CURONIAN “KINGS” and “KINGDOMS” of the VIKING AGE

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In Old Norse sources the word “Curonian” is of frequent occurrence. It should be stressed that this ethnonym is mostly met with in the context of armed skirmishes between this Baltic tribe and the Norsemen. Nevertheless, these sources also contain valuable information about the Curonians as a society and their social structure. It is namely the Old Norse sources that contain the earliest historical records, mentioning the Curonian “king” and “kingdoms”. A more accurate comprehension of these terms will lead to a better understanding of Curonian society and the changes it underwent in the period from the 9th to 12th centuries. It is also important for the search of the earliest elements of state formation in the Baltic tribes. That, in its turn, is substantial information for the analysis of the initial formative processes of Lithuanian statehood.

The chronicle of Adam of Bremen and the work of Rimbert do not contain any knowledge about Curonian kings. For the first time a Curonian king is mentioned in the chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus in the description of the attack against the Curonians, organized by Hading and Liser.¹ However, Saxo Grammaticus does not convey any information about Loker's rule in the Curonian territory. Neither are any data available about Loker as a ruler, his competence, the lands under him or the army at his disposal. The term *tyrannus*, used by the chronicler, is also rather vague. Describing one more clash between the Scandinavians and the Curonians, Saxo Grammaticus uses the term *rex*.² One cannot help agreeing with the statement that the terms used by early writers to describe the institution of the early rulers were most varied.³ Speaking about the Aestians, Wulfstan calls their leader *cynning*.⁴ It is worthwhile noting not only the variety of the terms used,

¹J. Olrik. (ed.). *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*. Hauniae, I, 1931, 23: “...Quo pacto Liscrus et Hadingus artissimis societatis vinculis colligati Lokero, Curetum tyranno, bellum denuntiant.”

²*Saxonis...*, 37: “Repertae pecuniae regum locupletem fecere, quibus instructas classe Curetum partibus admovetur. Quorum rex Dorno periculosi belli metu huiusmodi ad milites orationem habuisse fertur...”

³P. Sawyer. *Kings and Royal Power*, in *Hovdingesamfund og kongemakt*. Aarhus, 1991, 282.

⁴H. Sweet. *King Alfred's Orosius*, in *Early English Text Society*. London, vol. 79, 1883, 20.

but also the different meanings of the same term in similar contexts.

The descriptions of the early Scandinavian kings, found in Icelandic sagas, present them to a large extent as military leaders. According to the sagas the most typical features of these kings are bravery, physical strength and great fighting skills. They are heroic kings of epic dimensions, whose rule is based on their immense prestige and the booty they raise by plundering their neighbours and/or pirating in distant maritime raids. Unrestricted by laws or administrative institutions, such kings could put their aspirations into practice in the most primitive way resorting solely to military strength. Such rule, depending only on the luck of military predatory expeditions and devoid of any social, legal or ideological (religious) background, was not in any way related to any greater territories in administrative or political terms. These “sea kings” and “sea kingdoms”,⁵ although referred to as such by the chroniclers, cannot be equated with the mediaeval institution of the kingship.

Significant data based on Anglo-Saxon written sources were obtained by Francis John Byrne. In Ireland alone these records revealed up to 150 “kings”, ruling simultaneously.⁶ The nominal meaning of their royal titles (in the classical sense of the term) does not raise any great doubts. Saxo Grammaticus also seems to have used this term rather freely, especially in respect to the kings of non-Scandinavian countries. The mention of 30 rulers and of their 20 kingdoms conquered by Frothi, would also support this supposition.⁷ It is very unlikely that all the rulers mentioned by Saxo Grammaticus held kingdoms. There is a high probability that in certain communities there were leaders, who by their status could be equal to the so called “kings”. This conjecture is all the more probable, because it can be supported by the description of Olimar’s successful expeditions, provided by Saxo Grammaticus himself.⁸ He mentions “two other dukes”, not inferior to the “kings”. It is a convincing indication of the strong status enjoyed by the military nobility in society at that time, by the very fact of its existence, staked a claim to “royal” status. It is also worth noting that Saxo Grammaticus did not speak about the kings of Jamtland and Helsingland, but about the kings of the Jamtlandians and Helsinglandians (*Iantorum atque Helsingorum*). In this way he somehow approximated them to the leaders of local communities or warrior chieftains.

