

VIKINGS IN A PAGAN TEMPLE IN BJARMALAND.  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MOTIF IN OLD-NORSE SAGAS

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In historiography of the 19th to 20th centuries there exists a theses about a rich country named *Bjarmaland*. The Old-Norse sources say, that the vikings were anxious to get there in order to obtain treasures and fame. It is worth reminding here that the toponym *Bjarmaland* is used in the texts to designate a territory in the North-West of Eastern Europe (on the coast of the White Sea, close to the mouth of the river Northern Dvina). The term is used only in the texts of Nordic origin and that allows us to suppose that a general tradition gave birth to these pieces of information.

The analyses of of saga-texts that tell us about journeys to *Bjarmaland* shows us that the idea of the immense riches of this region is mainly based on a motif that moves from saga to saga: the robbery of a pagan temple by vikings who obtain a large amount of silver, gold and other objects of luxury there.

The motif can be found in the following sagas:

- A. *Saga Óláfs konungs hins helga*<sup>1</sup> (c. 1220) and the same variant is given in *Óláfs saga Haraldssonar* in *Heimskringla* by Snorri Sturluson<sup>2</sup> (c. 1230).
- B. *Orvar-Odds saga*<sup>3</sup> (2nd half of the 13th century).
- C. *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*<sup>4</sup> (late 13th century).
- D. *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*<sup>5</sup> (c. 1300).

E. *Bósa saga ok Herrauds*<sup>6</sup> (1st half of the 14th century).

The motif is developed in accordance with a scheme general for all the texts: vikings get information that in Bjarmaland there is a *hof* (or a temple) of a Biarmian pagan god; its idol is installed there and a large treasure is kept in that place; the vikings penetrate into the *hof* (a temple), rob the place and take the treasure with them. The wording and the description of the action is different in each text.

The original information comes from the text A. Without any doubt, it was basic for all other texts. The details given by Snorri Sturluson appear in them in a hyperbolized form. Thus for instance, an unpretentious *hof* (in the texts A, B and C) turns into a large temple (D and E), artificially made of expensive wood, gold and precious stones, the shining of which enlightens the whole valley (D). A simple wooden fence with gates in it (A) becomes an insufficient defence for the temple: a ditch is made in the gateway, filled with poison; there are also stones as an obstacle for those who would like to enter: a sword is installed into the cross-beam at the entrance and an inscription says that nobody should break the inviolability of the temple (D). Silver coins mixed with ground obtained by the vikings (A) turn into large amounts of gold and treasure (E), and among it there are such rare things as a chess-board and figures made of light gold (D) and a fine canopy which is "more expensive than three loaded ships belonging to the richest merchant that ever sailed in the Aegean Sea" (E). A cup filled with silver coins that was easily taken by one of the vikings (A) becomes heavy with red

gold and large to such an extent that "four men would not be able to drain it" (E). The idol of god is installed in the altar (E) or at a silver pedestal (D). It is richly decorated: instead of simple stone beads (A) it has a necklace worth of three hundred gold marks and a golden crown with twelve precious stones in it (E). In front of it there is the magic horn Urarhorn (D). The name of the god - Jómali - is extant in texts A and E.. Texts B and C do not mention it at all, and in text D it is replaced by a more familiar to an anonymous Icelandic writer - Thor.

The differences between the texts are first of all indicative of the fact that the sources of information changed drastically during the 13th to the 14th centuries. Text A could be based on eyewitnesses' stories who participated in the viking raids to the North-West of Russia. Texts B and C, which are chronologically closer to A, briefly repeat its information, making no changes in it.

Objective palaeoclimatic and hydrological data testify that at the beginning of the 13th century there began a deterioration of the climate<sup>7</sup>. Ice conditions in the Arctics prevented viking expeditions from penetrating into the White Sea region. The authors of texts D and E created their sagas at the time when all the connections with Bjarmaland had been broken. Nevertheless in accordance with the tradition extant in Old-Norse prose they describe the region as world of riches. As they have no reliable new information about Bjarmaland they take as a basis for their descriptions those data that already existed in other sagas written earlier (and

text A is an example of such a saga). The text is subjected to changes and additions corresponding to the demands of another saga genre - "legendary fiction". Thus, information about real facts turns into fiction.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Den store saga om Olav den hellige. Utg. av Oscar Albert Johnsen og Jón Helgason. B. 1. Oslo, 1941. S. 351-353.

<sup>2</sup>Íslensk fornrit. B. XXVII. Reykjavík, 1945. Bl. 227-234.

<sup>3</sup>Órvar-Odds saga. Hreg. von R.C.Boer. Leiden, 1888. S. 19 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda eptir æðmlum handritum.. Utg. ved Carl Christian Rafn. B. 2. Kaupmannahöfn, 1830. S. 38.

<sup>5</sup>The Two Versions of *Sturlaug's Saga Starfsama*: a Decipherment, Edition and Translation of a Fourteenth Century Icelandic Mythical-Heroic Saga. Ed. Otto J. Zitzelsberger. Düsseldorf, 1969. P. 20-22.

<sup>6</sup>Die Sosa-saga. Hreg. von Otto Liutpold Jiriczek. Strassburg, 1893. S. 25. 28-30.

<sup>7</sup>The Changing Climate. Selected Papers by H.H.Lamb. London, 1968. P. 56-68; Haasum S. Vikingatidens segling och navigation (Theses and papers in North-european Archaeology 4). Stockholm, 1974. S. 87-93; H.H.Lamb. Climate, History and the Modern World. London & New York. 1982. P. 162-186.