

History and Fantasy in *Jómsvíkinga saga*

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In his Prologue to *Heimskringla* Snorri Sturluson enumerates the kinds of source material he drew upon for his history of the kings of Norway. Besides genealogies and oral narratives, he acknowledges influence from *fornum kvæðum eða söguljóðum er menn hafa haft til skemmtanar sér* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 4). While this is a reference to poetic material rather than the written sources that Snorri also clearly used, it acknowledges that some of his source material was intended for entertainment rather than sober historical record. Snorri's Prologue makes no mention of written sources, which he may have assumed could be taken (literally) as read, but it is generally accepted that he did make use of earlier written works, and among them was almost certainly a version of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, in a separate redaction from that to which the surviving manuscripts belong.

Jómsvíkinga saga was written in Iceland probably around 1200, and its textual history is complex. Because of the considerable difference between the version used by Snorri and the author of *Fagrskinna* on the one hand, and the version best preserved in AM 291 4to (other surviving versions appear to be based on a combination of these redactions), it has been deduced that 'if we assume there was originally one written saga, based on oral traditions and to a lesser extent on older written sources, this saga would seem to have split into two redactions quite soon after its composition. The alternative is to allow for two sagas composed separately, but both based on oral traditions' (Ólafur Halldórsson 1993, 343).

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 main players among the *Jómsvíkingar* (Sigvaldi and his brother Þorkell, Þúi and Vagn) are attested not least in skaldic verses referring to the battle. But the saga's emphasis is distinctively anti-historical. These named characters are cut off from their expected context of allegiance to the Danish king, bound together instead within the apparently legendary brotherhood of the *Jómsvíkingar*. 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 main characters themselves; the early part of the saga tells of the struggles of the dispossessed King Sveinn, born illegitimate, to succeed to his father's kingdom, which he achieves by a prolonged campaign of harrying, culminating in the secret killing of the king by Sveinn's foster-father Pálma-Tóki, later the founder of Jónsborg. The involvement of the *Jómsvíkingar* in the battle of Hjørungavágr, which forms the climax of the saga, is motivated by Sveinn's duplicity: he exploits their

boasts, made at a feast where he has plied them with strong drink, to force them into attacking jarl Hákon; this in itself is presented as Sveinn's vengeance for the duplicity 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 *Edda*.

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 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. It is at the peripheries of the kings' saga genre that less historically acceptable material seeps in. One boundary is that of hagiography, which not only authorises a supernatural element in the guise of the miracles marking the status of the two missionary kings even in Snorri's comparatively rationalistic account, but also encourages the polarisation that, for example, demonises jarl Hákon Sigurðarson as arch-pagan.

On another boundary lie the early texts, all probably predating the developed *konungasögur*: *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*. There has been little critical agreement on the generic status of these texts, or even whether it is possible to generalise among them. They have been described as an 'outgrowth' of the kings' sagas by Melissa Berman, who also coined the term 'political sagas' for them (1985); equally non-committal is Ármann Jakobsson's classification, 'not quite kings' sagas' (2005, 391). Theodore Andersson acknowledged the fictional element in *Jómsvíkinga saga* by describing it, with the no longer extant *Skjöldunga saga*, as 'a cross between a kings' saga and a legendary saga' (1985, 215). Those who have called the saga 'pure fantasy' (Blake 1962, vii) or 'an entertaining fiction' (Ólafur Halldórsson 1993, 344) have done little to define the nature of the entertainment on offer.

Even the most responsible historians, and not only medieval ones, are liable to the charge of bias. It is relevant to take into account the background and prepossessions of the author, and even more important to consider those of his audience. The *konunga-sögur* relating the history of Norway were produced either in Iceland or at least by Icelanders, but can be assumed to be aimed at a Norwegian audience (Stefán Karlsson 1979); thus their point of view is predominantly Norwegian and the kings of Norway are the protagonists if not always 'heroes'.¹ Snorri lays stress on the importance of poetic sources as the nearest possible thing to eyewitness evidence, while acknowledging that the evidence of skalds, particularly those present

