅta itin derlingŅ ŅemiŅ, kurąiai turĕjo siekti kitŅ pajamŅ ŅaltiniŅ, ir vienas tokiŅ buvo karo grobiai. Informacija, kuria disponuojame svarstydami apie kurąiŅ karines kampanijas, yra paremta Adomo BremeŅieąio ir Sakso Gramatiko apraŅymais, Egillo Skallagrĕmssono saga, apibŅdinimais, kuriuos pateikia Henriko Latvio ir Eiliuotoji Livonijos kronikos. Ankstyviausias liudijimas, aptariantis vikingo Frodo iŅsverŅimŅ i KurŅŅ X a. pr., turi legendiniŅ bruoŅŅ. Kita vertus, Egillo Skallagrĕmssono (X a.) pateiktas iŅsverŅimo i KurŅŅ apraŅymas jau atskleidąia istorines ŅŅlygas. Detalesnĕ informacijŅ apie kurąiŅ karinĕ taktikŅ sausumoje ir jŅroje teikia KniutlingŅ saga, kurioje apraŅomas 1170 m. kurąiŅ iŅvykdytas Elendo (*Œland*) salos antpuolis, ir Henriko Latvio kronikos pasaŅai, apibŅdinantys jŅrŅ mŅŅŅ, per 1210 m. Ņv. Velykas iŅvykusŅ tarp Gotlando ir Forio (*FŅrŅ*) salŅ, bei 1210 m. liepos 13 d. kurąiŅ iŅvykdytŅ Rygos antpuolĭ.

<sup>17</sup> *Indriķa hronika*, XIV: 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Atskaņu hronika*, l. 4130–4132.

Kronikos parodo, kad kuršių laivai (*pyraticys*) tiko greitoms karinėms kampanijoms. Kuršiai žinojo, kaip atakuoti iš jūros ir keisti kovą jūroje kova sausumoje. Nors pakrantėje gyvenę kuršiai specializavosi vykdyti netikėtus antpuolius jūroje, Adomas Bremenietis (1043/1045–1076) pažymi, kad kuršiai turėjo „geriausius arklius“, o XII–XIII a. kuršių kapai išsiskiria turtinga ginkluote, kuri buvo laidojama kartu. Kuršių kapuose Durbėje ir Lybagų (*Lībagu*) valsčiuje buvo randama ir šalmų.

*Iš anglų k. vertė dr. Vasilijus Safronovas*