



FROM THE FRYING PAN OF ORAL TRADITION INTO THE FIRE OF
SAGA WRITING:
THE PRECARIOUS SURVIVAL OF HISTORICAL FACT IN THE SAGA OF
YNGVAR THE FAR-TRAVELLER

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The Saga of Yngvar the Far-Traveller¹ used to be classified as a Legendary Saga (Fornaldarsaga) on account of its vague and distant geographical setting and unrealistic subject matter. Lacking the mythological or epic/heroic roots of the more “classical” Legendary Sagas, it was considered late and obviously devoid of any historical value. A sort of epilogue to the saga, citing an original version by a late-12th century author, was rejected as fanciful.

When put to a proper philological test by Dietrich Hofmann these assumptions duly crumbled. What emerged as the reasonable assumption, supported by the balance of internal evidence,² is that the epilogue is genuine. Yngvar’s Saga was indeed written by “Monk Odd the Learned”, i.e. Odd Snorrason of the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar (Northern Iceland), known as the author of a Latin life of King Ólaf Tryggvason of Norway, written perhaps around 1190 and only preserved in Icelandic translation. Odd’s Yngvar’s Saga must have been composed in Latin, too, even if the epilogue does not expressly say so, the preserved text being an Icelandic translation – a rather free translation perhaps³ – made, according to Hofmann, very soon after the original composition, even before 1200.⁴

The very end of the saga (the last two paragraphs in modern editions) is an addition by the translator. He gives Odd’s book as his source⁵ and mentions Odd’s letter to two prominent chieftains, Jón Loftsson (d. 1197, a *terminus ante quem* for Odd’s work)⁶ and Gissur Hallsson,⁷ who happened to be acknowledged for their clerical education and clearly were expected to check Odd’s work before its release.

The translator goes on to paraphrase Odd’s account of his sources. Odd had cited three authorities for the story, all of them oral, and made sure that they in turn represented different chains of transmission. One had the story from his own father, the second from a certain Icelandic family, and the third from a trader who said he had learned it⁸ at the court of the



King of Sweden. Odd's stated principle was to retain from each version whatever he deemed most reliable.⁹ How widely the three traditions differed is not made clear, but Odd discusses and occasionally rejects certain variants included by "some people" or "some storytellers".

This sounds as a remarkably serious piece of historiography. Thin as it seems to be on historical fact, with its great emphasis on giants, dragons, ghosts and magic, Yngvar's Saga represents no less than state-of-the-art historical research in Iceland at a time when Danish and Norwegian historians readily acknowledged the superiority of Icelanders as preservers of historical tradition. A recognized scholar undertakes, supported if not recruited by the two learned aristocrats, to produce an export quality version, in the language of international scholarship, of an oral tale. He approaches the task methodically by finding and tapping oral sources representing different strands of the tradition, much as a modern practitioner of "oral history" might do.

The resulting saga is, indeed, to some extent "historical". The protagonist, Yngvar, and the ill-fated expedition he led far to the east and south, as far as the realm of the Saracens, is attested to by dozens of Swedish runic inscriptions – in fact no Swede of the entire Viking Age is as well covered by contemporary sources. The dating of the rune stones roughly fits the saga which places its main events around 1040 – a temporal setting too firm and far too late for a typical Legendary Saga. The Yngvar stones are among the rune stones erected by the first generation of Christians in Central Sweden, which to a certain extent fits the saga's rather unexpected portrayal of Swedish Vikings as champions of Christianity in the East.