⁵ C. Lofving. Who ruled the region east of Skagerrak in the eleventh century?, in *Social approaches in Viking studies*, Glasgow, 1991, 150, 154.

⁶ F. J. Byrne. *Irish kings and High kings*. London, 1973, 7.

⁷ *Saxonis...*, 132: “Ceterum viginti regna imperio Frothonis adicebant, quorum reges triginta praedictis adiuncti Danorum partibus militabant.”

⁸ *Saxonis...*, 132: “At Olimarus Thoriam Longum, Iantorum atque Helsingorum regem, dosque alios haud inferioris potentiae duces, Hestiam quoque cum Olandia Curc-tiam, sed et insulas Suetiae praetentis, celeberrimus barbariae domitor triumphavit.”

In all probability, such were the 170 kings subjected by Frothi as a result of only one of his successful expeditions.⁹ The governors appointed by the Scandinavian rulers in their conquered lands were also called "kings" by Saxo.¹⁰ It is evident that Saxo used very indiscriminately the terms relating to the supreme institution of the political power - the king. *Gesta Danorum* does not furnish enough evidence suggesting the existence of a more or less real royal power in the Curonian territories.

The knowledge of Henry of Livonia about the eastern Baltic region and about the Balts was much more comprehensive than that of Saxo Grammaticus. His *Livonian Chronicle* contained a relatively accurate picture of the political structure of the Baltic tribes. The terminology, used in the *Chronicle*, more adequately corresponded to the political institutions of the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Henry of Livonia did not mention any kings of the Baltic tribes, his characteristics were less pretentious and possibly more exact.¹¹ Even the influential Semigallian leader, Vesthardus, mentioned in the *Chronicle* several times, was not referred to by Henry as "king" or "lord".¹²

The Curonian leaders or kings, mentioned by Saxo Grammaticus, were merely leaders of different communities. The choice of terms in *Gesta Danorum*, however, was determined to a high degree by the political attitudes of the chronicler himself. Saxo's "monarchical" views and eulogy of strong royal power, assessed by Lauritz Weibull,¹³ could account for his frequent use of the terms "king" and "kingdom". Saxo's terminology to define the political institutions of the Viking Age did not really reveal their essence. It was rather an unsuccessful attempt of a later generation (in the 13th century) to show the past Viking years without any subtler reflection of real events.¹⁴

A more realistic characteristic of the Viking royal institution is to be found in Rimbert's work. At the same time as he discusses the subjection of Birka (Sweden) to the king, Saxo points out the extraordinary weakness of that power.¹⁵ *Ynglingasaga* also characterizes the

⁹*Saxonis ...*, 132: "Eo bello septuaginta ac centum reges, qui aut ex Hunis crant aut inter Hunos militaverant, submisere se regi."

¹⁰*Saxonis ...*, 135: "...Quem mox Frotho devictarum ab eo gentium regem constituit ac praeterca Helsingiam ei cum utraque Lappia, Finiam quoque et Estiam annuo stipendiorum iure contribuit."

¹¹W. Arndt (ed.). *Heinrici Chronicon Livoniae*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, XXIII, Leipzig, 1874, 271: "Caupo cum omnibus cognatis et amicis suis."

¹²*Ibid.*, 303: "Vesthardus senior aliorum Semgallorum de vicina provincia, que Thervetene vocatur..."

¹³L. Weibull. *Necrologierna från Lund, Roskildekronikan och Saxo*, in *Scandia*, I, Stockholm, København, Oslo, 1930, 84-112.

¹⁴P. Sawyrc, *op. cit.*, 282.

