Preface

Jómsvíkinga saga (henceforth JS) is preserved in manuscripts dating from the thirteenth century onwards and was probably written around 1200, and may very well have been one of the first epic prose texts to have been composed in Old Icelandic as it contains material from earlier sources. It is an important work in several respects, not least as regards the history of Denmark and the West Slavic area on the southern Baltic coast.

As far as genre is concerned, the saga stands outside the conventional division between ‘historical’ and ‘literary’ texts that is used in discussions of Icelandic sagas; JS blends historical material, such as the genealogy of the early kings of Denmark, with a strong element of fantasy. This is relevant not only in evaluating the status of the saga as a historical source, but also in considering its transmission, since it was mined at an early stage of its genesis as a source for texts of a more serious historical intent. Most of the characters and events in the narrative are historically attested, yet the narrative seems intended largely for entertainment. It is thus important to evaluate not only the degree of historical authenticity in the text, but also the attitudes it reveals among its intended (Icelandic) audience towards the issue of Scandinavian-Slavic contact.

Confidence in Old Norse sagas as historical sources has been declining ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. The saga-historicity debate has deprived sagas of most of their historical value, and modern historical research often prefers to ignore these sources. Yet archaeological finds suggest that relations between the West Slavic areas on the southern Baltic shore and Scandinavia were extensive in the late Viking Age and High Middle Ages, something that is supported by the evidence of the saga. Moreover, archaeological research seems to indicate that JS might contain a nucleus of some historical value. The need for interdisciplinary research on JS and its historical background as well as an evaluation of the available interdisciplinary data is therefore pressing.

One of the main topics for discussion concerning the saga’s description of events as compared with modern archaeological findings is the state of relations in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries between the Danish and Norwegian kings on the one hand and Pomerania and Jómsborg, the Jómsvíkings’ legendary stronghold, on the other. We clearly need to reassess what we thought we knew about JS and its usefulness as a historical source in light of new data. Furthermore, JS is an important source for the period when it was written, viz. c. 1200. A closer study of its versions might show how the legend of the Jómsvíkings continued its existence in oral and written traditions even after the Danish expansion into Rügen and Pomerania in the late twelfth century, and what place the Jómsvíkings and the area around Jómsborg had in the Scandinavians’ worldview.

The identification and localization of Jómsborg is a central problem in archaeological research related to JS. The town of Wolin in Polish Pomerania has for a long time been considered one of the most probable candidates, which has resulted in extensive archaeological excavations being undertaken there since the 1930s. These excavations have led researchers to the discouraging conclusion that looking for the legendary stronghold of the Jómsvíkings on the Dziwna River is futile.

However, recent archaeological excavations undertaken in the town seem to have opened up new perspectives for linking the Jómsborg legend with early medieval Wolin. A substantial quantity of various high status objects related to Scandinavia (tools, pendants, game pieces, weapons) has been found. All of these objects are dated to the period c. 970/980–c. 1020, the time when, according to JS, the Jómsvíkings were active in the region. The objects’ ornamentation suggests that they were manufactured in Wolin by Scandinavian craftsmen for Scandinavian customers. Recipients of these precious and exclusive objects could have constituted a close group of high-ranking warriors coming from Scandinavia.

A presentation and evaluation of the new archaeological data from Wolin is vital. If the preliminary interpretation of the data that suggests the presence of a Scandinavian warrior group in Wolin in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries is plausible, then there is definite potential for a breakthrough in JS research especially with regard to the saga’s historicity. The main topics for discussion are the possible presence, status and function of a Scandinavian warrior group in tenth–eleventh-century Wolin as well as this group’s influence on the oral and written saga tradition. The onomastic perspective is also to be taken into account.
since it has the potential to elucidate the problems of the identification, localization, and etymology of Jómsborg.

More recent research on the relations between West Slavs and Scandinavians as depicted in JS is not generally known or available to the scholarly or general audience in a row of European countries, where such a source might be of interest, including Finland, the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. This situation could be improved by translating JS from Old Norse into a number of European languages to make the text more widely available and thus stimulate future research on the saga and related philological, literary, historical, and archaeological problems. Furthermore, this could even open up new fields of study in the countries where the saga was not available before.

Translating JS implies understanding and interpreting the text and its different contexts, while transferring them into the target language. The interpretation of the saga and thus the credibility of the finished translations are ultimately dependent on the available research findings, making it necessary to combine translation work with research. Important aspects include the choice of the original text for translation among the available versions and manuscripts as well as a scholarly justification for such a choice; the interdependence of JS translation and research; the choice of appropriate target groups and the consequences of this for the translation process, and the rendering of Old Norse proper names into the target languages.

New investigations of JS would change the existing, sometimes disciplinary approach to studying Old Norse sagas in general and JS in particular, and moreover, renewed work might challenge the existing saga-research ‘axioms’. This is the common theme of this year’s issue of Scripta Islandica. It contains ten contributions that analyse the saga from the angles described above. Some of the contributions are accompanied by brief reactions and comments by other scholars. This volume is not a conference report, but it is the result of a workshop entitled “West Slavic-Scandinavian relations and Jómsvíkinga saga”, organized at Uppsala University 27–28 April 2012. Some of the speakers were encouraged to submit reworked versions of their papers that would be suitable for publication as articles and that were subject to the journal’s usual referee process. The editing has been carried out by Jonathan Adams, Alexandra Petrulevich (the main organizer of the workshop) and Henrik Williams, in collaboration with the main editors of Scripta Islandica. This preface includes contributions by Sirpa Aalto, Alison Finlay, Jakub Morawiec and Marie Novotná.
It is my hope that the published contributions will show what kind of JS-related research is still needed to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about this saga and its textual, literary, historical and archaeological context, and that it will moreover provide an interdisciplinary perspective in order to identify potential opportunities for further research on Jómsvíkinga saga.

Alexandra Petrulevich
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