

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 59 (2017)

Artikel: Body description as a genre marker : Jómsvíkinga saga
Autor: Novotná, Marie
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858060>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Body Description as a Genre Marker: *Jómsvíkinga saga*

MARIE NOVOTNÁ (PRAHA)

Hann [Vagn] var allra manna vænstr ok fríðastr sjónum og hinn mesti atgørvismaðr ok bráðgor um hotvetna. Búi móðurbróðir hans var maðr óorðasamr og heldr hljóðr oftast ok skapmikill. Hann var maðr svo sterkr at menn vissu ógerla afl hans. Búi var ekki vænleiksmað, en þó var hann vörpuligr ok mikilúðligr ok garpr hinn mesti í alla staði. Sigurðr kápa bróðir hans var maðr vænn ok kurteis ok liðmannligr ok þó enn raunœfr viðreignar ok heldr fámálugr. En frá Sigvalda syni Strút-Haralds er þat at segja, at hann er maðr nefljótr ok folleitr; hann var eygðr manna bezt; hár var hann vexti ok allsnofrmennligr. Þorkell bróðir hans var allra manna hæstr; hann var sterkr maðr ok forvitri, ok svo var hvortveggi þeirra bræðra. (Jómsvíkinga saga, ch. 16)

He [Vagn] was the nicest of all men and best looking; he was a man of all-round accomplishments and stormy in everything. Búi, his uncle, was taciturn and often silent and very proud. He was so strong that men were hardly aware how strong he actually was. Búi was not a nice-looking man but in spite of that he was important and distinguished looking and was the bravest one in all places.

Sigurðr kápa, his brother, was a handsome man, polite and dexterous; in spite of that he was difficult to get along with and rather taciturn. About Sigvaldi, the son of Strút-Haraldr, it is to be said that he had an ugly nose and sallow features. He had excellent eyesight; he was very tall and very nimble. Þorkell, his brother, was exceedingly tall, he was strong and both of the brothers were wise.

(*The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, ch. 16)

These descriptions of appearance of Vagn, Búi, Sigurðr kápa, Sigvaldi and Þorkell are strikingly detailed and in the context of the *Jómsvíkinga saga* unique. What can we deduce from them about the theme, aim or genre of this saga?

Jómsvíkinga saga has a complex textual history. It is preserved in five different versions, and its story is also incorporated in *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna* and *Gesta Danorum*. AM 291 4to – probably the oldest version – is a manuscript written in the second half of the thirteenth century and it is supposed to be one of the early sagas that “can be dated with a fair degree of certainty to the first third of thirteenth century” (Torfi Tulinius, 2002: 191).

The genre of *Jómsvíkinga saga* has been broadly discussed and the recent conclusion of Alison Finlay is that *Jómsvíkinga saga* defies genre classification (2014: 77). In spite of this rather sceptical statement, the difficulty of putting this saga in