Because of the rune stones, students of the history of Vikings in Sweden and Russia have, ever since the 18th century, tended to approach Yngvar's Saga as a historical source, albeit of doubtful validity. Various attempts have been made to make geographical sense of the less-than-realistic topography of the saga and to identify Yngvar's expedition with known events in the history of the Black Sea region. Especially interesting are the conclusions of Swedish runologist Mats G. Larsson¹⁰ who identifies Yngvar's expedition with an army of 3000 "varangians" who, according to a Georgian chronicle, featured in Georgian politics and warfare ca. 1040–1041, with a smaller group of 700 crossing the highlands of the Caucasus over to the Caspian region, a route of rivers and portages known to be passable with light ships even if the highest mountain pass is almost 1000 metres over sea level. The chronicle provides sufficient detail to confirm – or at least strongly suggest – the identity of the events described



with those of the saga, which in turn helps to identify parts of its topography. In certain respects the saga turns out to fit the historical and geographical facts, or, more often, to reflect such facts in a more or less radically altered form.

Despite its partial historicity the value of Yngvar's Saga as an historical source is sadly limited. It corroborates the rune stones and the Georgian chronicle on certain points, and those, in turn, confirm some grains of historical truth in the saga's seemingly implausible narrative. But wherever the saga stands alone it is anyone's guess how it relates to historical fact. Even geographical fits can hardly substantiate the events. If, for instance, the "Red Sea" of the saga probably is identical with the bay Kara Bugaz at the east side of the Caspian Sea, this does not (as Matsson tends to take for granted¹¹) establish that Yngvar's expedition really crossed, or even reached, the Caspian Sea. It only demonstrates that knowledge of this peculiar place eventually was linked with the Yngvar story, perhaps at an early stage. But this knowledge need not represent the first-hand experience of the survivors of the expedition. Instead it might have come from the inhabitants of the region (through interpreters or bilinguals who no doubt were involved in the dealings of the Swedes with the local populations) or even those other Scandinavian or Russian Vikings who shortly before had operated in the Caspian Sea, travelling perhaps by the Don-Volga route. Similarly, an unmistakable description of "Greek fire" used by Yngvar's enemies does not confirm that his expedition actually met with opponents so equipped, only that early tellers of the tale knew the phenomenon as one of the memorable hazards of the Black Sea region.¹²

Yngvar's Saga is, at any rate, no real Legendary Saga. Rather it belongs to the phase of saga writing which preceded the 13th century differentiation of saga genres. Its closest relative may, in some ways, be the Saga of the Jomsvikings (*Jómsvíkinga saga*), also hard to place in one genre or another and similarly centred on one event of historical proportions, i.e. the invasion of Western Norway by a formidable band of Baltic Vikings, some 50 years before Yngvar's expedition. Among the memorable events of those 50 years were the Vineland expeditions, and the Battle of Clontarf in Ireland (*Brjánsbardagi*) 1014. Both were the subject of tales, perhaps first written down in some form not much later than Yngvar's Saga but now only known as used by subsequent saga writers. Less similar to Yngvar's Saga, and perhaps a bit younger, is the Saga of the Faeroe Islanders (*Færeyinga saga*), yet another saga hard to classify, related to the Kings' Sagas but as a literary creation a precursor of and inspiration to



the Sagas of Icelanders. All of these represent attempts to reconstruct extraordinary events on the basis of 150–200 years of storytelling tradition – which is a short gap compared with much of Old Icelandic history writing.

In the case of Yngvar's Saga, at any rate, the historical result is remarkably meagre, considering Odd's apparent ambition. The question necessarily arises whether this is just an instance of historiographical bad luck, or whether it is the expected fate of historical fact to be, in the process of narrative transmission, soon overgrown with and replaced by oral fiction.

First of all, to be viable in oral transmission, historical fact has to be given a narrative form, in line with the tastes of a given oral culture. Then, in the chain of transmission, content gets gradually lost, perhaps not at every stage, but unavoidably in the long run. This is made good by creative transmission, by skilful storytellers rejuvenating their tales. Only by such transmission can the story retain its appeal and be viable in the long run. In the ample collections of 19th and 20th century folklore it is easy to spot examples of stories which have fared badly by loss of content; revealed by blind motives, unmotivated action and narrative discontinuities, and on the other hand those rounded and satisfying tales, with nothing lacking and nothing superfluous, which have been graced by the attention of creative storytellers. Their timeless quality may suggest a process of "immaculate transmission". But wherever the same story is known in independent versions, reasonably distant in time or place, comparison tends to reveal the fluidity of even the most popular and satisfying tales. Admittedly, this is folklore, oral entertainment. The same would, however, apply to historical narrative while orally transmitted – certainly so in a culture which referred to entertainment and information by the same term – *skemmta* / *skemmtun* – as long as it was presented orally, preferably in public.

