

Jómsvíkinga Saga as a Part of Old Norse Historiography

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Introduction

“But as a whole, the [Jómsvíkinga] saga is far from being a historical work. It must be classified as an entertaining fiction, and as such, it is one of the highlights of medieval Icelandic saga literature” (Halldórsson 1993: 344). This statement, which was published twenty years ago, is very clear: *Jómsvíkinga saga* is fiction. Halldórsson crystallizes the problem of *Jómsvíkinga saga*: its entertaining style. However, recent studies of saga genres have pointed out that several sagas show mixed modality (for example Lassen et al. 2012; Clunies Ross 2010; O’Connor 2005; Lönnroth 2003). This observation gives reason to reconsider *Jómsvíkinga saga*: Is the saga to be considered as part of Old Norse historiography, or is it just entertainment?

Jómsvíkinga saga is among the sagas that have been and still seem to be heavily debated. There are two main reasons for this: 1) The literary style of the saga makes it difficult to place it in a specific genre, and 2) its relatively early date of writing (c. 1200; Halldórsson 1993: 343) makes it even more difficult to assess its source value, compared with, for instance, the kings’ sagas which have been considered as historiography because of their content. It is thus the style of the saga that has been problematic for scholars. *Jómsvíkinga saga* has been classified as a “political saga”, “not quite [a] kings’ saga”, “a cross between a kings’ saga and a legendary saga” and even a “colonial saga” (Jakobsson 1997; Berman 1985; Chesnutt 1993: 456–57; Rowe 2005: 17). In fact, *Jómsvíkinga saga* is easily forgotten when sagas are categorized (Nordal et al. 1992: 291, 387).

The genre division made by scholars has affected views as to which of the sagas can be considered as history or used as sources for history. I argue that in spite of the fact that the genre division may be helpful for

scholars, it should not be regarded as an inflexible framework that defines the starting point for research. Therefore, the sagas' value as historiographical works should be considered separately.

As the available written sources from the Middle Ages are limited, we are faced with the reality that we have to use all the pieces of information we have for research. It cannot be denied, for instance, that the scarce information about the Christianization of the Icelanders is largely based on later saga evidence (Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 2003). This evidence may be misleading or biased, but is still to be understood as a source for history. This is the way *Jómsvíkinga saga* should be used as well: as a source that explains what happened in the past and thus reflects its time of writing.

The purpose of this article is to examine those features in *Jómsvíkinga saga* that connect it to Old Norse historiography, by comparing it with the kings' sagas, with the other sagas written around the same time such as *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, and with *Yngvars saga víðförla*, which as an example of a *fornaldarsaga* seems to show many similarities to *Jómsvíkinga saga*. These comparisons shed light on how difficult it is, in spite of the active discourse on saga genres during the last few decades, to evaluate sagas, on the one hand, as historical writing, and, on the other hand, as historical sources.

Defining Old Norse historiography

It is claimed that “medieval historiography, by all critical odds, is inauthentic, unscientific, unreliable, irrational, borderline illiterate, and, worse yet, unprofessional” (Spiegel 1983: 43–44). The above mentioned features of medieval historiography can be found in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, too. Whether the saga can cast light on those events that it describes (that is provide factual information about past events), is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it can reveal something about Old Norse views of history and history-writing.

The term historiography refers generally to works that were thought to record past events. Today historiography means scientific history-writing, but very generally it covers all history-related writing in the past. In the medieval context this usually means chronicles and annals. According to medieval understanding, history was written in order to show God's

will, and it also had a didactic purpose: People were supposed to learn from mistakes made by past generations. In the Middle Ages, history was considered part of literature, and as such the purpose of historiographical works was not to give an objective and truthful account of past events. We can detect underlying biases in these texts, which may be, for instance, religious or political. Some texts are openly propagandistic.

In the Old Norse context, historiography usually refers to Ari fróði's and Sæmundr Sigfússon's works and to the kings' sagas, which are considered to be the closest equivalent to chronicles. In addition, those Latin works that were written by Scandinavians, such as *Historia Norwegiae*, could be included in Old Norse historiography in the broadest sense. Nevertheless, in this article, the discussion of Old Norse historiography is confined to works written in Old Norse. All in all, defining Old Norse historiography is difficult because it overlaps with almost all other genres in its use of historical sources such as genealogies (Würth 2005: 156).

Telling about the past was not invented when the art of writing was adopted in Scandinavia and Iceland: History existed in the form of oral tradition. There must have been several factors contributing to why history was written down, first in Latin and then in the vernacular (about "the Norse renaissance", Johansson 2007). Christianity with its teleological orientation transformed the Scandinavian pagan view of history and time (Harris 2008: 235). One theory holds that ecclesiastical literature such as hagiographies must have provided the impetus for written culture in Scandinavia, although this view has been questioned (Andersson 1985: 213–14). Ian Beuermann has suggested that after the middle of the twelfth century there was a need to adapt new European ideas to native conditions as well as to establish the place of Scandinavian peoples as part of Christendom (Beuermann 2011: 377), which would have encouraged the writing of histories. This must apply especially to the Latin historiographies (Kersken 2003: 198). In other words, behind this history-writing was a need to prove and show that Scandinavians belonged to Christendom. However, Christianity may not have been the only factor behind this phenomenon: There must have been several influences that brought about Old Norse historiography. For instance, it is possible that Anglo-Norman historiography influenced Old Norse historiography, although this has not yet been studied thoroughly (Ghosh 2011: 111–30).

