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Body Description as a Genre Marker: *Jómsvíkinga saga*

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Hann [Vagn] var allra manna vænstr ok fríðastr sjónum og hinn mesti atgærvismaðr 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 raunæfr viðreignar ok heldr fámálugr. En frá Sigvalda syni Strút-Haralds er þat at segja, at hann er maðr nefljótr ok fólleitr; hann var eygðr manna bezt; hár var hann vexti ok allsnöfrmannligr. 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

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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 Hjørungavágr, 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: *Þyri [...] var kvenna frídust 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 *Hlaðjarlar*, 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 *höfðingjar*, 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.

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