¹ There are, of course, contrasts made between the kings in this respect, and one kind of judgement is influenced by the religious bias mentioned above. There are also contrasts discernible among the broad category of *konungasögur*; many have argued for an Icelandic perspective in *Heimskringla*, while *Fagrskinna*, by contrast, is more 'Norwegian' in its perspective and has been argued to have been commissioned by King Hákon Hákonarson.

in battles on one side or the other, self-evidently privileges one side of the story: *En þat er háttir skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir*. Only occasionally is it possible to represent both perspectives, where there are poets positioned on both sides of the conflict: an example is the account of the battle of Svölör in *Heimskringla* and other texts, which draws on both the verses of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld in honour of Óláfr Tryggvason, and those of Þórðr Kolbeinsson for his opponent jarl Eiríkr. Snorri may have thought of this as a way of introducing balance, but the effect reveals the Norwegian perspective of the whole: Eiríkr is treated throughout the account as a secondary hero, shown to advantage against the lesser villains, his allies the kings of Sweden and Denmark; as Óláfr remarks, *Oss er ván snarprar orrostu af því liði. Þeir eru Norðmenn sem vér erum* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 357).

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 used 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* used as a source for those historical texts. Judith Jesch has seen in this use of verse 'attempts at historical narrative' (1993, 215) likely to derive from the early stage of the literary history of the saga represented by this lost version. Jesch cites examples 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 Jómsvíkingar' (215). She sees the later history of the saga, resulting in the texts that now survive, as a process of fictionalisation, diverting attention from the historical kernel of the story — which is contained in verses honouring not the Jómsvíkingar but their Norwegian enemies. Norman Blake too calls the saga 'the end product of many years of literary accretion' (1962, vii). Both he and Lee M. Hollander chose to translate the particularly highly coloured version in MS perg. 4to no. 7 because of its entertaining characteristics.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact, though, that this process of fictionalisation must have begun early, since the almost entirely fictional Jómsvíkingar must always have been its focus, and that it must have originated in the pre-literary period. Jesch points out that Tindr's verses are introduced in AM 510 4to with what appears to be the classic historian's respect for the evidence of the eyewitness skald: *þat segir Tindr Hallkelsson í flokki þeim, er hann orti um Jóms-víkinga, ok heyrir svá til, at hann var þar sjálf* (Petersens 1879, 82; text normalised in all references). But this must be a tweaking, in fact either a fictional pretence at historical attribution or a mistake on the part of the compiler of AM 510 4to. It is unlikely to have been drawn from the earlier version of the saga, since *Fagrskinna*, which normally sticks closely to its written sources, describes the poem differently, listing Tindr among the Icelanders who supported and recorded the feats of Jarl Hákon:

Þessir váru íslenzkir menn með Hákoní jarli . . . Tindr Hallkelssonr; hann orti drápu um Hákon jarl, ok í þeirri drápu er margt sagt frá Jómsvíkingaorrostu. Frá þessa manna orðum hafa menn á því landi minni haft frá þessum tíðendum, sumt með kveðskap, en sumt með annarri frásögu' (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 131).

The content of the surviving verses attributed to Tindr seems to confirm that they all belong to the one poem in honour of Hákon. *Fagrskinna* refers also to the *annarri*

frásögu, the prose oral narratives, in which stories of these events must have circulated.²

Moreover, verses with potentially historical content can be put to fictional purposes. One of the examples Jesch treats is that of the description of jarl Hákon's fleet before the battle of Hjörungavágr. In AM 510 4to it is said of Hákon that:

var hann eigi einskipa ok eigi með tvau, heldr váru meir en þrjú hundruð; þat váru snekkjur ok skeiður ok kaupskip ok hvert fljótanda far, er jarl fékk til þeira, þau er há váru borði, ok öll váru skipin bæði hlaðin af monnum ok vápnum ok grjóti' (Petersens 1879, 69).

