



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Finlay, Alison (2014) Jómsvíkinga saga and genre. Scripta Islandica 65 , pp. 63-80. ISSN 0582-3234.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/16197/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

# *Jómsvíkinga Saga* and Genre

ALISON FINLAY

Discussions of genre in Old Norse literature have largely passed *Jómsvíkinga saga* by. In 1985 Melissa Berman placed it, alongside *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*, in a group for which she coined the term “political sagas”; while this categorization has not been found to be altogether convincing, it brought into focus the fact that these early texts, versions of which are believed to have existed as early as 1200, at least have in common their anomalous status outside the major generic groups that developed with the burgeoning of saga writing later in the thirteenth century. Recent discussions of genre, concentrating on issues of historicity, fiction and authorial intention in the sagas, have attempted to reposition at least one anomalous text, *Yngvars saga víðfjrla*, within the category of *fornaldarsaga*. Can a fresh examination of the generic associations of *Jómsvíkinga saga* throw fresh light on the text?

Our understanding of the literary genre of Old Norse texts is modern and imperfect. The term *saga* itself is a generic term and a very non-committal one, meaning nothing more specific than “narrative”. A modern convention applies it to narratives in prose (the norm in Iceland, although most other medieval European literatures tend to favour verse, at least for fictional and/or entertaining narratives), and those that are long enough not to be described as *þættir* — though that still allows, of course, for significant variation in length. We tend to apply “saga” to written texts, although the etymology of the word, and its application in some medieval contexts, tantalizingly suggest an origin in oral storytelling. The texts identified as sagas break down into a number of categories, increasingly recognized as porous — leaving aside those, such as the translated *riddarasögur*, that are directly translated from European sources. The *konungasögur* are perhaps too varied a group to be classed as a genre, including legendary material such as *Ynglingasaga*, the prelude to the otherwise comparatively rationalistic *Heimskringla*, and the hagiographical material associated

mainly with the two King Óláfrs, alongside the historical intent revealed, for instance, in Snorri's preface, a rare example of an author's evaluation of his sources: "þótt vér vitim eigi sannendi á því, þá vitum vér dæmi til, at gamlir fræðimenn hafi slíkt fyrir satt haft" ("although we do not know how true they are, we know of cases where learned men of old have taken such things to be true") (*Heimskringla* I, 1941: 3–4; Finlay & Faulkes 2011: 3). The *Íslendingasögur* are often categorized as fiction, but intersect, for instance, with the *konungasögur* (as in the early chapters of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, dealing with the clashes of Skalla-Grímr and his sons with the king of Norway), and the more fantastical *fornaldarsögur* (as when the hero of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* earns the title of *kappi* in a duel on behalf of the king of Garðaríki, and later kills a dragon while in the service of King Knútr in England).

As long ago as 1964, Lars Lönnroth instigated a critique of conventionally employed generic terms such as *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, partly on the grounds of anachronism, since such usage is rare in medieval texts, particularly those of early date (Lönnroth 1964; see also Lönnroth 1975). Joseph Harris responded with a defence of the use of these conventional terms, and indeed metaphorical description in terms of other modern critical categories, on the score of their analytical functionality in modern scholarship: "'Saga as historical novel' is a more revealing formulation than 'saga as saga', and the 'as' prevents it from being considered [...] simply a lie" (Harris 1975: 429). Recent evaluation of genre in Old Norse texts has turned to the *fornaldarsögur*, a genre at "the more fantastic end of the saga spectrum" (O'Connor 2009), in a reconsideration of the borderline between history and fiction in saga texts. In two important articles, Ralph O'Connor has analysed truth-claims in *fornaldarsögur* and some *riddarasögur* to suggest complex rhetorical motivations for the claims to historicity made by the self-conscious compilers of texts that modern readers have identified as frankly fictional, and consequently dismiss such claims as ironical or parodic (O'Connor 2005; 2009). As a corollary he makes the observation that the medieval concept of history was a capacious one; "it was perfectly acceptable for a historian to take a bare narrative and fill it out with dialogue and dramatic details [...] *historia* could embrace wonder-tales, parody and slapstick humour [...] [the distinction between entertainment and history] is a false opposition, because entertainment is one of the chief functions of historical writing in the Middle Ages" (O'Connor 2009: 366; 373). A related line of thought is pursued by two scholars writing in the same

volume as one of O'Connor's articles, arguing for the alignment of the anomalous text *Yngvars saga víðfjrla* with the *fornaldarsögur*. This is a discussion with considerable relevance for how *Jómsvíkinga saga* might be perceived, since *Yngvars saga* is a text whose narrated events take place within recent historical time (the early eleventh century) but with a considerable admixture of fantastic material. Gottskálf Jensson places *Yngvars saga* as part of a proposed evolution of the genre of *fornaldarsögur* from Latin works such as the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (Gottskálf Jensson 2009) while Carl Phelpstead puts the literary case for “an understanding of the *fornaldarsögur* that accommodates *Yngvars saga* and also has broader significance as a way of conceptualizing the relationship between fantasy and realism in saga narrative” (Phelpstead 2009: 332; see also Phelpstead 2012). Both approaches take seriously the argument of Dietrich Hofmann (1981) that the reference in *Yngvars saga* itself asserting that it was originally written by Oddr Snorrason, author of the early Latin biography of Óláfr Tryggvason, is to be given credence, giving support to the claimed affinity of *Yngvars saga* with both historical and hagiographical genres.