21
Sva v̄t̄z i allri lyzko ziallo s̄nu at h̄pi at t̄iart h̄ot̄ i megar
maripla. De 2 p̄i sagt at yagu ē l̄vndr þa herma p̄oddur leysigat
h̄afþ v̄t. En l̄vndr ē t̄i b̄gv̄dar holme m. yeleca apa s̄nu + ē
t̄i. þat ûþyckiaz h̄varig raf̄ mega v̄t̄ kōa l̄. kettahðe a t̄im
þyck h̄va o dæll v̄ Bua ð h̄bæt̄ allra s̄iða freyða + þe h̄v̄t̄
noekn helket̄ ē Bui meln þ t̄im. f̄ s̄i at h̄t̄ v̄t̄ scappellaða l̄tr. En
at ongu hæfþ t̄i p̄reysð h̄ m̄tu er t̄im lyðit aðau veg h̄var
seofþ v̄t̄. h̄v̄t̄ allra in væntr + s̄íþaltv̄ s̄iðu + en meðiat gœv̄l
ði + brab̄ ger v̄u hotvetna. Bui mōs̄ brof̄ h̄v̄t̄ in v̄ oþa l̄antr
+ li h̄lið optaz + scappmikill h̄v̄t̄ in s̄væt̄kr at in v̄iso oglapl
h̄. Bui v̄ ecki væntriks in en ho v̄t̄ h̄ varþ poligr + mikil v̄þligr +
garþr ei meði jalla itaþ. Sigf̄ kapa brof̄ h̄v̄t̄ in yðg + kurdæs
+ l̄kþmægþigr + ho eð rauðgr v̄iþ yðg + le ða malogr. En f̄ra
Sigvalda lyne l̄tr v̄o h̄ar ē þat legia at h̄t̄ in neþlœtr + pallœtr
h̄v̄t̄ v̄þg þ in bæt̄. h̄ar v̄t̄ v̄rði + all s̄iðr mægþigr. Skell b̄f̄
h̄t̄ allra to hætr h̄v̄t̄ in + for v̄tre + s̄i v̄ h̄varði þa broþra
+ t̄i. at er in f̄l̄ig at þ Sigvaldi brof̄ b̄valdþ uðr fði + ætla
+ t̄i jons̄ b̄gar + vilia vita er v̄iþ v̄rði + l̄spr̄ia r̄ist̄ h̄an. +
þ. liþ h̄osa vallig þim lyðre þat þ reþi + l̄kþ m̄t̄ jons̄
yki h̄o. En h̄ s̄væt̄. + katt þ vallig at þ foriþigat + ætlaþ
s̄s̄a gatil + v̄þgat + ē in mal at þ r̄aynt̄ yker brof̄
þot id eðd naðrund at in. þ beða h̄ þur tilaga t̄. þarar h̄
+ s̄væt̄ eð h̄ suðræd v̄ qþ þa Þurðuegu ḡa l̄kildó at þi þe
n̄ þes coðra ðe ðiðr at þ reþi þi þalf̄ m̄t̄ + ætla þ eþ
þerti at haua. e. þær h̄v̄t̄ ellig + s̄æti v̄kýrt. Nu þi þ
ðat s̄iþ. ho at h̄ar. + þa v̄lde ecki t̄ legia. þ h̄aya. n. leysigat
+ t̄. in þi v̄ndr. þu þi s̄iþ sem meðt + s̄iþ h̄art er þ kōo v̄
þgviðar holm + þoðoþ þurþa at qþla s̄iða v̄lta + þurð noc
ðed n̄ððar. + t̄aca þi m̄t̄ raf̄ at þiðahar v̄pðas + meðtop
+ t̄aca v̄pþu yeleca. + þiðaþigat var + meðt þi þe ollo

one of the commonly used categories makes it well suited for analysing the development of saga writing as such. In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, researchers have found traits connecting it to different saga genres. If we here omit new genres created for this saga, such as “anti-royal” or “political saga” (Berman, 1985) which do not help much in understanding its relationship to other literary works, we have to do with three traditional genres: *konungasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. In this limited space it is not possible to cite and analyse in depth the specifics of body descriptions in these genres, so general tendencies typical for each of them are instead summarised.

Different Old Norse sources of *konungasögur* were compared by Klingenberg, and he concluded that the most common description of a king is that he is tall and beautiful (1993: 108). In *Heimskringla*, he also finds another tendency: diminishing of the ideal traits in the course of history, or the concept of *diminutio*, common in the Middle Ages (1993: 118). Besides illustrating this idea, the body descriptions in the *konungasögur* strengthen the king’s glory. *Fornaldarsögur* focus in respect to body description – as in all other themes – on the unusual. We read many comparatives (more beautiful, more able and stronger than others), superlatives, descriptions of extraordinary strength or monstrosity. A normal appearance is not mentioned. In *Íslendingasögur*, descriptions of someone’s appearance are not as common as in *konungasögur*. They often contain positive adjectives and are more variable, including more physical details, sometimes also negative ones. Height and strength are often mentioned, and beauty usually when describing women - which is also the only place where superlatives are generally used.

Let us look now at *Jómsvíkinga saga* itself. Generally, traits of the *konungasögur* have been found there mainly on the thematic level. First of all, the initial part of the saga (ca. one third) talks mostly about Danish kings and their deeds, but also later the story is set against a background of historical events – Danish military activity along the Baltic coast and incursion into Norway (Finlay, 2014: 77). But there is a big difference in emphasis: *Jómsvíkinga saga*, in contrast to most of the *konungasögur*, expresses hostility to kings and is distinctively anti-historical. This is an important point, as when considering genres the material as such might be of lesser importance than the emphasis put on it. If body descriptions are analysed, *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the *konungasögur* have nothing in common. There are very few physical descriptions in *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the appearance of the Danish kings is not described at all.