¹⁵G. Waitz (ed.). *Rimberti, Vita Anskarii, Scriptorum Rerum Germanicarum*, Hannover, 1884, 41-42: "...rex Suconum nomine Anoundus, cunctus regno suo, apud Danos exul fuerit. Qui fines regni quondam sui denuo repetere cupiens, coepit ab ipsis auxilium

kings exclusively as sea masters, having only ships at their disposal.¹⁶ The Viking Age sources, dealing with the kings and their rule, lay stress on sheer military power as the main element of their institution and not their political domination in appropriately defined territories with an established system of administration and regular taxation. As a rule, that royal institution manifested itself most vividly in the organization of plunder. Of all writers, Rimbert probably described those kings most accurately.¹⁷ Rimbert's royal descriptions accentuated the marauding rather than the royal aspect in the mentality of the ninth-century "king". Anund, considering himself king of Birka, promises the Danes his permission to rob that territory. Such a step is totally incompatible with the image of a statesman. It is quite probable that pillage was a real way of getting some income for Anund himself. Having no other possibility of gaining the Danes as allies, he just offered them that kind of reward - plundering his own territory. The very end of the expedition speaks for itself: instead of attacking Birka, the ships of Anund and the Danes attacked the Slavs. Thus, the priorities of the expedition become evident - it is an ordinary piratical undertaking rather than an attempt to re-establish political control. In Rimbert's writings the royal title "rex" also seems closer to the afore-mentioned term "sea-king" than to the title of the highest political institution.

Even at the end of the Viking Age kings were only the performers of external functions. Their political activity was directed not towards the exploitation of internal resources, but towards plunder abroad.¹⁸ Of course, it would be wrong to exaggerate, but even when the political aspirations of the Viking "kings" became evident in the 12th century, traditional piracy and pillage still predominated. Numerous kings or rulers of minor Scandinavian territories (except Denmark), often referred to in the written records, should be placed almost on an equal footing with warrior chieftains. Even the appearance of larger armies did not radically change the essence of their activity. The "kings" of the Curonians and other Baltic tribes, cited in the chronicles, should also be interpreted only as leaders of territorial communities. It would hardly be possible to speak about their political authority, at least on the basis of the sources, available at present.

The chronicles speak about the Curonian kingdom or land more often than about its kings or rulers. These mentions are not only more

quaerere, spondens, quod, si se sequerentur, multa eis possent donaria provenire. Proponbat enim eis vicum memoratum Birca, quod ibi multi essent negotiatores divites et abundantia totius boni atque pecunia thesaurorum multa. Ad illum itaque vicum se eos promittebat ducturum, ubi sine sui exercitus damno multo suae necessitatis fruerentur com-
modo."

¹⁶T. Lindkvist. Social and political power in Sweden 1000-1300: Predatory incursions, Royal taxation of a feudal state, in *Social approaches in Viking studies*. Glasgow, 1991, 140.

¹⁷Rimberto ..., 41.

¹⁸T. Lindkvist, *op. cit.*, 140.

frequent, they are also more varied and sometimes rather contradictory. Rimbert was the first to mention the Curonian kingdom, even indicating some elements of its internal structure.¹⁹ His description of a Curonian kingdom consisting of five regions has been accepted virtually by all archaeologists and historians dealing with the Curonians of the Viking Age. Particularly extensive is Rimbert's description of the siege of Apuolê. A closer study of his information, however, raises doubts about the existence of the Curonian state in the 9th century. It is worth noting that at the start of his account about the incursion of the Swedes into the Curonian territory, Rimbert uses the term "tribe" instead of "kingdom",²⁰ thus stressing that it was the tribe - *gens Cori* rather than the Curonian kingdom that belonged to the Swedes. The Curonians, gathering from the five territories, did not come to defend the kingdom. The news about the Swedish invasion made them unite their forces. However, according to Rimbert, each tribe defended its own territory.²¹ Thus, the irrefutable assertion about the existence of the Curonian kingdom in the 9th century becomes highly debatable. The following sentences of the text present contradictory information about this state.