*Jómsvíkinga saga* has an intricate two-way relationship with the *konungasögur*. A version of the text was in existence by 1200, and material was extracted from this and inserted in both *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Chapters 19–22 of *Fagrskinna*, detailing the establishment of Jónsborg, the forming of the fellowship of heroic warriors, their invasion of Norway and defeat by Jarl Hákon at the battle of Hjørungavágr derive from this early version of the saga (Indrebø 1917: 58–80). The same version was used independently in *Heimskringla* (I: 14–15). The later, surviving, versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga* have in turn been influenced by those historical texts. Melissa Berman ranked it alongside two other probably early texts, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*, as an “outgrowth” of the *konungasögur*, possibly a misleading term if these texts are taken to pre-date the interest in royal biography that powered the development of the *konungasögur*. Berman offered the generic classification of “political sagas” for them, defining them as “historical works devoted to small settlements in Norway’s sphere of influence: Jónsborg, the Orkney Islands, and the Faroe Islands. In each saga, Norwegian power proves too much for the young colony, which loses its independence” (Berman 1985: 113). The oddity of lumping the legendary fortress at Jónsborg as a “settlement” together with Orkney and the Faroes reveals the awkwardness of this classification, but Berman’s analysis does identify

a major difference between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the generality of the kings' sagas, its hostility to kings: "*Jómsvíkinga saga* dismisses kings as corrupt, vicious and unjust" (Berman 1985: 114; see also *Heimskringla* I: 53). It has been objected that Berman is too wholesale in dubbing the saga as an "anti-kings' saga", and that criticism of individual kings does not amount to a critique of the institution of monarchy; but a recent survey by Ármann Jakobsson confirms that the attitude to kings can be a marker of genre: "It seems to be the general tendency in the Family Sagas to regard amiable relations with the king as a source of good fortune, regardless of the virtues of the king in question. The Family Sagas may thus even be said to be less critical of individual kings than the Kings' Sagas. The Kings' Sagas are concerned with the idea of kingship. This makes their authors critical of individual kings, who clearly fall short of the ideal" (Ármann Jakobsson 2002: 157).

Theodore Andersson asserts a more fictional quality in *Jómsvíkinga saga* by describing it, along with the no longer extant *Skjöldunga saga* which was probably a source for it, as "a cross between a kings' saga and a legendary saga" (Andersson 1985: 215), a blend that has also been observed, as noted above, in another early text, *Yngvars saga víðfjóra*, from about 1200. The fact that *Skjöldunga saga* also seems to have originated in the period around 1200 — as early as 1180, in the view of Bjarni Guðnason (1982: li–lii) — may remind us that our conception of the historicity of the *konungasögur* is overwhelmingly moulded by the comparatively critical and rational approach to his material developed by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla*, and in particular his use of earlier verse as sources and corroboration of his narrative. In his Prologue to *Heimskringla* he acknowledges the mixed nature of the sources, ultimately oral, that he drew upon for his history of the kings of Norway. He claims to have used "langfeðgatali, þar er konungar eða aðrir stórættaðir menn hafa rakit kyn sitt" ("records of paternal descent in which kings and other men of high rank have traced their ancestry") as well as "fornum kvæðum eða söguljóðum er menn hafa haft til skemmtanar sér" ("old poems or narrative songs which people used to use for their entertainment") (*Heimskringla* I, 1941: 3–4; Finlay & Faulkes 2011: 3). As noted by Ralph O'Connor, the function of historical texts to entertain was a medieval commonplace; the fact that it is oral, verse sources to which Snorri particularly attributes entertainment value perhaps represents a developing tendency for written texts to be assigned value over oral tradition (O'Connor 2009: 367). It would be anachronistic to impose on medieval writers such as Snorri

Sturluson the standards of rationalistic enquiry of the modern historian, and it can readily be conceded that the sober kings' sagas include much that strikes the modern eye as frankly fictional. But the *konungasögur* are founded on what can, broadly speaking, be acknowledged as fact: the biographies of kings who (after the legendary preamble of *Ynglinga saga*) are known to have existed. Snorri's Prologue details his sources for this hard fact: the genealogies used by the kings themselves to justify and support their claims to authority, reports of *fróðir menn*, and skaldic verse composed during the lifetimes of the kings themselves (or their sons) and recited in their presence. A recent book has taken a sceptical view of the reliability of skaldic verse in the *konungasögur* as historical evidence for the events they purport to describe (Ghosh 2011), but this is irrelevant to the issue of the value that medieval authors placed on them. Snorri's Prologue by no means accepts the truthfulness of the verses at face value; he acknowledges that some verses are likely to be more reliable than others, and he accepts as a principle the value of recording material that *fræðimenn* of the past have believed to be true, even if he cannot demonstrate it himself — in other words, the value of tradition.

