

TATJANA N. JACKSON

The North of Eastern Europe in Early Nordic Texts: the Study of Place-Names¹

In the course of the last two centuries Russian-Scandinavian relations in 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 therein is still open to discussion.

The fact that the number of written sources can no longer be enlarged increases archaeology's importance 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".² Nowadays nobody can deny Scandinavian presence in Eastern Europe as early as the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Systematic analysis of Scandinavian artifacts from cemeteries and settlements east of the Baltics makes it possible to solve many vexing problems, such as the periodization of Russian-Scandinavian relations in the ninth through the eleventh 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 sources and archaeological materials, as well as of the data supplied by auxiliary historical disciplines, that scholars achieved insights into 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 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

¹ This paper was presented at the Eighth International Saga Conference (Gothenburg, August 11–17, 1991). In the version for ANF a few changes have been made. My friends, Dr Alexej Jurasovskij and Dr Fredrik Heinemann, helped me, on different stages of my work, to improve the English text, and I thank them heartily for it.

² A. Artsikhovskiy, "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.

Baltic, Old Rus' and European North. Historians using Old Scandinavian sources meet with certain difficulties in specific features of their genre. Moreover, there is always the 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 tenth and eleventh centuries; scaldic poetry composed between 800 and 1100 is preserved mostly within the sagas that were written down in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but are available now, as well as the geographical treatises of the twelfth to the fourteenth 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 the geographical and topographic knowledge the Scandinavians had of these territories.³ The character of information preserved in *oldtidssagaer* and *fortnidssagaer* (in Sigurður Nordal's terms)⁴ makes us believe that we are dealing with the reflection of some ancient reality. Finally, the study of geographical treatises proves that they provide an accurate picture of Eastern Europe of the tenth through the twelfth century, that is, prior to the Mongol invasion of Rus', the formation of the Lithuanian state and the conquest of the East-Baltic lands by the Teutonic Order.⁵

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 it is impossible to date this formation with any precision. Still, there is a reliable chronological boundary, a *terminus ante quem*, for determining when the Scandinavians had already acquired their knowledge of Rus' geography. This is, as the Russian archaeologist Gleb Lebedev points out, the year 839 of the *Annales Berthiniani* that offer the earliest evidence of the Slavonic-Scandinavian relations as already existing.⁶

The general analysis of the Old Icelandic toponymy of Eastern Europe demonstrates that each source (or 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

³ E. A. Melnikova, "Etnonimika severa evropejskoj časti SSSR po drevneskandinavskoj pis-mennosti i 'Povesti vremennyh let'", *Severnaja Rus' i ee sosedi v epohu rannego srednevekovja* (Leningrad 1982), p. 124.

⁴ Sigurður Nordal, "Sagalitteraturen", *Nordisk kultur. B. VIII. Litteraturhistorie. B. Norge og Island* (Stockholm–Oslo–Copenhagen 1953).

⁵ See E. A. Melnikova, "Drevnjaja Rus' v islandskih geografičeskikh sočinenijah", *Drevnejšije gosudarstva na territorii SSSR. Materialy i issledovanija. 1975 god* (Moscow 1976), p. 156.

⁶ G. S. Lebedev, *Epoha vikingov v Severnoj Evrope. Istoriko-arheološkičeskiye očerki* (Leningrad 1985), p. 190.

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.⁷

From this point of view it is interesting to look at the place-names with the root *aust-* (*austr*, *Austrvegr/Austrvegir*, *Austrlqnd*, *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".⁸

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 tenth century,⁹ and in the scaldic poems of the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁰ About twenty-five runic inscriptions commemorate men who died *austr*. On the contrary, scaldic strophes that preserve this term, without a precise geographical designation, are extremely rare. More common are those cases when the term has an indirect object defining the area more exactly: for instance, *austr í Gqrðum*. And in runic inscriptions we sometimes encounter the same set expression, as well as *austr í Grikkjum*.

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

Glúmr Geirason in his *Gráfeldardrápa* (975) employs not only the term *austr* while speaking about "bjarmian folk", but also the composite *Austrlqnd*. In this case, the place-names are likely to denote some northern territories of Eastern Europe.

Thus, the scaldic and runic sources of the ninth through the eleventh centuries reflect the initial stage of the development of Norse toponymy with the root *aust-*, when the meaning of place-names was extremely broad and where they denoted any territories to the east of the Baltic Sea (from the Eastern Baltic to Byzantium). Obviously, this meaning could stem only from the first visits of the Scandinavians to Eastern Europe, and, as archaeological

⁷ See G. V. Glazyrina and T. N. Jackson, *Drevnerusskije goroda v drevneskandinavskoj pismennosti. Teksty, perevod, kommentarij* (Moscow 1987).

⁸ G. S. Lebedev, "On the Early Date of the Way 'from the Varangians to the Greeks'", *Fennougrri et slavi. 1978* (Helsinki 1980), p. 90–101.