Rimbert was very particular about the prehistory of the Swedish campaign in question. He knew that the Swedes had subjected the Curonians, then came their "liberation" and the unsuccessful attempts of the Danes to conquer that Baltic tribe. It is noteworthy that Rimbert did not at all make any mention of the Curonian kings. On the ninth day of the siege the talks started between the Curonians and the Swedes. The latter were represented by king Olof and his dukes - *rex vero et principes saniori*,²² while the former were referred to only as *qui intrinsecus erant*,²³ i.e., the anonymous besieged. Could the specification of such "unequal" partners in the talks be coincidental? Could Rimbert not mention anybody by name because the Curonians simply did not have a single supreme ruler? It is worthwhile to go back to the details, furnished by the chronicler. Rimbert indicated the attacked Curonian centres and the numbers of their defenders: exactly Seeburg - 7,000 and Apulia - 15,000. A five-day journey to cover the distance from one centre to the other was also indicated as well as the eight cases of luck, which however, did not result in the capture of Apuolê. Exact numbers of hostages and the amount of silver as ransom were also quoted. All that would characterise Rimbert as a writer, scrupu-

¹⁹Rimberto ..., 60.

²⁰Rimberto ..., 60: "Gens enim quaedam longe ab eis posita, vocata Cori. Suconum principatui olim subiecta fuerat."

²¹Rimberto ..., 60: "Populi itaque inibi manentes, cognito eorum adventu conglobati in unum, coepere viriliter resistere et sua defendere."

²²Rimberto ..., 62

²³Rimberto ..., 62.

lously recording the facts, familiar to him. He could have hardly omitted the name of the Curonian king or at least ignored the fact of his participation in the talks. Most probably no Curonian king of that time was known to Rimbert. It is a paradox that a Curonian kingdom, consisting of five territories, had no ruler. Rimbert used the terms "Curonian tribe" and "Curonian kingdom" as parallel concepts. That could be a weighty argument, proving an exceptionally early existence of the Curonian kingdom. In passing, it can be noted that the term *civitas* was already used by Caesar to define the state structures of Gaul.²⁴ Rimbert's use of the term could have been influenced by the literary Latin tradition, peculiar to many works of the early Middle Ages. Therefore it would be more appropriate to admit that Rimbert's information was related to separate territorial formations of the Curonians in the mid-ninth century. On the other hand, on the basis of the same data it would be impossible to assume the existence of some unified central political power.

Like Rimbert, Saxo Grammaticus also deals with the Curonian kingdom and the Curonian tribe in the description of Ragnar's expedition against the Sambian and Curonian kingdoms.²⁵ Those two kingdoms were also devastated by Canute.²⁶ However, the victory over the Sambian, Curonian and Eastern tribes was attributed to Jarmerik.²⁷ Again, it can be supposed that Saxo Grammaticus' terms for the kingdoms and tribes did not adequately correspond to the designated structures. The appearance of the Baltic "kingdoms" in the chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus was conditioned most likely by the chronicler's own times, i.e., by the political realia of thirteenth-century Europe. Thus, it is not so much a reflection of the early Baltic political formations of the Viking Age, but the image of the Viking Age in the thirteenth century. Saxo Grammaticus' acquaintance with Eastern Baltic Region is based mostly on oral tradition, which lacked consistent terminology. Therefore, the internal structures of the Baltic tribes were also not properly identified by Saxo in that regard. It is most likely that the "kingdoms", mentioned in the chronicle, were only thirteenth century concepts, carried over into the Viking Age.

Archaeological data can also supply information about the size of the Baltic territorial structures, the elements of their internal organization and about the contacts between various regions. Already in the late 19th century August Bielenstein acknowledged the existence of separate Curonian lands and their further formation.²⁸ Mapping

²⁴ Caesar. *Commentarii de bello Gallico*.

²⁵ *Saxonis* ..., 257.

²⁶ *Saxonis* ..., 319.

²⁷ *Saxonis* ..., 232.