It is at the peripheries of the *konungasögur* genre that less historically trustworthy material seeps in. One boundary is that of hagiography, which not only authorizes a supernatural element in the guise of the miracles marking the status of the two missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, even in Snorri's comparatively rationalistic account, but also encourages the polarization that, for example, demonizes Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson as arch-pagan.

*Jómsvíkinga saga* is set against a background of historical events — the involvement of the Danish king in defensive military activity along the Baltic coast in the tenth century, and a historical Danish incursion into the realm of their subject but rebellious subordinate in charge of Norway — and the existence of the main Jómsvíking heroes (Sigvaldi Strút-Haraldsson and his brother Porkell, Búi and Vagn) is attested in skaldic verses referring to the battle of Hjørungavágr, cited in *Jómsvíkinga saga* but also in other texts. But the saga's emphasis is distinctively anti-historical. These named characters are made to undertake the fight against the Norwegian aggressors, the Hlaðjarlar, not out of allegiance to the Danish king Sveinn but because he has tricked them into making extravagant vows while they were drunk, so that the encounter is seen in the light of the impossible quest of a folktale or romance. Rather than representing an outlying and potentially vulnerable settlement, as Berman implies, these

heroes are bound together within the apparently legendary brotherhood of the Jómsvíkings, which she herself identifies with the “noble viking covenant so common in legendary sagas”, in seven of which she instances codes comparable to the rules governing Jómsborg according to the saga (Berman 1985: 115).<sup>1</sup> Like a medieval order of knighthood, or even a monastic order, this group is defined by its oaths, testing procedures and the bonds between its members, rather than by loyalty to a historically verifiable entity, such as a sovereign state; the members of the group are measured, not only against their enemies, but also against each other. The ideology of this warrior band depends, as might be expected, on values of extreme heroism and loyalty, but the repeated plot element of duplicity lays stress as well on self-reliance and individualism.

This feature extends beyond the saga’s main protagonists; the early part of the saga tells of the struggles of the dispossessed King Sveinn, born illegitimate, to succeed to the kingdom of his father Haraldr Gormsson, which he achieves by a prolonged campaign of harrying, culminating in the secret killing of King Haraldr by Sveinn’s foster-father Pálma-Tóki, later the founder of Jómsborg. The involvement of the Jómsvíkings in the battle of Hjørungavágr, at the climax of the saga, is motivated by Sveinn’s duplicity: He exploits their boasts to force them into attacking Jarl Hákon; this in itself is presented as Sveinn’s vengeance for the treachery of Sigvaldi, who has kidnapped Sveinn and tricked him into marriage with a daughter of King Burisleifr of the Wends. The closest parallel to this reinvention of historical material to make it dependent on the character traits and personal motivations of individual characters is the treatment of the interactions of historical peoples, such as the Huns and Burgundians, in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*.

Some indication of how *Jómsvíkinga saga* was received by its medieval audience can be gleaned by differences between the versions that show how it developed over time. For instance, the first part of the saga dealing with the early kings of Denmark is heavy with fantastic elements, and is contrasted by Berman with what she considers the “political” content of the text proper: “The early history of Denmark that opens the saga is [...] the stuff of legend: a foundling prince, prophetic dreams, and ominous visions fill this section” (Berman 1985: 115). There is some evidence, indeed, that this preamble was not original to the saga: A stylistic analysis

<sup>1</sup> *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Friðjófs saga*, *Hervarar saga*, *Hálfs saga*, *Sturlaugs saga* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*.

by Peter Foote led him to conclude that it was not as old as the rest, though it is found in all but one of the surviving versions (AM 510 4to is the exception), and must therefore have existed in the version from which all the surviving manuscripts descend (Foote 1959). If we speculate on why such an addition may have been made, it is, ironically, likely that it was modelled on the precedent of such texts as *Heimskringla*, which opens with the legendary *Ynglinga saga*, or *Skjöldunga saga*: Thus an element that, to modern eyes, seems blatantly unhistorical may have been added in order to bring the saga into line with texts of more sober historical intent.