In addition to the aforementioned vernacular works, there are other sagas that would deserve to be categorized as part of Old Norse histori-

ography. However, this is a difficult task due to the nature of saga entertainment. It does not fit into the classical categorization of Latin literature, which distinguishes fiction (*fabula*) from history and which affected medieval European written culture. It was typical of medieval historiography that truth-value was not the primary objective; rather, texts were biased and distorted. The texts themselves passed among different modes so much so that they often seem more reminiscent of fiction to modern readers, which shows the flexibility of historiographical practice. On top of this, the idea of authorship was obscure when the texts remained anonymous; compilers or authors copied long passages from other works and were often influenced by authorities who had commissioned the texts to be written (O'Connor 2005: 109–16). It is not even possible to define Old Norse historiographical works by saying that they exclude fantasy, because this is not the case; this again reveals how blurred the whole concept is.

How do we then define the concept of historiography? As pointed out above, definitions of medieval historiography are vague. Nonetheless, a few points of departure could be mentioned. Historiographical texts differ from fiction in at least three points, according to Ármann Jakobsson: 1) They have interests in mentioning names of people and places; 2) they demonstrate “an historical and critical attitude”, meaning that information that is insufficient regarding for instance eye-witness accounts has to be validated somehow or else it is questioned, and 3) the events and the dialogue must be plausible for the audience (Jakobsson 1998: 56). These points become clearer if we add definitions of fiction by Ralph O'Connor: 1) Fiction is made up by the imagination of an individual author (although it could be argued that there is also fiction without individual authors such as wonder tales); 2) it contains events that did not really happen, and 3) the author does not intend the audience to understand all the events narrated as having really happened (O'Connor 2005: 108).

This last point relates to the reception of the sagas: What was considered history by contemporaries, by the audience of the sagas? For instance, are those *fornaldarsögur* or *riddarasögur* that have any connection to the past (real characters or events) historiographical works? Were they considered history by the audience or by their authors? There was a thin line between the real and the fantastic in the medieval mentality, but we have very little means of evaluating the reception of the sagas in the Middle Ages. There is a lot of speculation about the reception of the sagas but little concrete evidence, which leaves us with educated

guesses (O'Connor 2005: 118). Lars Boje Mortensen has examined the status of the distant past in Nordic Latin historiography, concluding that readers had different expectations of the stories set in ancient times. He argues, for instance, that there was “no contract of make-believe between Saxo [Grammaticus] and his intended audience”, but that Saxo’s patrons trusted him to be able to represent the Danish past (Mortensen 2012: 133–34). Saxo’s example cannot be applied directly to the sagas because it was first and foremost Saxo’s own representation of the Danish past that followed stylistically Latin literary models, whereas the saga authors — at least the writers of those sagas that were meant to be history — could not neglect the reaction of the audience. This is perceptible for instance in Snorri Sturluson’s prologue to *Heimskringla*, in which he declares that no one would dare to exaggerate the deeds of great men in poems that were performed in their presence, because this would be mockery and not praise (Heimskringla I: 5). In other words, the saga authors who wanted their stories to be credible could not invent fantastic stories about the past because that would have been considered mockery or possibly even insulting. Therefore, saga authors added comments such as “some say” when they want to point out that there are perhaps several versions of the account and which may all not be reliable.

It must be stressed that the distinction (or connection) between history and fiction is only a problem for modern readers. In the medieval context, when there was no scientific history-writing, the past consisted of several stories and the perception of them was subjective. This is perceptible in the sagas: They contain many levels and they can be interpreted in several ways. It is possible that the same saga could be understood differently depending on the educational level of the audience (Clunies Ross 2012: 318; O'Connor 2005: 166).

The entertainment value of history cannot be disregarded. Joseph Harris has stated that even if the sagas are not historical novels, they have features that can be connected to much later historical novels (Harris 2008: 259–60). It could be argued that entertainment became the impetus for writing down sagas because they were read and told especially in the long winter evenings in Iceland (Driscoll 2005: 203). The writing of history also served the purpose of defining an Icelandic identity (Jakobsson 1997). These features already show that history had manifold purposes in the Old Norse cultural sphere. Especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a need to bring native views of the past into alignment with Christian past, which meant that in a way the sagas were

a re-“writing” of history, and at the same time contemporary ideas were projected into the past (Harris 2008: 241).

The medieval historiographies thus contain more or less fictive elements, which have to be seen as part of the medieval worldview in which the fantastic was present. This applies also to the sagas. Yet it does not mean that the audience was not able to distinguish between a truthful and an untruthful story. One indication that the saga audience made a distinction between more and less reliable sagas is that some sagas are referred to as *lygisögur* ‘lying sagas’. The most famous passage in this connection is in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, where it is mentioned that King Sverrir thought that a story about Hrómundr Gripsson was an amusing *lygisaga* (*Porgils saga ok Hafliða*: 38). In fact, the same word is used in the version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* that is included in *Flateyjarbók* (*Flateyjarbók* I: 184). In this passage the word is not used for telling a saga but lie. According to Terje Spurkland, these two occurrences of the term *lygisaga* are not sufficient to demonstrate its use as a common denominator for legendary sagas. Spurkland adds that the term *stjúpmæðrasögur* ‘stepmothers’ stories’ (compare ‘old wives’ tales’) denotes the same type of story as *lygisögur* and *skröksögur*, but that it is important to see the different frequency between these terms. He argues that the general term in the thirteenth century was *skröksaga*, which is based on word *skrökva*, meaning ‘to tell or invent a story’; his argument is well-grounded because this word has by far the most occurrences of the three (Spurkland 2012: 174–82). The point is that the existence of such a term (or terms) indicates that people in the Old Norse cultural sphere were aware of the varying truth-value of stories.