²⁸ A. Bielenstein. *Die Grenzen des lettischen Volkstammes und der lettischen Sprache in der Gegenwart und im 13. Jahrhundert*. St. Petersburg, 1892, 177-256.

the hill-forts of Kurzeme, the Latvian archaeologist Ernst Brastinš made an attempt to reconstruct a certain administrative system.²⁹ His reconstruction, encompassing a Curonian administrative centre in Vec-kuldīga, was based on the location of the hill-forts and settlements, known in the author's time. However, at the beginning of the century Curonian archaeological studies were not yet advanced enough. Neither was the material of the southern Curonian area (in present-day Lithuania) taken into account. Thus, the scheme was based on the geographical distribution of the archaeological objects and on the characteristic of their external features. That mono-centric system was not supported by later studies. Nevertheless, the exceptional abundance of Curonian hill-forts and their defensive fortifications, revealed by Brastinš, served as strong arguments in the subsequent hypotheses, related to the early Curonian political formations.

A modernized pattern of the early Curonian state formations was presented by the Latvian archaeologist Francis Balodis.³⁰ Taking into account the results of the research in Grobiņa, he corrected Brastinš's model. Kuldīga was recognized as the central site of northern Curonians, and Grobiņa as the central Curonian port.³¹ The role of Grobiņa as the main trade centre was obvious. However, the subordinate ties of this trade centre with its political counterpart - Kuldīga or in general, with the Curonian territorial regions, can hardly be proved on the basis of the sources, available at present. Even the contrary can be found - early Scandinavian and other Western European emporia were relatively autonomous and their ties with the political institutions of the state were weak in the early Viking Age. Therefore, it is little wonder that in that period Grobiņa as the trade centre of Curonia was rather independent. It must also be noted that the trade of Grobiņa was to a very large extent in the hands of Gotland merchants. The above-mentioned assertion of Balodis should be interpreted as an instance of the modernization of the ninth-century situation in Kurzeme in an attempt to archaize Latvian statehood. The same holds true for Balodis' interpretation of the Scandinavian way to the East through the Latvian territory; in that hypothesis Baltic territorial regions were supposed to play a significant role.³²

Modern archaeological research in the Curonian region also reveals separate minor territorial formations in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³³ "Curonian kingdoms" or "Curonian lands", indicated in

²⁹E. Brastinš. *Latvijas pilskalni*, t. I, Kuršu zeme. Rīga, 1923.

³⁰F. Balodis. 9-12. gadsimtmeti Latvijā, in *Senatne un Māksla*, 2, Rīga, 1936, 5-15; see also F. Balodis. *Det aldsta Lettland*, Uppsala, 1940.

³¹F. Balodis ..., 1936, 6.

³²F. Balodis. Handelswege nach dem Osten und die Wikinger in Russland, in *KVHAA Handlingar, Antikvariska studier*, 3, Stockholm, 1948, 319-365.

³³V. Žulkus. *Klaipėda i ee okruka v XI-XVII vv.* Unpublished candidate dissertation, Moscow, 1987, 82.

the written records, were most likely such territorial structures. Their size and number varied. The chiefs of these communities could sometimes be called “kings” and the communities proper - “kingdoms”. They were not stable political formations. The situation in Scandinavia was similar; there the political stability and the very existence of those formations depended not on some social foundation, but on the fortune of their warrior chieftain - the “king”. One more important circumstance leads to the juxtaposition of the Curonian and the early Scandinavian kingdoms. Curonian kings and kingdoms were recorded in Scandinavian sources, whose writers understood the kingdom not according to the model of the Frankish kingdom, but according to the early Scandinavian political formation. Kingship was also identified according to the Viking model, i.e., based solely on military power, active mainly in the external sphere. Seafaring Scandinavian raiders used to encounter the Curonians, engaged in similar activities. No wonder that in the opinion of the chroniclers, the latter had to be organized in the way the Scandinavians were, i.e., they had to have their own “sea kings”. The Curonian kingdoms essentially were similar to the Scandinavian kingdoms of the early Viking Age and had little to do with the kingdoms of the medieval continental tradition.