Snorri's Prologue to *Heimskringla* gives priority to poetic sources as the nearest possible thing to eyewitness evidence, while acknowledging that the evidence of skalds, particularly those present in battles on one side or the other, self-evidently privileges one side of the story: "En þat er hátt skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir" ("It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time") (*Heimskringla* I, 1941: 5; Finlay & Faulkes 2011: 3–4). The late (sixteenth-century) version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* in AM 510 4to cites a number of skaldic verses, two by Þórðr Kolbeinsson and nine whole and two half stanzas by Tindr Hallkelsson, not preserved in other manuscripts of the saga. The fact that some of these verses are also cited in *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* suggests that the scribe of AM 510 4to interpolated them into his text from the now lost version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* which was used as a source for those historical texts. Judith Jesch has seen in this use of verse "attempts at historical narrative" likely to derive from the early stage of the literary history of the saga represented by this lost version (Jesch 1993: 215). Jesch cites examples in the saga of unevenness in perspective, arising from "the incomplete integration of sources which basically concentrate on the Hlaðajarls [...] into a text that is otherwise primarily interested in the deeds of the Jómsvíkings" (215). She sees the later history of the saga, resulting in the texts that now survive, as a process of fictionalization, diverting attention from the historical kernel of the story — which is contained in verses honouring not the Jómsvíkings but their Norwegian enemies. Norman Blake too calls the saga "the end product of many years of literary accretion" (Blake 1962: vii). The reintroduction of verse into this late version of the saga may have come from an impulse to give the saga a more historical gloss, in the style of Snorri; on the other hand, Jesch shows that the process of fictionalization must have begun very early, since comparison with the evidence of *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* shows that even in the lost



earliest version of the saga verses seem to have been used in contexts that make them serve literary rather than authenticating purposes.

Analysing the saga's use of verse sources is one means of measuring it against external reality. Another is its treatment of topography. Extensive efforts have been made to establish the geographical basis for the two central locations of the saga, Jónsborg and Hjørungavágr. It is widely accepted that Jónsborg, mentioned in various historical sources predating the saga, can be identified with the town of Wollin, now in Poland; the northern affiliations of Wollin are well-attested by archaeological evidence but it "was principally a market town, although there must have been a garrison in the citadel [...] Jónsborg can never have been the home of an isolated viking community" (Blake 1962: xi). The location of the great battle of Hjørungavágr has been the subject of attempts to match up the physical details specified by the saga with the contours of the west coast of Norway (see Megaard 1999); it is most commonly associated with the bay now called Liavåg (Blake 1962: 49–50). But as Halldór Laxness aptly remarked, Hjørungavágr — like Svǫldr, the equally shadowy location of Óláfr Tryggvason's fall — is a place created not by God but by Icelanders: "Hjørungavåg er et sted som Svolder, hvor Olav Tryggvason faldt, og som ikke blev skabt av Gud, men lavet af islændere. Ikke engang filologerne ved hvor disse steder ligger" (Halldór Laxness 1971: 179). By this he meant that the physical features of these literary scenes are shaped by the needs of the traditional story; Svǫldr becomes an island rather than a river, as it is said to be in a verse by Skúli Þorsteinsson (*Heimskringla* I, 1941: 358), in order to accommodate the scene (probably derived from a literary model) of Óláfr's enemies observing his passing fleet, and failing to recognize the magnificent Ormr inn langi. Ólafur Halldórsson takes a sceptical view of the identification of Hjørungavágr with Liavåg, pointing out that the features described in the text differ from the location in almost every respect, and implying that the landscape of the saga is dictated by the needs of the story: the island PrímSIGÐ as the location for Jarl Hákon's invocation of his pagan goddesses, and the skerry behind which Vagn's ships lie concealed (Ólafur Halldórsson 1990: 408–09).

More significant in the saga than the topography of Jónsborg is its status as an enclosed community, defining the heroic ideals of the tested warriors admitted within its fortified walls. The warrior credentials of the Jónsvíkings are established, not by any detail of their deeds before the battle of Hjørungavágr, but by their collective identification with their brotherhood (Jónsvíkinga saga 1969: 130):

Og sitja þeir nú í borginni við þetta í góðum friði og halda vel lög sín. Þeir fara hvert sumar úr borginni og herjar á ýmsi lönd og fá sér ágætis mikils, og þykja vera hinir mestu hermenn, og öngvir þóttu vera nálega þeirra jafningjar í þenna tíma. Og eru nú kallaðir Jómsvíkingar héðan í frá allar stundir.

[And now with that they remain peacefully in the fortress and keep their laws well. Every summer they go out of the fortress and raid in various lands and win themselves great fame, and are considered to be the greatest warriors, and had almost no equals at that time. And now ever since they have always been called Jómsvíkings.]

A chapter of the saga is devoted to the discipline imposed on the band by their laws, which combine definition of the heroic demands they are expected to fulfil — not running from equally well-armed men, avenging each other as brothers, speaking no word of fear — with pseudo-monastic disciplines which subordinate individual assertiveness to the common good — pooling the goods they win by raiding, being absent for no more than three days, submitting to their leader, Pálna-Tóki, to settle their disputes. Although there is no historical evidence of warrior bands adopting such complex ordinances, some of the requirements can be paralleled, for instance, in the Norwegian *Hirðskrá*. The stipulation that no one can join the band “er ellri væri en fimmtugur að aldri og engi yngri en átján vetra gamall” (“who was older than fifty, and no one younger than eighteen”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 129) is reminiscent of the restrictions on the crew of Óláfr Tryggvason’s great vessel, the Ormr inn langi: “engi maðr skyldi vera á Orminum langa ellri en sextøgr eða yngri en tvítøgr, en valdir mjök at afli ok hreysti” (“no man was to be on Ormr inn langi older than sixty or younger than twenty, and they were to be chosen mainly for strength and valour”) (*Heimskringla* I, 1941: 344; Finlay & Faulkes 2011: 215). Strikingly, though, the code of the Jómsvíkings emphasizes submission not to a ruler, but to the group. The leader’s dominance is vital in maintaining the group dynamic, but is not an end in itself. Thus when Sigvaldi takes over after Pálna-Tóki’s death, “þá er það frá sagt, að nökkvað breyttist háttur laganna í borginni, og verða lög in haldin eigi með jafnmikilli freku sem þá er Pálnatóki stýrði” (“then it is related that the nature of the laws in the fortress changed somewhat, and the laws were not observed with as much keenness as when Pálna-Tóki was in charge”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 152). The relaxation of discipline has no particular narrative consequence in the saga, but the observance of the code is used as a mechanism for the measuring of one character against