It is impossible to say whether *Jómsvíkinga saga* was considered a *skröksaga* by contemporaries. This is due to the presence of two kinds of literary elements in the saga: On the one hand, some parts of the saga are comparable to accounts in the kings’ sagas (or *jarlasögur*), because they tell about historical events and characters. On the other hand, some parts that include fantastic elements connect the saga stylistically more to *fornaldarsögur*, which makes the saga resemble fiction.

Jómsvíkinga saga tells of events and characters that belonged essentially to the history of the Norwegians and Danes, and these stories were repeated in other sagas. Interestingly, some of the kings’ sagas seem to have used *Jómsvíkinga saga* as a source; I will return to this point later. Some supernatural events in *Jómsvíkinga saga* are connected to the story of the battle of Hjørungavágr, in which the goddess Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr

and her sister Irpa intervene in favour of Earl Hákon. It is difficult to determine whether this incident was invented (by the author/s) for the sake of telling a good story or whether it stems from oral tradition. How fictional is the story of Búi digri, who leaps from his ship with a chest of gold? Or those Jómsvíkings who are beheaded after the battle of Hjørungavágr? However, it is these fantastic or “fictional” elements that make the saga stand out from other sagas. Admittedly, the division into “factual” and “fictional” elements is subjective and not wholly consistent. It reflects modern views of literary genres. Nonetheless, these features in *Jómsvíkinga saga* reveal its mixed modality.

The mixed modality of *Jómsvíkinga saga*

A combination of two different literary modes in the sagas is rather common, although scholars have tended — or preferred — to see sagas as belonging to a single literary genre. *Jómsvíkinga saga* is a good example of mixed modality — so mixed that one wonders where the mixture stems from. On the one hand, *Jómsvíkinga saga* derives its background from history and perhaps from other sagas (the lost **Skjöldunga saga* and Gunnlaugr Leifsson’s *Vita Olavi*, possibly **Hlaðajarla saga*), but, on the other hand, the purpose was to write down the great heroic story of the Jómsvíkings. Theodore Andersson has argued that modes must have been intermixed in the oral stories (Andersson 2006: 18; also Clunies Ross 2010), but we can only guess what kind of oral background *Jómsvíkinga saga* has. The mixed modality could be due to the development of the saga in written saga culture. As Torfi Tulinius has suggested, *Jómsvíkinga saga* may represent some kind of transitional phase in literature (Tulinius 2002). I will discuss this further in connection with *Fareyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*.

Hans Robert Jauss has argued that people in the Middle Ages classified literature according to styles, not genres (Jauss 1997: 45). Considering *Jómsvíkinga saga*’s mixed modality, Jauss’s argument does not really help to solve how the saga was perceived by contemporaries. The heroism of the Jómsvíkings could be taken as an example of how difficult it is to evaluate the reliability of details in the saga. Where does this ideal of a warrior community or brotherhood with its laws stem from? Interestingly, this picture of the warrior community is reminiscent of

certain contemporary or near contemporary phenomena. The closest analogues are retinues of kings and other noblemen in Scandinavia. As an example could be mentioned the *Vederlov*, imposed by the Danish King Knut VI in c. 1182 (Kroman 1982: 611–14) for his *hirð* (court), which is almost contemporary with *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Nor can one ignore the resemblances between the knightly orders and the Jómsvíkings. There is, for instance, information about a brotherhood that was active in the crusade against the pagan West Slavs in the mid-1150s (Bysted et al. 2012; Gelting 2007: 99). This background would suggest that the laws of the Jómsvíkings had models in real life (Bandlien 2005: 177).

It is obvious that *Jómsvíkinga saga* contains great praise for heroic deeds and a warrior ethos. The main characters are presented according to conventions and it is easy to see which of the characters are heroes: If their heroism is not revealed by their looks, it is revealed by their deeds. Else Mundal has pointed out that many of the *fornaldarsögur* may be understood as parody (Mundal 2003: 33; see also Willson 2009). The idea that the sagas can easily combine two (or more) genres would also support this hypothesis. What if the heroic deeds of the Jómsvíkings were intended to be parody, so that the saga would in fact make fun of the warrior ethos? Looking at the Jómsvíkings and their deeds as parody would also put their laws in a different perspective. However, the interpretation of *Jómsvíkinga saga* as parody must be hypothetical because we have no certainty as to how the saga was perceived by its audience. It is probably better to examine *Jómsvíkinga saga* as a generic hybrid, which means that the saga combines elements from at least two different genres. Elisabeth Ashman Rowe has argued that the function of the generic hybrids was to articulate certain political themes and perspectives which would not have been possible in the purer saga genres (Rowe 1993: 545; Kalinke 2012: 201). She speaks especially of texts that combine features of Icelandic family sagas and legendary sagas, but it could be applied as well to *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which seems to be a combination of a kings' saga and a legendary saga. I will come back to this point when comparing *Jómsvíkinga saga* with *Orkneyinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga*, and *Yngvars saga*.