If we think about the borderline of *Jómsvíkinga saga* to the *fornaldarsögur*, the following common traits can be mentioned: the battle of Hjörungavágr, which is strongly influenced by supernatural events – in contrast to the description of this battle in *Heimskringla*; the apparently legendary brotherhood of the Jómsvíkings; and the strange motivation for the final fight: extravagant vows made while drunk (Finlay, 2014: 67). With respect to body descriptions, descriptions typical of the *fornaldarsögur* can be found in *Jómsvíkinga saga* in cases where women are described: *Pyri [...] var kvenna frídst at sjá* (“had no equal in beauty”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga/The*

Saga of the Jomsvikings, ch. 2) – *Ástriðr [...] var hin vænsta kona ok hin vitrasta* (“was the most beautiful and wisest of women”) (*Jómsvíkinga saga/The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, ch. 25) But as mentioned above, superlatives when describing women’s beauty are common also in the *Íslendingasögur*, so it is not possible to use this trait as a genre marker.

For obvious reasons *Jómsvíkinga saga* could never be classified among the *Íslendingasögur* but several researchers have seen it as “an important milestone on the road that leads to the *Íslendingasögur*” (Torfi Tulinius, 2002: 194), see also Jesch (1993: 218). Finlay also states that there is a common ground between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the *Íslendingasögur* in their representation of individual characters (2014: 73). Also the body descriptions cited at the beginning of this paper belong to the type of description that is often found in the *Íslendingasögur* and the whole chapter (ch. 16 in AM 291 4to, ch. 17 in Sthm. perg. nr 7 4to, ch. 19 in AM 540 4to) is written in the same style – as a genealogy.

Jesch (1993) used skaldic verses to demonstrate that *Jómsvíkinga saga* originally had a historical impulse, namely the history of the *Hlaðajarlar*, but it “was side tracked into narrative for its own sake, giving us the fictions of the *Íslendingasögur*” (218). Body descriptions can be used in a similar way, revealing to us the heterogeneity of this saga and its transitional position, and due to the early date of its composition, we can say not yet differentiated style.

But why is it Véseti and his sons who are described in the way common in the *Íslendingasögur*? Using Torfi Tulinius’s interpretation of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, the answer might be that they are prototypes of a *bændr* family. He sees *Jómsvíkinga saga* as addressed particularly to Icelandic *höfdingjar*, hoping to gain nobility through service to the king and marriage to daughters of *jarlar*, so that their lineage becomes worthy of historiographic treatment making possible the birth of *Íslendingasögur* (2002: 216). The use of body descriptions in *Jómsvíkinga saga* might support this theory.

Jómsvíkinga saga, being an early saga that does not easily fit into any category of the saga genres, can help us to understanding the development of these genres. Stylistic details such as body descriptions can also contribute to that end as they play a specific role in each literary genre and are used according to the genre’s own goals.

Literature

Berman, Melissa. 1985. "The Political Saga", *Scandinavian Studies*, 57: 113-129.

Finlay, Alison. 2014. "Jómsvíkinga saga and Genre", *Scripta Islandica*, 65: 63-79.

Jesch, Judith. 1993. "History in the 'Political Sagas'", *Medium Ævum*, 62: 210-220.

Jómsvíkinga saga, edition cited from Ólafur Halldórsson, ed. 1969. *Jómsvíkinga saga* (Reykjavík: Jón Helgason).

Klingenberg, Heinz. 1993. "Das Herrscherportrait in Heimskringla", in *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages*, ed. Alois Wolf (Tübingen: Narr), pp. 99-139.

The Saga of the Jomsvikings, edition and English translation cited from Norman Blake, 1962. *Jómsvíkinga saga. The Saga of the Jomsvikings*. (London: Thomas Nelson).

Torfi Tulinius. 2002. *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth Century Iceland*, trans. R. C. Eldvik (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark).