

SUMMARY

*Egill Skallagrímsson in
Latvian Historiography*

Sagas are prosaic stories from ancient Iceland written from the 12th century onwards, when Icelanders learned the Latin alphabet and began to read Western European literature. The “Egils saga” belongs to the genre of family sagas; its possible author was Snorri Sturluson. Egill was a *skald* (poet) and a Viking. The saga’s forty-sixth chapter describes a Viking’s journey to Courland around the year 925. It is one of the very few written sources about the history of Latvian territory dated from the 10th century. Thus “Egils saga” attracted the attention of many Latvian historians.

This saga’s forty-sixth chapter appeared for the first time in 1914 in a Latvian translation from German. The author was Roberts Kļaustiņš, who was a literary expert. Kļaustiņš wasn’t a professional historian, but often paid attention in his works to the history of the Latvian people. At the turn of the 20th century, Latvian writers searched for important events in the past in order to educate Latvians to a higher level of national consciousness. In his research, Kļaustiņš used other medieval sources, results of archaeological excavations and ethnographic research. From the information given in this particular chapter, Kļaustiņš concluded that Courland was inhabited by rich and powerful people, who were pirates and seafarers, rather than uncivilized barbarians as they had been described by German historians. Quite often, according to Kļaustiņš’ reading, they were traders and pirates incorporated into one person, which was later re-inforced by the famous historian, Arveds Švābe. In the second half of the 20th century, historians like Vladislavs Urtāns or Arnis Rādiņš argued that professional (Latvian) traders already appeared in the 10th century.

Until 1940, Latvian historians continued to use “Egils saga” to gather information about the contact zones of the Vikings and the Curonians, their military conflicts, trade and housing conditions in Curonia. After Kārlis Ulmanis’ coup d’état in 1934, there was a tendency to underscore the Curonians’ fearless fight against Scandinavian aggressors. In this particular period medieval history played an important role in Latvia’s ideology.

After the Second World War, Latvian historiography was influenced by Soviet ideology, i.e. the concept of socio-economic formations and class struggle. In 1948 Jānis Zutis in writing about early medieval history noted that “Egil saga” told about slaves in the Curonian peasant homestead, but he argued that slaves had only been an auxiliary working force. Zutis’ conclusion about the German aggressors who seriously hindered the locals’ political development was based on the traditional Latvian national historiography and Soviet ideological demand alike. In the Latvian SSR there

was no research in Scandinavian studies, only Vilnis Pāvulāns wrote some texts about ancient Scandinavia. However, exiled Latvians developed a separate historiographic tradition often based on the history writing of the Republic of Latvia. Uldis Ģērmanis for instance described Vikings as dangerous aggressors against whom the Curonians had successfully defended themselves.

After 1991 cooperation with Scandinavian scholars grew, but Latvian historiography, especially in textbooks and popular scientific publications, still repeats the conclusions made by Klaustiņš a century ago. Some historians, however, use “Egils saga” in order to contextualise archaeological material such as early medieval deposits (Tatjana Berga) or ancient defence structures (Ēvalds Mugurēvičs).