In the Middle Ages it was sufficient to state that a story was reliable because it was told by “wise old men”. It was up to the listener to decide whether he believed it or not (Nordal et al. 1992: 305). As it is impossible to say whether the audience perceived certain parts or details of *Jómsvíkinga saga* as more reliable than others, we can look at other sagas

that are close to it thematically, temporarily, and physically (meaning that they can be found in the same manuscript). If we look at the manuscript context, we find *Jómsvíkinga saga* standing alone in the oldest extant manuscript AM 291 4to (dated to the end of the thirteenth century). In the manuscripts Sthm. perg 4:o nr 7 (dated to the early fourteenth century) and AM 510 4to (dated to the mid-sixteenth century) we notice that the saga is included with some legendary sagas, which could imply that the saga was there because of its entertaining side. On the other hand, *Jómsvíkinga saga* is incorporated into Flateyjarbók (dated to the latter half of the fourteenth century) and in this context it is part of King Óláfr Tryggvason's saga, which emphasizes its historiographic role. This evidence only confirms that the saga could be included in different contexts, meaning that its content could then be interpreted differently depending on its physical environment.

Comparison with *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*

In order to study the mixed style of *Jómsvíkinga saga* it is relevant to compare it to other sagas from around the same time. This makes it possible to look at how much *Jómsvíkinga saga* has in common with them when it comes to themes.

Orkneyinga saga and *Færeyinga saga* have not survived in their original forms, but it is assumed that they were written c. 1200, which makes them contemporary with *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Despite later interpolations, which have in some cases affected the unity of the sagas negatively, it is argued that these three belong to the so called seminal "school" of narrative technique (Foote 1993: 222). Stylistically they are not as polished as the kings' sagas, but if the dating of the sagas is accurate, that is the turn of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, it is understandable that the Old Norse way of telling about the past in written form was just developing.

All these three sagas have been classified, more or less, as kings' sagas (Jakobsson 1997; Chesnutt 1993: 456–57). This is evident because they all are interlacing with sagas of Norwegian kings in Flateyjarbók. Stylistically, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga* are not as entertaining as *Jómsvíkinga saga*. If we look at what these sagas have in common, it is

generally their way of telling a detailed story on a local level, which is then combined with the “big picture”, namely a kings’ saga. Therefore, these independent traditions — as we usually assume they were — were easy to incorporate into compilations of kings’ sagas. Incorporation must have been rather easy because the sagas are closely connected to the histories of kings in Denmark and Norway. This relates to the concept of the immanent saga, introduced by Carol J. Clover (Clover 1985: 293). The concept of immanent saga would suggest that there was no one original saga, but several traditions. In the case of *Jómsvíkinga saga* the tradition was repeated in connection with the saga of King Óláfr Tryggvason.

If we look at the three sagas on a thematical level, the main theme of *Orkneyinga saga* is the strife between the Orcadian earls and the Norwegian kings. It could be claimed that *Jómsvíkinga saga* shows a similar tendency, as the Danish nobleman Pálnatóki does not get along with King Haraldr Bluetooth. He has to flee from the Danish realm when King Sveinn Forkbeard finds out that Pálnatóki had killed Sveinn’s father, King Haraldr. *Jómsvíkinga saga* does not, however, try to claim authority over a certain geographical area in the way *Orkneyinga saga* does; nonetheless, one can see some similarities in the way both these sagas show disapproval of royal dominance: The noblemen fight against the royal authorities and challenge them. The earls of Orkney and leaders of the *Jómsvíkings* show that they want to act independently, but they are confronted by kings.

Of these three sagas, *Færeyinga saga* gives the most positive picture of royal power, because it does not emphasize the friction between the leaders or upper class in the Faroe Islands and the Norwegian king. The time span in the saga is rather short (the events in *Færeyinga saga* take place during the reign of King Óláfr Tryggvason), and in this respect it differs from the other two sagas, but it could be pointed out that in fact the time span of *Jómsvíkinga saga* is fairly short as well, if we exclude the beginning of the saga, with the introduction to the history of the Danish kings. *Færeyinga saga* relates how the king claimed the overlordship in the Faroe Islands, so the friction between the subjects and the king is actually an underlying theme in the saga.

We can therefore conclude that all three sagas deal with relationships between kings and their chieftains/earls in one way or another. They also show significant differences and unique features which could be listed:

- *Orkneyinga saga* concentrates on the earls of Orkney; at least one of the purposes of the saga seems to have been to challenge the Hár-fagri royal lineage by referring to the ancestors of the Orcadian earls as the first inhabitants of the northern mainland (Steinsland 2011: 50).
- *Færeyinga saga* is exceptional because it concentrates on only one chieftain — a feature that is rare even in the Icelandic family sagas.
- The Jómsvíkingas as a group are pivotal in *Jómsvíkinga saga*: This group of warriors with their strict laws make the saga stand out from others. The other feature that makes the saga different from other (kings') sagas is its anti-Danish stance, which may be a result of the emphasis placed on the conflict between the Danish King Haraldr and Pálnatóki. Perhaps the anti-Danish element should be interpreted more generally as an anti-royal tendency, which would then be the feature that unites *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, as mentioned above.

It would be too bold to assume that these three sagas would have stemmed from some common initiative, but in my opinion it is worth noting that they were all written down at approximately the same time and they all reflect anti-royal tendencies. This could be interpreted as a sign that around the year 1200 there must have existed tension between the upper class and the king, at least in Norway. The Icelanders also shared this anxiety regarding the increasing power of the Norwegian king, and these tendencies are reflected in other sagas written around the same time (Jakobsson 1997).