The wording of *Fagrskinna* is similar, suggesting that this phrasing existed also in the lost early version of the saga (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 129).³ The detail must derive from two and a half verses by Þórðr Kolbeinsson cited at this point in AM 510 4to and *Fagrskinna*, the first of which says that the warrior (Hákon's son Eiríkr, since the poem is devoted to his praise) had in his fleet *mjök margar snekkjur sem knörru ok skeiðar*, the second stanza mentions the *hávir stafna* of the ships. The other versions of the saga omit this description and the cited verses, AM 291 4to switching attention to the arrival of the Jómsvíkingar as seen by the Norwegians. If we read the verse independently of this prose context, its purpose would appear to be a straightforward description of Hákon's large and varied fleet, and indeed Snorri cites it in *Heimskringla* simply to confirm that Hákon and Eiríkr *stefna út öllum atmenningi at liði ok skipum* (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1941, 276). The catalogue of varieties of ship in the fleet is a rhetorical flourish used also by other poets: 'In these stanzas, the poets are trying to give an impression of a large fleet composed of various types of ships and use the different words, probably not very precisely, to create this impression' (Jesch 2001, 126). In *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Fagrskinna* the emphasis is different. In other contexts *knörr* suggests not a warship but a trading vessel, and this is the sense picked up in the prose by the replacement of *knörr* with *kaupskip* in the catalogue, suggesting the emergency mobilisation of every possible kind of vessel; the sentence also stresses the contrast between this enormous fleet and the *eitt skip eða tvau* the Jómsvíkingar have been led to expect by an old farmer who meets them on a raid for provisions ashore and tricks them into the unequal engagement with the jarls. This vivid passage gives a colourful prelude to the battle in which the values of the heroic band are called upon in a set-piece challenge replete with animal imagery (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 128):

Þér farið eigi hermannliga á ókunnu landi ok langt til sótt, ok eru þér áburðarmenn miklir ok vilið auka nofn yður í þessi fýr, þér takið kið ok kálfa,

² Tindr is named only in the A version of *Fagrskinna*; the B version omits his name, so that the *drápa* referred to appears to be attributed to Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson. Whether *á því landi* refers to Norway or Iceland depends on what the perspective of the writer is taken to be. If he is writing in Norway, as is generally assumed (see Ólafía Einarsdóttir, 2002), he is suggesting that the Icelanders named, who had witnessed the events narrated, had taken oral reports back to Iceland, which ultimately formed a source for the saga composed there.

³ *Fagrskinna* has a smaller number of ships, *hálfri annat hundruð*; the same number is specified in *Heimskringla*. This suggests an exaggeration in AM 510 4to of the number given in its more conservative source. The other versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga* do not specify a number: *sjá þá að skipaður var vogurinn allt frá þeim í brott af herskipum* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 176).

geitr ok kýr, ok væri meiri ýðvarr frami at láta vera búit ok taka heldr björmin, er náliga mun nú kominn á bjarnbásinn, ef þér fáid stíltan.

The exchange with the old peasant introduces an extreme challenge, which, according to the heroic ethic of the Jómsvíkingar, must be met; its language invokes the classic symbolism of *níð*, comparing the herding of female and ungrown animals with the hunting of the bear, an animal connoting the warrior. At the same time the reference to the trap foreshadows the outcome, in which the trap will close on the Jómsvíkingar themselves. This is expressed through a comparison made, as at other points in the saga, between the qualities of two of the heroes themselves: the rashly heroic Búi, eager to seize the opportunity to catch the enemy unawares, and the more devious Sigvaldi, who recognises the possibility of a trick but acquiesces in the attack:

‘Vera kann þat at Búi digri gangi sjálfir á bjarnbásinn, þann er hann hugðisk veiða myndu Hákon jarl. Svá ferr hann sem feigr maðr’ (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 129).

This is reminiscent of the stoicism of Skarphedinn in *Njáls saga*, who recognises his father’s failure of judgement in believing his attackers will not set fire to his house, but nevertheless consents to die with him. This posture of heroic resignation is problematised, however, in the case of the enigmatic Sigvaldi who, at the moment of doom, does not die alongside his fellows but withdraws from the battle. The element of trickery in the episode is a recurrent theme in the saga, although it is left unclear here whether the peasant’s trick is a gesture of patriotic support for the jarls or, as *Fagrskinna* hints, a self-serving ploy to retrieve the plundered livestock: after the intruders have gone in pursuit of the enemy, *bóndinn veik aptr búinu um eyna*.⁴ Þórr’s verses are used, in *Fagrskinna* and AM 510 4to, to emphasise the climax to this entirely fictitious story, with its clearly literary function of building tension before the battle, directing attention and perspective to the betrayed Jómsvíkingar, and analysing the individual characteristics of their heroism. It is significant that Snorri, although he includes a truncated version of the exchange with the peasant, separates it from the verse, which he puts to a more genuinely historical purpose.