another. This foreshadows the events of the battle of Hjörungavágr, where the solidarity of the Jómsvíkings as a unit is a vital factor — and Sigvaldi is again found wanting.

In proposing the category of “political sagas”, Melissa Berman hoped that “the term may help rescue these sagas from neglect and allow us to assess their importance to the history of Icelandic literature, especially the development of the family saga” (Berman 1985: 113). The family saga she finds most relevant to this group is *Egils saga*, in which she notes a comparable representation of the subsuming of an outlying community by a larger political entity through the confrontation between individual and ruler. I have already expressed some scepticism about the applicability of this description to *Jómsvíkinga saga*, for this text is striking in that the conflict between political entities (Denmark and Norway) is mediated not by an individual but by a group, and the emphasis is on maintaining the collectivity within this group. Nevertheless, there is common ground between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the sagas of Icelanders in their representation of individual character, as comparisons and tensions between these individuals are explored. The enclosed nature and stringent exclusiveness of Jómsborg function to introduce the main players in the forthcoming battle and establish their heroic credentials. The saga narrates the arrival of individuals — Sigvaldi and Þorkell, Búi and Sigurðr kápa — at the gates of the fortress, where they are tested before being admitted; to emphasize the element of exclusivity, some followers of each are turned away. The (apparently fictional) pairing of these warriors as brothers<sup>2</sup> sets up a tension between family solidarity and that which the laws of the Jómsvíkings impose on the group, a tension that plays its part too in the vows of the Jómsvíkings and the fulfilment of these oaths in the course of the battle, which nevertheless allow the band to fragment.

Where the laws of the Jómsvíkings test these arrivals, the advent of Vagn, by contrast, puts the laws themselves to the test. The superiority of Vagn is established in a duel with Sigvaldi, and is such as to force the fellowship to lay its age restrictions aside to admit Vagn at the age of twelve. Despite the overtones of knightly combat in the duel and the subsequent praise of Vagn’s expertise in *ridðaraskap* “knightliness” (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 150), all the leading Jómsvíkings are represented

<sup>2</sup> Skaldic verses testify to the presence of Sigvaldi and Búi at Hjörungavágr. Þorkell was certainly a historical figure who participated in the viking conquest of England in the eleventh century, but his presence at Hjörungavágr is more doubtful. Sigurðr kápa is not known elsewhere and may be an invention (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969: 48–50).

anti-heroically in ways familiar from the *Íslendingasögur*. Vagn is a precocious, difficult youth after the fashion of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who finds his place among the Jómsvíkings when his family is unable to control him: “Hann er nú heima þar til er hann er tólf vetra gamall, og er þá svo komið að menn þóttust trautt mega umb hræfa hans skaplyndi og ofsa” (“Now he stays there at home until he is twelve years old, and then it has reached the point where people seemed hardly able to tolerate his temperament and pride”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 143). Búi is portrayed as notoriously miserly, his determination to hold on even in death to the two chests of gold acquired in a settlement early in the saga, and which he takes overboard with him in the course of the battle, again reminiscent of a story told of Egill: “En það skorar Búi í sættina, að hann læzt aldri mundu lausar láta gullkisturnar þær er hann hafði fingið af jarli” (“But Búi stipulates as part of the settlement that he would never let go of the chests of gold that he had got from the jarl”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 140). Sigvaldi, as already suggested, is an equivocal character more noted for shrewdness than his observance of the laws; his later defection from the battle foreshadows his more historically significant betrayal of Óláfr Tryggvason at Svøldr.