With multiple and interlocking chains of transmission, content is not necessarily forgotten. A popular tale may, at a certain point in time, be told in variants which between them contain all the elements of the same tale as told a century earlier. A dedicated "oral historian" may even come across all those elements in the course of his studies. But he would encounter them as bits and pieces in the context of variant tales, variously mingled with additional material: stock motives, imports from different tales, imaginary interpolations etc. Without any historical record of either the events themselves or earlier stages of the tale, how should our learned Monk Odd be able to sift the original from the additions?



Yngvar's Saga may give the impression that he didn't even try. But that is a false impression, created mainly by Odd's blatant superstition. A saga writer with less of a taste for the supernatural would come up with a more sober narrative and make a more "historical" impression upon the modern reader. But if the oral story was open to the intrusion of supernatural elements, it would have been equally open to other types of secondary content, and the less superstitious saga writer would be no better placed than Odd to tell fact from that sort of fiction. Similarly, the sense that Odd gives to his story tends to be ecclesiastical, which strikes some readers as un-sagalike, whereas a different author might lean towards a more political interpretation – without necessarily staying any closer to his oral sources than Odd.

The codifier of tradition is a storyteller in his own right, the last link in a chain of creative transmission, and, working at the leisurely pace of the written word, perhaps better placed than any to make his own creative additions. In the view of Palsson and Edwards¹³ the creative remaking of Yngvar's Saga is the work mainly of Odd himself, adding material "from the world of book-learning" to the "vague memories" orally preserved. Yet Hofmann had – it seems to me convincingly – argued that much of the development of the story, even the inclusion of elements ultimately dependent on written texts, would have taken place at the oral stage.¹⁴ Be that as it may, in either case the loss of historical content would have occurred gradually, in the ordinary process of oral transmission.

Tradition can, of course, be extraordinarily long-lived. And there is no denying the fabulous capacity of human memory. The use of that capacity to memorize large amounts of verbatim text and fixed fact is, however, not typical of oral culture but literate culture, where the written text made it possible to establish texts and fix facts and subsequently served not only as a model of accurate retention but as an invaluable aid to the process of memorizing. In Iceland the inaccuracy in copying written texts prevailing, it seems, throughout the 13th century – saga scribes tended to produce versions rather than copies – suggests that the flexible transmission of oral culture was still the norm, and, of course, even more so in the days of Odd Snorrason and his oral sources.

Compared with domestic events, the distant setting of Ingvar's Saga may have contributed to a more creative transmission. The main difference, however, is that phantastic elements would seem more plausible on the distant scene; therefore the fictive material is, to the modern reader, easier to spot, not that the proportion of fact to fiction is necessarily any different.



Odd's material is oral narrative. Different arguments may apply to the oral transmission of different content, such as poetry,¹⁵ law,¹⁶ and genealogy.¹⁷ Even narrative may retain accurate fact for any length of time, as, indeed, Yngvar's Saga does contain its grains of truth. In evaluating saga narrative as an historical source the crux, however, is not the potential for accuracy but the risk of distortion. The grim fate of historical fact in the Saga of Yngvar the Far-Traveller is a reminder of that risk.

NOTES

¹ Or, in short, *Yngvar's Saga*. Old Norse text available in any edition of the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Yngvars saga víðförla/víðförla) or on the Internet as [<http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/yingvar.htm>] (9 Jan. 2003). In English: see Palsson and Edwards: 44–68.