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, Jóm sborg and Hjørungavágr. It is widely accepted that Jóm sborg, mentioned in various historical sources predating the saga, can be identified with the town of Wollin, now in Poland; its northern affiliations are well-attested by archaeological evidence but it ‘was principally a market town, although there must have been a garrison in the citadel. . . Jóm sborg 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 Liavág (Blake 49–50). But as Halldór Laxness

⁴ The account of *Fagrskinna* is followed here, as most likely to represent the lost early ‘historical’ version of the saga. Surviving versions of *Jóm svíkinga saga* lack the element of contrast between those who do and do not trust the old peasant (here called Úlfr); suspecting a trap, they force him to go with them in pursuit of the jarls; when, anticipating their realisation of the trick, he jumps overboard, he is killed by a spear (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 175).

aptly remarked, Hjørungavágr — like Svǫldr, the equally shadowy location of Óláfr Tryggvason's fall — is a place created not by God but by Icelanders.⁵ By this he means 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, in order to accommodate the scene (probably derived from a literary model) of Óláfr's enemies observing his passing fleet, and failing to recognise the magnificent Ormr inn langi. Ólafur Halldórsson takes a sceptical view of the identification of Hjørungavágr with Liavág, pointing out that the features described in the text differ from it in almost every respect, and implying that the landscape of the saga is dictated by the needs of the story: the island Primsigð as the location for jarl Hákon's invocation of his pagan goddesses, and the skerry behind which Vagn's ships lie concealed (Ólafur Halldórsson 1990a, 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 Jómsvíkingar are established, not by any detail of their deeds before the battle of Hjørungavágr, but by their collective identification with their brotherhood:

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 (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 130).

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 *Hirdskrá*. The stipulation that no one can join the band *er ellri væri en fimmtugur að aldri og engi yngri en átján vetra gamall* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 129) is reminiscent of the restrictions on the crew of the Ormr inn langi:

engi maðr skyldi vera á Orninum langa ellri en sextøgr eða yngri en tvítøgr, en valdir mjök at affli ok hreysti' (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 344).

Strikingly, though, the code of the Jómsvíkingar emphasises 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 nékkvað breyttist háttur laganna í borginni, og verða lögin haldin eigi með jafnmikilli freku sem þá er Pálnatóki stýrði' (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 152).

The relaxation of discipline has no particular consequence in the saga's narrative, 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 Hjørungavágr, where the

⁵ 'Hjørungavág 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' (Laxness 1971, 179).

solidarity of the Jómsvíkingar as a unit is a vital factor — and Sigvaldi is again found wanting.

The enclosed nature and stringent exclusiveness of Jómzburg 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 brothers⁶ sets up a tension between family solidarity and that which the laws of the Jómsvíkingar impose on the group, a tension that plays its part too in the vows of the Jómsvíkingar and the fulfilment of these oaths in the course of the battle, which nevertheless allow the band to fragment.

Where the laws of the Jómsvíkingar 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, in which Vagn is praised for his ability in *riddaraskap*, all the leading Jómsvíkingar are represented anti-heroically in ways familiar from the *Íslendinga-sögur*. Vagn is a precocious, difficult youth after the fashion of Egill Skalla-Grimsson, who finds his place among the Jómsvíkingar 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 um hæfa hans skaplyndi og ofsa (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 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 þat skorar Búi í sætina at hann kvezk aldri mundu lausar láta gullkistur jarls.
Er þat ok mál manna at hann þykkir þat ent hafa' (Blake, 21).

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 Svölðr.