Whereas in Oddr Snorrason’s saga of Óláfr Tryggvason and its later derivatives Sigvaldi is a clear villain, his status in *Jómsvíkinga saga* is more ambivalent; he does desert his comrades, but in doing so fulfills the letter of his boast, since Jarl Hákon has enlisted the aid of two troll-women in the battle, and “ekki strengdu vér þess heit að berjast við tröll” (“we did not swear an oath to fight against trolls”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 187). Walter Baetke (1970) argued that Sigvaldi’s treacherous nature was an invention of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, borrowed and adapted by Oddr Snorrason to demonize the betrayer of Óláfr Tryggvason on the model of Judas, the betrayer of Jesus. But Theodore Andersson (2003: 20–25) considers, surely rightly, that Oddr’s source for Sigvaldi’s treachery was the verse attributed to Stefnir Þorgilsson which Oddr cites (translated into Latin), and which is also cited in *Fagrskinna* and *Kristni saga*, in which Sigvaldi is denounced for his double treachery: the tricking of Sveinn alluded to above, and the betrayal of Óláfr Tryggvason (*Fagrskinna*: 151; Finlay 2004: 121):

Munkat nefna,	[I shall not name
nær munk stefna:	though near I aim:
niðrbjúgt es nef	downward bends
á níðingi, —	the dastard’s nose —

panns Svein konung	the one who lured
sveik ór landi,	King Sveinn from his land,
en Tryggvason	and drew Tryggvason
á talar dró.	into a trap.]

Whether or not the word *níðingr*, and Sigvaldi's down-turned nose, represent allusions to the Judas tradition already present in the verse, as Andersson argues, the verse clearly establishes Sigvaldi as the type of a traitor, referring to his betrayals of the two opposing rulers. This tradition underlies his characterization in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, where the description of him as "maður nefljótur" ("an ugly-nosed man") suggests knowledge of the verse, but the portrayal is not consistently negative; indeed, Sigvaldi's tricking of Sveinn, referred to in Stefnir's verse, is one of the incidents that establishes him as a resourceful and successful leader, in a saga that sets a premium on duplicitous cunning.

In Oddr's saga, and indeed in Stefnir's verse, the emphasis is on Sigvaldi as a betrayer of kings; that one of these kings is presented in a saga that some at least have represented as a saint's life (Sverrir Tómasson 1984: 261–79) adds a hagiographical dimension that identifies Sigvaldi with the forces of evil. In *Jómsvíkinga saga* the issue is his abandonment of the group, and of his own special duties as its leader. His betrayal is measured, first, in the context of the oaths sworn by all the Jómsvíkings; and second, through comparison with the more truly heroic Vagn. Egged on by the deviousness of King Sveinn, Sigvaldi had sworn "að eg skal [...] hafa eltan Hákon jarl úr landi eða drepið hann ella; að þriðja kosti skal eg þar eftir liggja" ("that I must [...] have driven Jarl Hákon from the land, or else have killed him; as a third alternative I must stay lying dead there") (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 162). This uncompromising boast compares poorly with Sigvaldi's behaviour in the event; to fail to fulfil his vow because the enemy had called on superhuman help looks like seeking refuge in a technicality, and Sigvaldi's failing is highlighted by Vagn's overt condemnation: "Þá mælti hann til Sigvalda, at hann skyldi fara manna armastur" ("Then he told Sigvaldi that he went as the most despicable of men"), followed by a derogatory verse (188). It is contrasted too with the conventional stoicism of Búi, who quips as his lips and teeth are hewn off, "Versna mun hinni dönsku þykja að kyssa oss [...] í Borgundarhólmi, þótt vér kæmim enn þangað þessu næst" ("The Danish woman in Borgundarhólm will think kissing me is getting worse [...] if I get there after this"). It is presumably not for this reason that Búi

soon after seizes his two chests of gold and jumps overboard, fulfilling the boast made not in Sveinn's presence, but earlier in the saga.

More significantly, the vows of the other Jómsvíkings, reflecting their familial relationships, are framed to show that the defection of Sigvaldi, as leader, has consequences for the strength of the fellowship as a whole. For the vow of Sigvaldi's brother Þorkell had been "að eg mun fylgja Sigvalda bróður mínum og flýja eigi fyrr en eg séig á skutstafn skipi hans" ("that I will follow my brother Sigvaldi and not flee before I see the stern of his ship") (162). Þorkell's commitment to the battle is contingent on Sigvaldi's, and therefore he and Sigurðr kápa, who has made a similar vow in relation to his brother Búi, feel free to leave the scene, "og þykist nú hvorumtveggi þeirra hafa efnt sína heitstrenging, Þorkels og Sigurðar" ("and now both of them, Þorkell and Sigurðr, feel they have fulfilled their vow") (188–89).

The final testing of the heroic mettle of the Jómsvíkings takes place in the execution scene, where the reactions of each of a series of ten survivors are passed under review as they are put to death. It may not be going too far to suggest that the closest generic comparison with this sequence is hagiography, since these are demonstrations of exemplary behaviour where narrative improbability is sanctioned by the special power — in this case heroic self-control — commanded by exceptional individuals. The construction of the scene is anecdotal, with evidence in the different versions of confusion and embroidery as new postures and witticisms are devised to showcase the heroes' stoicism. The motivation is explicitly that of testing the reputation of the Jómsvíkings (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 195):

Og nú ætla þeir Hákon jarl og Þorkell að spyrja hvern þeirra áður þeir sé höggvir, hvern veg þeir hygði til banans, og reyna svo liðið, hvort svo hart væri sem sagt var, og þykir reynt ef engi þeirra mælir æðruorð þegar þeir sjá banann opinn fyrir sér [...] En í öðru lagi þá þótti þeim gaman að heyra á orð þeirra, hvort sem upp kæmi.