This conclusion, in my opinion, strengthens the hypothesis that these three sagas were not written down just for entertainment, but that they contain a message that reflects the contemporary political situation, in which the kings were strengthening their positions at the expense of the upper class. On the part of the kings this was manifested in the *rex iustus* ideology (Beurman 2011: 152). Elisabeth Ashman Rowe's argument that sagas that represent generic hybrids could better articulate contemporary political themes could also explain why *Jómsvíkinga saga* combines features of kings' sagas and legendary sagas: It expresses the underlying political tension between the upper class and the kings. At any rate this hypothesis would fit into the overall picture that we have of the political situation in Denmark and Norway at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Comparison with the kings' sagas

In comparisons of different saga genres, it has been pointed out that the kings' sagas, the *fornaldarsögur* and the *riddarasögur* share the same narrative structures (Clunies Ross 2010: 133). Therefore, narrative structure cannot be the criterion for differentiating saga genres. *Jómsvíkinga saga* has the same narrative structure as the kings' sagas and the *riddarasögur*: The adventures of the Jómsvíkings are presented in chronological order and the main narrative structure is rather simple.

Both *Fagrskinna* (c. 1220) and *Heimskringla* (c. 1230–35) include *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Fagrskinna 1979: 121–41; Heimskringla I: 272–86). There seem to have been two different versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, the so-called A- and B-versions, which may have differed from each other (Megaard 2000a). It is assumed that the information about the Jómsvíkings in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* is based on the B-version, and that the A- and B-versions would have come about independently, which would indicate a strong oral background for the saga.

Jómsvíkinga saga is historically important because the Jómsvíkings play a role in Óláfr Tryggvason's life — especially in the end of it. This indicates, in my opinion, that the events were considered to be “history” by contemporaries and that *Jómsvíkinga saga* overlaps general historical events in Scandinavia. Also the way the events are represented shows that the authors expected the Jómsvíkings to be known to the audience. For example, Snorri Sturluson does not bother to introduce them or their background to the audience in *Heimskringla*. Here, again, Clover's idea of the immanent saga, mentioned above, could provide an answer as to why the Jómsvíkings appear in *Heimskringla* without introduction (Anderson 2006: 4; Clover 1985: 293). The relevance of the saga for the history of kings Haraldr Bluetooth, Sveinn Forkbeard and Óláfr Tryggvason is clear because it is repeated later on in such sagas or collections of sagas as *Knýtlinga saga*, *Ágrip af sögu Danakonunga*, and *Flateyjarbók*. *Jómsvíkinga saga* is connected to *Danakonunga sögur* because it is essentially part of Danish history, although stylistically it differs from them (Nordal et al. 1992: 387). It is also part of the lore of King Óláfr Tryggvason, but the saga's relevance in this tradition depends on the source. This is understandable because the tradition concerning King Óláfr is not consistent and his image and significance vary from one source to another (Rafnsson 1999: 107–08).

The story of the Jómsvíkings does not thus appear in a similar form in

all sources: As mentioned above, Snorri did not bother to tell the story in detail. Sources give contradictory details, for example, as to who was the founder of the fortress Jómsborg. Even *Ágrip af Nóregskonunga sögum*, which is very sparse in detail in all matters and which does not mention the Jómsvíking, mentions Jómsborg as a place where King Óláfr Tryggvason stayed. This piece of information seems to be a very old part of the tradition attached to King Óláfr Tryggvason (Rafnsson 2005: 17). *Ágrip* mentions, for instance, that King Óláfr Tryggvason travelled to Wendland to gather support among his “true friends”, who had accompanied him on his Viking expeditions, against King Sveinn Forkbeard (*Ágrip*: 23; Driscoll 1995: 28, 32). Similarly, Saxo Grammaticus does not mention the Jómsvíking, but he does speak of Julin situated in the Wendish land, which King Haraldr Bluetooth conquered and which was manned by “pirates” (*Gesta Danorum* X, 2,1). Despite differences in the way the story is told, the tradition about the Jómsvíking or more generally about King Haraldr’s and King Óláfr’s connections to Wendland seems to have been an integral part of past of the Jómsvíking, and Wolin/Julin/Jómsborg is remembered in these stories.

The first part of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which tells about the history of the Danish kings, creates the historical background for the saga. It is assumed that the first part is to some extent based on two now lost sources, that is **Skjöldunga saga* and Gunnlaugr Leifsson’s **Vita Olavi*. It could be argued that by beginning the saga with this introduction to the history of the Danish kings, the author/s of the saga may have wanted to follow some ideal of how to write about the past. The history of the Danish kings can be seen as a kind of introduction to the saga as a whole. *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*, in which the history of the Æsir and the Ynglingar functions as an introduction to the history of the kings of Norway, could be mentioned as a *comparandum*.

The history of the Danish kings may have been an essential part of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, although stylistically it seems as if it was separate. Einar Ól. Sveinsson has argued that the Oddaverjar were the patrons behind **Skjöldunga saga*, and that they may have also had a connection to *Orkneyinga saga* because of their relations with a number of prominent Orkney Islanders (Sveinsson 1937: 16–39; Nordal et al. 1992: 386–87). If sagas such as **Skjöldunga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga* were important for an Icelandic family, would *Jómsvíkinga saga* have had a similar connection to some patron or family? (On descendants of Jómsvíking, see Megaard 2000b.) There may not be a direct connection to any

particular family or person, but the saga may be just one more example of how Icelanders had acquired the role of writing histories for Scandinavian rulers (Bjarni Guðnason 1982: vii). The author of *Jómsvíkinga saga* was probably an Icelander, and the Icelandic presence is clear in the decisive battle of Hjørungavágr (Hollander 1997: 22).

As Ólafur Halldórsson has pointed out, it is not easy to show how, for example, the traditions concerning King Óláfr Tryggvason, the Jómsvíkings and the Danish kings stand in relation to one another (Halldórsson 1969). The life of King Óláfr Tryggvason is intertwined with the story of the Jómsvíkings and with the history of King Sveinn Forkbeard, but how did this tradition survive in Iceland? This kind of question is relevant not only for *Jómsvíkinga saga* but also for other literary sources that survive in Icelandic manuscripts. In order to survive in either oral or written form, these sagas must have had a certain relevance for their audiences.