Whereas in Oddr Snorrason's saga 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 fulfils 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' (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 187). Walter Baetke (1970) argued that Sigvaldi's treacherous nature was an invention of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, borrowed and adapted by Oddr Snorrason to demonise 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 was the verse attributed to Stefnir Þorgilsson which Oddr cites (translated into Latin), and which is also cited in *Fagrskinna* and *Kristni saga*, in

⁶ Skaldic verses testify to the presence of Sigvaldi and Búi at Hjørungavágr. Þorkell was certainly a historical figure who participated in the Viking conquest of England in the eleventh century, but his presence at Hjørungavágr is more doubtful. Sigurðr kápa is not known elsewhere and may be an invention (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 48–50).

which Sigvaldi is denounced for his double treachery, the tricking of Sveinn alluded to above, and the betrayal of Óláfr Tryggvason:

Munkat nefna,
 nær munk stefna:
 niðrbjúgt es nef
 á niðingi, —
 þanns Svein konung
 sveik ór landi,
 en Tryggvason
 á talar dró. (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 151)

Whether or not the word *niðingr* and Sigvaldi's down-turned nose represent allusions to the Judas tradition already present in the verse, as Andersson argues, it clearly establishes Sigvaldi as the type of a traitor, referring to his betrayals of the two opposing rulers. This tradition underlies his characterisation in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, where the description of him as *maður nefljótur* suggests knowledge of the verse, but the portrayal is not consistently negative; indeed, Sigvaldi's tricking of Sveinn, referred to in Stefni'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 Stefni'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 his own special duties as its leader. His betrayal is measured, first, in the context of the oaths sworn by all the *Jómsvíkingar*; 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 eitan Hákon jarl úr landi eða drepið hann eila; að þriðja kosti skal eg þar eftar liggja' (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 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 words of overt condemnation: *Þá mælti hann til Sigvalda, at hann skyldi fara manna armastur*, followed by a derogatory verse (188), and the conventional stoicism of Búi, who quips as his lips and teeth are hewn off:

'Versna mun hinna dönsku þykja að kyssa oss . . . í Borgundarhólmi, þótt vér kæmim enn þangað þessu næst.'

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 before Sveinn, but earlier in the saga.

More significantly, the vows of the other *Jómsvíkingar*, 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 Porkell had been *'að eg mun fylgja Sigvalda bróður mínum og flýja eigi fyrr en eg séig á skutstafn skipi hans'* (162). Porkell'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 hvorumtveggj*

þeirra hafa efnt sína heitstrenging, Þorkels og Sigurðar (188–89). Norman Blake makes a comparison in passing between the account of Hjørungavágr and another classic heroic battle account, the Old English *Battle of Maldon* (Blake 1962, xxv). Here a similar point is made, that the failure of the cowardly thanes is less significant in itself than for its effect on the solidarity of the whole force:

Us Godric hæfð,
 earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene.
 Wende þæs formoni man, þa he on meare rad,
 on wlanca þam widge, þæt wære hit ure hiaford;
 forþan wearð her on felda folc to twæmed,
 scyldburch tobrocen. (*Battle of Maldon*, ll. 237–242)

[‘Godric, the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us all. Full many a man believed, when he rode on that proud horse, that it was our lord; therefore the army was divided here on the battlefield, the shield-wall broken’.]

The final testing of the heroic mettle of the Jómsvíkingar 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. 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 Jómsvíkingar:

Og nú ætla þeir Hákon jarl og Þorkeli að spyrja hvern þeirra áður þeir sé högginn, 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 opin fyrir sér . . . En í öðru lagi þá þótti þeim gaman að heyrja á orð þeirra, hvort sem upp kæmi (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 195).

The final sentence, typically, warns us not to take the saga’s heroic postures 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 Jómshorg (or, more likely, among the literary associates of the saga’s author):

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

The experiment is undercut by the author’s sardonic comment on its result:

Og nú höggur Þorkell svo að þegar fauk höfuðið af bolnum, en knifurinn féll á jörð niður, sem líklegt var (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 196).

The saga has often 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 rationalisations 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 fictionalised. 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 Hjørungavágr it

re-establishes the collective values of the warrior band, as one after another calls on traditional heroic resignation in the name of the collective values of the Jómsvíkingar:

‘Eigi man eg lög vor Jómsvíkinga ef eg hygg illt til eða kvíða eg við bana mínum eða mæla eg æðruorð, þvíáð eitt sinn skal hver deyja’ (Ólafur Halldórsson 1969, 195).

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