[And now Jarl Hákon and Þorkell intend to ask each of them before they are beheaded what they thought about death, and so to test the company, whether it was as tough as was said, and think it will be proved if none of them speaks a word of fear when they see death waiting for them [...] And on the other hand it seemed entertaining to them to listen to their words, however it turned out.]

The final sentence, typically, warns us not to take the saga's heroic attitudes too seriously; its prime purpose is to entertain. An interesting feature of

the scene is that it delineates, among the more predictable displays of stoicism and gallows witticisms at the expense of the executioners, a strain of meditation on the nature of death, apparently a popular topic of philosophical investigation among the mead-cups of Jónsborg (or, more likely, among the literary associates of a bookish saga author) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 196):

En það vilda eg að þú veittir mér, að þú hyggir sem skjótast af mér höfuðið, en eg helda á einum tigilknífi, þvíáð vér Jómsvíkingar höfum oft rætt um það, hvort maður vissi nokkuð þá er af færi höfuðið, ef maðr væri sem skjótast högginn, og nú skal það til marks, að eg mun fram vísa knífinum ef eg veit nokkuð frá mér, ellegar mun hann falla þegar niður úr hendi mér.

[I would like you to grant it to me that you chop off my head as quickly as possible, while I hold on to a belt-knife, for we Jómsvíkings have often discussed whether a man is aware of anything when the head goes off if he is struck as quickly as possible, and the sign of it will be that I will point the knife forward if I am aware of anything, or else it will fall down at once out of my hand.]

The author's sardonic comment punctures the heroic posturing:

Ög nú höggur Porkell svo að þegar fauk höfuðið af bolnum, en knífurinn féll á jörð niður, sem líklegt var.

[And now Porkell strikes so that the head at once flew off the trunk, but the knife fell to the ground, as was likely.]

*Jómsvíkinga saga* has been described as a series of colourful set pieces. Some, such as the account of Jarl Hákon's sacrifice of his son to his patron goddesses and the magical storm that ensues, and that of Sigvaldi's betrayal, exploiting his reputation — established in texts of historical intent, whether or not it had a basis in reality — as a traitor, can be seen as rationalizations of the outcome of a battle which probably in some form or another actually happened, though its location and most of what we are told about it are fictionalized. The execution scene, though, is an entirely literary creation, designed to exemplify, in as many ways as possible, the stoicism of the viking hero facing the supreme challenge. After the heroic defeat of Hjúngavágr it re-establishes the cohesion of the warrior band, as one after another calls on traditional heroic resignation in the name of the collective values of the Jómsvíkings: "Eigi man eg lög vor Jómsvíkinga ef eg hygg illt til eða kvíða eg við bana mínum eða mæla eg

æðruorð, þvíað eitt sinn skal hver deyja” (“I am not remembering the laws of us Jómsvíkingas if I think ill of it or fear my death or speak words of fear, for everyone must die once”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga*: 195).

The most obvious generic associations of *Jómsvíkinga saga* are with the kings’ sagas. But this is already a very capacious genre; as I have shown, the saga incorporates elements of fantasy such as prophecy, portents and dreams, to an extent that confirms the origin of the text to be too early to be influenced by the critical and rationalizing developments in the genre fostered by Snorri. At the same time other generic connections can be made. The interpretation of history in terms of the character and motivations of individuals is characteristic of the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*. The conception of the viking fellowship and laws of Jómsborg can be paralleled in the *fornaldarsögur*. There are hagiographical elements in the demonization of Jarl Hákon, and the defection of Sigvaldi, though these are presented without overt Christian moralization. The interest in the characterization of non-royal individuals is reminiscent of the *Íslendinga-sögur*. While it can be shown that material from the saga went towards the shaping of the *konungasögur*, it does not share their preoccupations and emphasis. That much it has in common with the other early texts, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*; but this is not to say that they should be forced together into classification as a genre. In its focus on the communal relationships among a group of warriors, set against a broadly historical conflict between states that drives the narrative but never takes centre stage, *Jómsvíkinga saga* defies genre classification.

## Bibliography

- Andersson, Theodore M., 1985: Kings’ Sagas (Konungasögur). In: Old Norse–Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide. Ed. by C. J. Clover & J. Lindow. Pp. 197–238.
- Andersson, Theodore M., trans., 2003: Oddr Snorrason. The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason. In: *Islandica* 52.
- Ármann Jakobsson, 2002: Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas. In: *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117, pp. 145–60.
- Baetke, Walter, 1970: Die Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar des Oddr Snorrason und die Jómsvíkinga saga. Zur Historiographie des nordischen Frühmittelalters. In: *Formen mittelalterlicher Literatur: Siegfried Beyschlag zu seinem 65. Geburtstag*. Ed. by O. Werner & B. Naumann. Pp. 1–18.