As far as we know, the first written versions of those sagas that deal with this tradition (the *vita* of Óláfr Tryggvason and the Jómsvíkings) came about at the end of the twelfth century (Rafnsson 2005). In the case of Oddr Snorrason's *vita* of King Óláfr Tryggvason, which was written at the end of the twelfth century in Latin, it is most probable that its background lies in the hagiographical tradition and that there was a need or desire to construct the same kind of saintly persona for Óláfr Tryggvason as Óláfr Haraldsson already had. However, *Jómsvíkinga saga* must have had a very mundane purpose. Here we return to the question posed at the beginning of this article: the relevance of *Jómsvíkinga saga* during its time of writing.

Comparison with *Yngvars saga víðförla*

The comparison between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the contemporary *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga* showed that these sagas share some thematic similarities; namely, they all deal with relationships between chieftains and kings. When *Jómsvíkinga saga* is compared with the kings' sagas, which are thought to represent "proper" Old Norse historiography, it becomes evident that the core of *Jómsvíkinga saga* was probably considered to be true, because it was incorporated into the kings' sagas.

In order to evaluate the saga's resemblance to *fornaldarsögur*, I have chosen to compare *Jómsvíkinga saga* with *Yngvars saga víðförla*. This

saga, too, has been difficult to assign to a single saga genre. It survives in incomplete form in two fifteenth-century manuscripts and in full in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The saga is usually associated with the *fornaldarsögur*, even though it is not set in the legendary past, but in the early eleventh century, and it lacks poetry; however, the prominence of fantastic beasts and monsters aligns it with other *fornaldarsögur* (Phelpstead 2008: 331, 336). *Yngvars saga* also contains elements that show connections to contemporary learned literature, which makes it stand out, at least from many other *fornaldarsögur* (Antonsson 2012: 74, 80–82). Thus, “it stands on the margin between *konungasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*” (Wolf 1993: 740) in the same way as *Jómsvíkinga saga* does. Dietrich Hofmann has suggested that *Yngvars saga víðfjrla* is an Icelandic translation of a now-lost Latin original by Oddr Snorrason written at the end of the twelfth century (Wolf 1993: 740; Hofmann 1981). Even if Hofmann’s overall interpretation of *Yngvars saga* has been rejected, his attribution of the saga to Oddr Snorrason has been upheld (Antonsson 2012: 77). This means that *Yngvars saga* could be contemporary with *Jómsvíkinga saga*.

It is difficult to find a thematically close comparison to the Jómsvíkings in the saga literature, because as a group they are an extraordinary phenomenon. Other sagas show warrior groups, too, but none of them have strict rules that are given in such detail as in *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Therefore, the closest comparison may be with *Yngvars saga víðfjrla*, in which Yngvarr sets out for an expedition in the east with his crew. When Yngvarr Eymundsson starts his travel to the east he has plenty of ships and selected men to crew them, but only four men are mentioned by name (Hjálmvigi, Sóti, Garða-Ketill, and Valdimarr. *Yngvars saga*: 435). These four characters are not introduced in detail to the audience, although they play a part in the saga. The saga describes the protagonist Yngvarr, while the other characters are left aside. *Jómsvíkinga saga*, on the other hand, introduces several characters with information about their background and even gives details about the appearances of the heroes. These descriptions cannot be seen as unique, because they follow literary conventions. Of all the main characters in the *Jómsvíkinga saga*, the character of Vagn Ákason in particular shows some similarities with Yngvarr, although Vagn seems to be more hot-tempered. Nevertheless, they both share features typical of aristocratic men; they are described as fearless, fair-minded, and skilful warriors.

If *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga* all reflect

the political situation around the year 1200, when the relationship between the kings and the chieftains in Scandinavia was topical, this seems to apply to some extent to *Yngvars saga* as well. The saga begins with a detailed account of his father Eymundr, who was not on good terms with King Óláfr Svíakonungr. This pattern is reminiscent of the setting in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, in which the Danish nobleman Pálnatóki ends up in a conflict with King Sveinn Forkbeard and leaves Denmark. On the one hand, it could be argued that this pattern may be a literary convention, especially in *Yngvars saga*, which is set in the past, but, on the other hand, tensions between the upper class and kings were current in the thirteenth century.

The Jómsvíkings had a detailed code of their own, which gave instructions as to how to divide booty; the members of the community were supposed to be between eighteen and fifty years old; they had to leave their family ties behind and consider each other as brothers; women were not tolerated in the fortress, and so on. All in all, the code more closely resembles an order for a religious brotherhood than for a fierce band of Viking warriors (Bandlien 2005: 177). In *Yngvars saga*, Yngvarr makes only one rule: No one should go ashore without his leave when they were travelling in the east with their ships. If anyone did, he would lose a hand or a foot. This rule is not consistently enforced because Yngvarr does not maim Ketill when he disobeys. Yngvarr's rule is very simple compared to the code of the Jómsvíkings, but they share the same purpose: to keep the warriors under control.

This ability to control one's men is connected to the qualities of the leader. A leader had to have the respect of his men. When Pálnatóki, the leader of the Jómsvíkings, dies, he chooses Sigvaldi to take over. But Sigvaldi turns out to be a bad leader, with the consequence that the code of the Jómsvíkings was not followed strictly. The saga tells that breaches in discipline began to occur: Women stayed at the fortress two or three nights at a time; there were maimings and even occasional killings (Petersens 1882: 85). Yngvarr faces similar challenges when his rule is not obeyed and men go ashore without permission.