⁹ E. A. Melnikova, *Skandinavskije runičeskije nadpisi. Teksty, perevod, kommentarij* (Moscow 1977), NN 1, 2(?), 8, 9, 12, 13, 24, 26, 34, 37, 39, 41, 42, 46, 47, 48, 54, 59, 62, 63, 68, 70, 71, 73, 75, 78, 79, 83, 85, 90, 93, 95, 96, 97.

¹⁰ On scaldic poems in kings' sagas see chapter 3 of my book *Islandskije korolevskije sagi kak istočnik po istorii Drevnej Rusi i ee sosedej. X–XIII vv.* (published in a series *Drevnejšije gosudarstva na territorii SSSR. Materialy i issledovanija. 1988–1989 god.* Moscow 1991).

and numismatic data show, the earliest period of relations between Eastern Europe and Scandinavia can be dated from about 750 to 860.¹¹

The early kings' sagas (*Ágrip af Nóregis konunga sqgum*, ca. 1190; Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ca. 1190; *Morkinskinna*, 1217–1222) preserve the toponymy with the root *aust-* in the next stage of its development: *austr* is no longer used as a geographical term, but only as a locative adverb; composites *Austrvegr* and *Austrlqnd*, 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 Sigurðarson “flýði . . . braut ýr landi ok í Austrvega ok svá til Miklagarðs”,¹² and some time later he sailed “heim ór Garði (Miklagarði. – T. J.) um Austrveg”.¹³ *Morkinskinna* describing Haraldr's trip from Miklagarðr says that “þaðan ferr hann um Avstrriki til Holmgarðs”.¹⁴ It is evident that Byzantium no longer figures among the lands denoted by these place-names. On the contrary their meaning is, as a rule, Rus': Oddr in his saga calls Vísivaldr “Austruegs konungr”¹⁵ (cp. in *Heimskringla*: “Vísivaldr austan ór Garðaríki”¹⁶); it is said in *Ágrip* that Ingigerðr, the daughter of Óláfr sænski, was married to “Jaritláfi Austrvegs konungi”¹⁷ (cp. in *Heimskringla*: “Jarizleifr konungr austan ór Hólmgarði”¹⁸); *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 “sótto í Austrvega til Jaritláfs konungs”.¹⁹

Thus, we can believe that in 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 ninth or beginning of the tenth centuries, which coincides with the second and third periods of Russian-Scandinavian relations, the years 860–1016 in Lebedev's classification.²⁰

The major compendia of 1220–1230 (*Fagrskinna*, ca. 1220 and Snorri

¹¹ Lebedev, *Epoha vikingov*, p. 260.

¹² Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Ágrip af Nóregis konunga sqgum* (in: *Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek* 18. Halle 1929), p. 33.

¹³ *Ágrip*, p. 38.

¹⁴ C. R. Unger, ed., *Morkinskinna. Pergamentsbok fra første halvdel af det trettende aarhundrede. Indeholdende en af de ældste optegnelser af norske kongesagaer* (Christiania 1867).

¹⁵ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar av Oddr Snorrason munkr* (København 1932), p. 107.

¹⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 2 (in: *Íslenzk fornrit* 27. Reykjavík 1945), p. 436.

¹⁷ *Ágrip*, p. 27.

¹⁸ *Íslenzk fornrit* 27, p. 147.

¹⁹ *Ágrip*, p. 34.

²⁰ Lebedev, *Epoha vikingov*, p. 260.

Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, ca. 1230)²¹ consistently use the newly formed place-name *Garðaríki* (the secondary derivation from *Garðar*) to denote Rus'. Consequently, the meaning of *Austrvegr* and its synonyms is narrowed, since they are used to denote only the East Baltic lands.²² 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 the Varangians to the Greeks" lost its meaning and the Russian-Scandinavian relations received a new character (periods four and five in Lebedev's classification, the years 1016–1240),²³ 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 twelfth through the fourteenth centuries.²⁴

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, in 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 *Aðalsýsla* (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' (*Garðar*) that originated as a designation of a line of fortified settlements on the banks of

²¹ 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 (in: *Islandica XLV*. Ithaca and London 1985), p. 213, 216–219]. The specific character of *Morkinskinna* finds its reflection in toponymics.

²² See my paper "Drevneskandinavskaja toponimija s kornem *aust-*", *Skandinavskij sbornik XXXI* (Tallinn 1988), p. 140–145.

²³ Lebedev, *Epoha vikingov*, p. 260.

²⁴ E. A. Melnikova, *Drevneskandinavskije geografičeskije sočinenija. Teksty, perevod, kommentarij* (Moscow 1986), p. 196.

the Volkhov, the initial section of “the route from the Varangians to the Greeks”, namely – on the way from *Aldeigja* to *Hólmgarðr*.²⁵

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.