- Berman, Melissa, 1985: The Political Sagas. In: *Scandinavian Studies* 57, pp. 113–29.
- Bjarni Guðnason, 1982: Formáli. In: *Danakonunga sögur*. Ed. by Bjarni Guðnason. (Íslenzk fornrit 35.) Pp. v–cxiv.
- Blake, Norman, ed. and trans., 1962: *Jómsvíkinga saga — The Saga of the Jomsvikings*.
- Fagrskinna. 1985. In: *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*. Fagrskinna–Nóregskonunga tal. Ed. by Bjarni Einarsson. (Íslenzk fornrit 29.)
- Finlay, Alison, trans., 2004: *Fagrskinna, a Catalogue of the Kings of Norway*.
- Finlay, Alison & Anthony Faulkes, trans., 2011: *Heimskringla I. The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*.
- Foot, Peter, 1959: Notes on Some Linguistic Features in AM 291 (*Jómsvíkinga saga*). In: *Íslenzk tunga* 1, pp. 26–46.
- Ghosh, Shami, 2011: *Kings' Sagas and Norwegian History. Problems and Perspectives*.
- Gottskálk Jensson, 2009. Were the Earliest *fornaldarsögur* Written in Latin? In: *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. by A. Ney, Á. Jakobsson & A. Lassen. Pp. 79–91.
- Halldór Laxness, 1971: *Yfirskygðir staðir*.
- Harris, Joseph, 1975: Genre in the Saga Literature: A Squib. In: *Scandinavian Studies* 47:4, pp. 427–36.
- Heimskringla I*. 1941. Ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. (Íslenzk fornrit 26.)
- Hofmann, Dietrich, 1981: *Die Yngvars saga víðförla und Oddr munkr inn fróði*. In: *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*. Ed. by U. Dronke et al. Pp. 188–222.
- Indrebø, Gustav, 1917: *Fagrskinna*.
- Jesch, Judith, 1993: History in the 'Political Sagas'. In: *Medium Ævum* 62, pp. 210–20.
- Jómsvíkinga saga*. 1969. Ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson.
- Lönnroth, Lars, 1964: *Tesen om de två kulturerna: Kritiska studier i den isländska sagaskrivningens sociala förutsättningar*. In: *Scripta Islandica* 15, pp. 1–97.
- Lönnroth, Lars, 1975: The Concept of Genre in Saga Literature. In: *Scandinavian Studies* 47:4, pp. 419–26.
- Megaard, John, 1999: *Hvor sto 'Slaget i Hjørungavágr'?* Jomsvikingeberetningens stedsnavn og Sæmundr fróði. In: *Alvíssmál* 9, pp. 29–54.
- O'Connor, Ralph, 2005: History or Fiction? Truth-claims and defensive narrators in Icelandic romance-sagas. In: *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 15, pp. 101–69.
- O'Connor, Ralph, 2009: Truth and Lies in the *fornaldarsögur*: The Prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*. In: *Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Ed. by A. Ney, Á. Jakobsson & A. Lassen. Pp. 361–78.
- Ólafur Halldórsson, 1969: *Inngangur*. In: *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson.

- Ólafur Halldórsson, 1990: Mostur og Sæla. In: Grettisfærsla. Safn ritgerða eftir Ólaf Halldórsson. Pp. 403–14. (First published in Gripla 6, 1984.)
- Phelpstead, Carl, 2009: Adventure-Time in Yngvars saga víðförla. In: Fornaldarsagaerne. Myter og virkelighed. Studier i de oldislandske fornaldarsögur Nordurlanda. Ed. by A. Ney, Á. Jakobsson & A. Lassen. Pp. 361–78.
- Phelpstead, Carl, 2012: Fantasy and history. The limits of plausibility in Oddr Snorrason's Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar. In: Saga-Book 36, pp. 27–42.
- Sverrir Tómasson, 1984: Hvönnin í Ólafs sögum Tryggvasonar. In: Gripla 6, pp. 202–17.

## Summary

*Jómsvíkinga saga* is difficult to classify generically. Modern conceptions of history and fiction in any case rely on different assumptions from those of medieval authors. Recent attempts to relocate another anomalous text, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, within the *fornaldarsögur* has implications for *Jómsvíkinga saga*. The saga has an intricate two-way relationship with the *konungasögur*, and is set against a background of historical events, but its narrative is ahistorical, particularly in its personalization of events. The saga shows a development over time, with later versions including more fantastic elements; the inclusion of verse, on the model of the *konungasögur*, was also a later development. The saga shows a particular interest in the dynamics of relationships within a warrior group, rather than singling out an individual hero. There is a polarity between the heroic Vagn and the treacherous Sigvaldi, whose defection brings about the downfall of the group. Despite sharing material with the *konungasögur*, the saga's preoccupations are distinctive and defy genre classification.

**Keywords:** Genre, history, fiction

*Alison Finlay*  
*Department of English and Humanities*  
*Birkbeck College*  
*Malet Street*  
*London*  
*WC1E 7HX*  
*UK*  
*a.finlay@bbk.ac.uk*