In a good adventurous saga there is also a treasure. In *Jómsvíkinga saga* the treasure is owned by Búi digri, who does not want to give up his chests of gold when the battle of Hjörungavágr is lost. Instead, he leaps overboard with the chests. In *Yngvars saga*, Yngvarr and his companions find gold in a dragon's lair. *Jómsvíkinga saga* also combines the golden treasure with a dragon. Búi digri is said to have become a dragon, who brooded on his gold in Hjörungavágr (Flateyjarbók I: 203). It is clear that

there are many more fantastic elements in *Yngvars saga* than in *Jómsvíkinga saga*. In fact, the most fantastic element in *Jómsvíkinga saga* is when Earl Hákon summons his protecting goddess Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr to help him win the battle at Hjörungavágr. This does not differ from episodes in, for instance, the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason in *Heimskringla* in which Óláfr fights against heathen magic. The fantastic elements in *Yngvars saga* can also be explained through connections to contemporary learned literature. Yngvarr's travel also has a spiritual dimension, because it combines an adventure with a search for the Earthly Paradise (Antonsson 2012: 81).

Neither *Jómsvíkinga saga* nor *Yngvars saga* has enjoyed respect as a historical source (Würth 2005: 162). Understanding the nature of the source is important for historical studies because it is necessary in order to evaluate how the source can be used. The sagas are not to be relied on as trustworthy sources as such, but they cannot be neglected either. *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Yngvars saga* are excellent examples of this.

The historical background of *Jómsvíkinga saga* has come to seem more plausible since the excavations in Wolin, Poland. The site of Jómsborg has been debated; the island of Wolin in Poland has been the primary candidate. Even if it is not possible to pinpoint the exact location of Jómsborg, the excavations show a strong Scandinavian presence on the island at the end of the tenth century and the beginning of the eleventh century. However, toponymic data do not support this (Stanisławski 2003; Petrulevich 2009).

It has also been suggested that Yngvarr could be a historical character because of the so-called Yngvarr runestones in Sweden (around thirty of them) which mention an expedition to the east that was led by a certain Yngvarr. Yngvarr's travels have been investigated in several scholarly works, which confirm that it is plausible that such a journey was made (for example Shepard 1982–85: 222–92). *Yngvars saga* as such is not included in the kings' sagas, which could weaken its value as a historical source. But just to demonstrate that a source should not be evaluated on the basis of its style, a few details concerning *Yngvars saga* should be mentioned. A certain Yngvarr is mentioned in the entries for 1041 in *Konungsannáll* and *Lögmannsannáll* ("Yngvarr the far-traveller dies", *Annálar og nafnaskrá* 1962: 7, 80). To point out another comparison: In *Ynglinga saga* a certain king Yngvarr makes a similar expedition to Eistland (Estonia) as the other Yngvarr does before leaving for his longer journey to the east (*Heimskringla* I: 61–62). Two ship burials containing a total of 40 warriors were found in archaeological excavations in

Saaremaa, Estonia, a few years ago. These ships have been dated to pre-Viking Age, that is the eighth century, which would fit with the possible expedition of the Yngvarr mentioned in *Ynglinga saga* (Allmäe 2011). It would be tempting to speculate that these two traditions concerning two Yngvarrs would have affected one another somehow. For instance, could it be that the earlier Estonian expedition was “attracted to” the figure of the eleventh-century Yngvarr?

If we consider the medieval way of looking at the past and try to ignore the traditional genre division in the sagas, I think it is worth reconsidering the meaning of these sagas. First of all, these two sagas are not based on totally invented characters or events. In the case of *Jómsvíkinga saga* it is impossible to prove that such characters as Pálnatóki or Sigvaldi existed, but the saga contains a lot of other characters that did, such as King Haraldr Bluetooth, King Sveinn Forkbeard and possibly even Þorkell the Tall, one of the Jómsvíkings. *Yngvars saga* mentions King Óláfr Svíakonungr and Prince Jarizleifr (Jaroslav) of Russia, who are real historical figures.

Considering the above, we can ask whether there is a difference between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Yngvars saga* with respect to historicity. Where is the line between a historically reliable and an unreliable story? Ralph O’Connor has pointed out that some legendary sagas contain *apologiae*, which can be seen as evidence that the *apologiae* were composed in order to silence noisy skeptics. His conclusion is that if sagas were routinely accepted as fiction, *apologiae* would not have been needed (O’Connor 2005: 167–68). *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Yngvars saga* do not contain *apologiae*, but presumably they were considered to be historical and entertaining stories by their audiences. In a similar way, Ármann Jakobsson has argued that *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (dated to 1280–1390) has a historical perspective, and it was a historical work of its own period (Jakobsson 1998). Annette Lassen has pointed out that *fornaldarsögur* are in fact historiographical works and that they can be viewed as “an Icelandic off-shoot of the European chronicles of the *origo gentis*-kind” (Lassen 2012: 54).

Concluding remarks

The evidence suggests strongly that *Jómsvíkinga saga* deserves a place in Old Norse historiography. The underlying conflict between the king and the chieftains in Norwegian (and Icelandic) society at the turn of the

thirteenth century is reflected in *Jómsvíkinga saga* as in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, which makes them all topical and even political. Judith Jesch has suggested that *Orkneyinga saga* was an attempt to write historical scholarship, but when it was incorporated into *Flateyjarbók*, many of the features that reveal the original historiographical intentions of the saga were worn away (Jesch 2010: 171–73). This could apply as well to *Færeyinga saga* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which were also incorporated into the same compilation.