The early kings’ sagas inherited ethnic and geographical nomenclature from scaldic poetry and runic inscriptions. *Gandvík*, *Vína*, *bjarmar* and *Bjarmaland* denote the European North; Rus’ is called *Garðar*, though this name is being consistently replaced by the secondary derivation of the *X-riki* type – *Garðaríki*; the main town names of Rus’ are *Aldeigjuborg*, a derivation from the scaldic *Aldeigja*, and *Hólmgarðr*, although the later kings’ sagas twice mention Kiev (*Kænugarðr*), Polotsk (*Pallteskia*) and Suzdal’ (*Suðrdalaríki*, *Súrdalar*). The tradition governing this influence will be discussed below. In the Baltic area the early kings’ sagas name *Eysýsla* and *Aðalsýsla* (i.e. the scaldic *allar Sýslur*), *Eistland*, *eistr* and *finnar*, while the large compendia *Fagskinna* and *Heimskringla* add *Kúrland* and *Kirjálaland*.

The geographical treatises of the twelfth to the end of the fourteenth centuries contain more extensive information about Eastern Europe. Among the Baltic lands and peoples there are (but *Virland*, *kirjálir*, *Kirjálaland*, *Kúrland*, *Lifland*, *Tafeistaland* and *Eistland*) also *refalir*, *Samland* and *Erm-land*. These treatises know eight Old Russian towns: Murom (*Móramar*), Rostov (*Rostofa*), Suzdal’ (*Súrdalar*), Novgorod (*Hólmgarðr*), Polotsk (*Pallteskia*), Smolensk (*Smaleskia*), Kiev (*Kænugarðr*) and Gnezdovo (*Sýrnes Gaðar*),²⁶ while Ladoga is no longer mentioned. Rus’ apart from its main designation *Garðaríki*, has two “bookish” names: *Svíþjóð hin mikla* / *Scythia* and *Kylfingaland*. The number of East-European rivers increases as well: we find the Western Dvina (*Dýna*), the Dnieper (*Nepr*), the Neva (*Nyia*), the Volga or the Volkhov (*Olkoga*) and the Kama (*Kuma*).²⁷

A number of East-European rivers is named in one of the *pulur* of the late twelfth century. As Elena Gurevich demonstrates, these scaldic lists include a large number of synonyms that had never been used in scaldic poetry.²⁸ 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, *Drqfn* – a river near Polotsk) and belong to an

²⁵ Cf. my paper “O nazvanii Rusi *Garðar*”, *Scando-Slavica* 30 (1984), p. 133–143.

²⁶ As far as the last name is concerned see my paper “*Sýrnes* i *Gaðar*: Zagadki drevneskandinavskoj toponimii Drevnej Rusi”, *Scando-Slavica* 32 (1986), p. 73–83.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ E. A. Gurevich, *Drevneskandinavskaja poetičeskaja sinonimika. Tradicija i ee učenoje osmyslenije v XII–XIII vv.* (Dissertation thesis. Moscow 1984), p. 8.

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 different from the early one. The material in *pulur* and the treatises 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*, *Kænugarðr*). These sources mention the main river routes across *Garðaríki* and name the biggest towns that, according to the *Primary Chronicle*, were the most ancient.

The mythical-heroic sagas,²⁹ which 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 are *Ermland*, *Eistland*, *Kirjálaland*, *Kúrland*, *Refalaland*, *Virland* and *Vindland*; Rus' is called *Garðar* and *Garðaríki*; the Russian towns are *Hólmgarðr*, *Kænugarðr*, *Móramar*, *Ráðstofa*, *Pallteskia*, *Smálenszkia*, *Súrdalar*. Still, the mythical-heroic sagas preserve some additional toponymic data, that have to be explained: specifically, the latinized names of Rus' (*Russia*, *Russialand*), Novgorod (*Nógarðr*) and Kiev (*Kio*), as well as the names of the two other towns, *Álaborg* and *Danparstaðir*.

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: 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) represents a progression in which the Scandinavians moved along "the route from the Varangians to the Greeks".

As a final illustration, 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

²⁹ Their toponymy was studied by Galina Glazyrina in "Geografija Vostočnoj Evropy v sagah o drevnih vremenah", *Drevnejšije gosudarstva na territorii SSSR. Materialy i issledovanija. 1986 god* (Moscow 1988), p. 229–235.

the name of Kiev (*Kænugarðr*) only in the later sagas and geographical treatises corresponds to this progression of the Scandinavian expansion. This variation explains why *Hólmgarðr*, and not *Kænugarðr*, is known to be the main town of *Garðaríki* (Rus'). Obviously, *Hólmgarðr* was frequented by the Scandinavians somewhat earlier than *Kænugarðr*, and its name was fixed in the tradition, earliest of the two mentioned above.