If *Jómsvíkinga saga* can be considered as part of Old Norse historiography, what are the ramifications? It shows at any rate that saga genres cannot be seen as disjoint categories. It is possible that a saga may belong to two categories. As Lars Lönnroth has pointed out, it may be difficult to say to which category a saga belongs, because it may have features of two or more genres (Lönnroth 2003). Defining a genre for a saga may be important for scholars because it helps finding common features in the texts, but we should keep in mind Jauss’s argument that in the Middle Ages literature was categorized according to its style, not according to its genre (Jauss 1997: 45). The concept of cultural memory also shows affinities to this interpretation of presentations of the past. It contrasts with our modern understanding of “historical tradition”, which has to be scientific and objective, whereas cultural memory is understood as “a means of interpreting and selectively presenting the past” (Ghosh 2011: 62–63; see also Hermann 2013).

In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, we can see similarities which connect the saga to the kings’ sagas — namely the historical setting, place names and historical characters that form part of the saga plot. Thematic connections can be found with the contemporary *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga* and with the possibly contemporary *Yngvars saga víðfjörla*. At this stage it is difficult to say how the saga was perceived by the contemporary audience, but further research on the different genre features, that is, literary modes, in *Jómsvíkinga saga* could shed more light on this matter. A closer study of *Jómsvíkinga saga*’s possible oral background could also yield new insights into the saga itself. For example, is *Jómsvíkinga saga* a scripted saga or a textualized saga (Oesterreicher 1998)? In other words, it should be investigated further whether the saga was oral tradition that was written down (scripted) around year 1200, and whether it soon after that became textualized by the literary tradition that it was bound to — meaning what kind of contacts the saga may have had to other written sagas. This article has not addressed, for example, the poem *Jómsvíkinga drápa*, which certainly bears essentially on this question. It was

most probably composed by Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson in the latter half of the twelfth century, which means that it is the earliest or at least one of the earliest versions of the story of the Jómsvíkings, although the oldest manuscript version of the poem (GKS 2367 4to) dates from the early fourteenth century.

The language of the saga reveals something about its reception. Latin histories such as Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de antiquitate regum Norvagiensium*, *Historia Norwegiae* or Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* were definitely aimed at a much smaller audience than vernacular texts. The kings' sagas were most probably read aloud in the courtly milieu or in upper class households but also read or recited among the common people. It could be assumed that the vernacular *Jómsvíkinga saga* with its entertaining elements was probably meant for a broad audience. This is very possible considering that the two oldest manuscripts — AM 291 4to and Sthm. perg 4:o nr 7 — are very modest-looking and were probably not produced for courtly milieux.

One theme that has not been addressed in this article is the post-medieval reception of *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Theodore Andersson has claimed that the way the sagas were perceived by their audience changed over time:

[W]e can surmise that entertainment value came to overshadow historicity as the stories were passed down from generation to generation. It is quite uncertain how much history survived in the process, but it seems clear the thirteenth-century Icelanders thought they were in possession of a historical tradition. (Andersson 2006: 7)

This could further cast light on how the content of *Jómsvíkinga saga* was perceived later. The saga is preserved both in post-medieval manuscripts and in two *rímur* versions. Although the post-medieval versions of the saga are not numerous, it would still be worthwhile to examine which parts of the saga were transmitted and how. Presumably the entertaining elements of the saga were the reason to continue the tradition, but this is by no means self-evident without further research (on overall changes in narrative strategies, see Johansson 2012: 351–69).

We can only speculate as to the purposes of the original author/s of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, but probably the saga was supposed to combine a good story and an account of past events. All in all, this shows that we should be aware that the sagas may have been perceived differently at different times and also in different environments. It is worth noting, for instance, that the first part of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, dealing with the history

of the Danish kings, is omitted in AM 510 4to, which is dated to the sixteenth century. It is possible to posit different explanations for this. For instance, it is possible that the version reflected in AM 510 4to originally also contained the first part, but it was omitted (Megaard 2000a: 178), or that it should be seen as a copy of a more authentic and original version of the saga than other manuscript versions (Petersens 1879: ix). I suggest we should also consider the possibility that the saga's anti-Danish or anti-royal attitude was not considered relevant by later copyists/authors.

Even if *Jómsvíkinga saga* may have been intended to be a historical work, it later became entertainment. This information helps the historian to understand the nature of the source. However, it does not help to decide whether the content of the saga is based on historical facts, characters, and places. Finding the facts in the saga still remains to be done using comparative, interdisciplinary analysis and methods.

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Summary

The article argues that *Jómsvíkinga saga*, despite its mixed modality, should be included in Old Norse historiography. A comparison with kings' sagas and legendary sagas — in this case *Yngvars saga víðförla* — shows how these modes were used in *Jómsvíkinga saga*. The saga is often grouped with *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, which were also written around the year 1200; all deal in some way with the relationship between kings and aristocrats. The reason for this may be found in contemporary events: The Scandinavian kings were strengthening their position, while the aristocracy was trying to maintain its influence. Therefore, the sagas have also been called political sagas. The oldest extant versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga* contain the first part of the saga, which deals with the history of the Danish Kings; this shows that the saga was intended to be perceived as history. However, a later version (AM 510 4to) omits this part, which suggests that the historicity of the saga had eroded. The fact that *Jómsvíkinga*

saga was incorporated into manuscripts containing legendary sagas also shows that the saga may have been valued for its entertaining plot and not because of its connections to real events and historical characters.

Keywords: Historiography, political sagas, genre

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