² Reception to Hofmann's theory has been mixed (see K. Wolff: 740 and references), typically non-committal (e.g. Sverrir Tómasson: 158–159), while Palsson and Edwards (2–3) unreservedly accept his main conclusion. Compared with the sort of conjecture on which we necessarily base many of our assumptions about very early saga writing, Hofmann's conclusions deserve acceptance. While some of the points he makes may be less than convincing, those are not crucial for the main argument.

³ Early Icelandic translations, at least of narrative texts, are usually found to be free rather than close. When referring to “the translator (whom we prefer to call the saga author)” Palsson and Edwards (2) go rather far, however, in playing down the distinction between translation and original writing.

⁴ His arguments are based partly (200–203) on three peculiarities of spelling, partly (198–200) on a chronological technicality which would seem to place the translation *either* before 1200 *or* several decades later. The latter case, assuming that Odd had used “Gerlandic” dates converted by the translator into “Dionysian” (i.e. normal) ones, is not considered by Hofmann.

⁵ Palsson and Edwards's manner of translation requires a fair amount of interpretation. They have the translator state: “We have *heard* this story *told*, but in writing it down we have



followed a book composed by ...” (68, my emphasis). In Icelandic: “En þessa sögu höfum vér *heyrt og ritað* eftir forsögn þeirrar bækur ...” (modern orthography, italicised phrase corresponding to the words emphasised in the English citation). The phrase *heyrt og ritað* (literally: “heard and written”; incidentally only one of the two manuscripts includes the “heard and”) does not seem to indicate the distinction so prominent in the translation. Rather it cites Odd’s book at the same time as the *source* from which the translator knows the saga (having *heard* something does not exclude a written source, a manner of expression perhaps supported by the circumstances that before the advent of eyeglasses mature scholars would prefer having texts read aloud to them) and the *authority* he followed in his own writing (in the very next line of their translation Palsson and Edwards render the same term, “forsögn”, as *authority*).

⁶ Jón Loftsson of Oddi, educated in Norway, related by blood to the Norwegian royal house and easily the most highly respected aristocrat of his generation in Iceland, fostered Snorri Sturluson whose education is the most telling evidence of the intellectual standards maintained in Oddi.

⁷ Around 1190 he was an elderly gentleman (b. 1126), residing at the episcopal seat Skálholt in some sort of honorary role. He was head of the ruling family of the district (Haukdælir) and served as “lawspeaker” at the General Assembly, indicating his high status and legal expertise. Fostered and educated by an earlier bishop of Skálholt and widely travelled, he is named as the author of a work in Latin (*Flos peregrinationis*, now lost), has been suggested as the author or compiler of a learned compendium in the vernacular (*Veraldar saga*), and must have at least supervised the writing of a (mostly lost) Latin life of St. Þorlák, including a chronicle of the previous bishops of Skálholt. A younger colleague of Odd, Monk Gunnlaug of Þingeyrar, also showed Gissur a work he was composing in Latin, a new and augmented life of King Ólaf Tryggvason of Norway, presumably seeking advise on language and style as well as issues of substance.

⁸ Icelandic *numið* = “learned, picked up, memorised” rather than the “heard” of Palsson and Edwards’ translation.

⁹ *Merkiligast* – literally “most noteworthy”, rendered by Palsson and Edwards as “most interesting” which is the Modern Icelandic meaning of the term.



¹⁰ M. G. Larsson (1999: 3–163, 2nd ed. of a book published in 1990). Based on the author's more scholarly articles, mainly in Swedish. In English he has published a short article, “Yngvarr's expedition and the Georgian chronicle”, *Saga-Book XXII* (1987), 98–108, with a brief summary of his main argument but mainly concerned with a controversy over the exact dating of events in the Georgian chronicle. In Larsson's view the date of Yngvar's death, given by the saga as AD 1041, is in exact agreement with the chronicle. According to another interpretation the Georgian events took place seven years later, which need not, however, upset their identification with the events of the saga. A dating error of seven years is, after all, only to be expected after 150 years of oral transmission.

¹¹ Larsson, 1999: 79–83.

¹² On these counts *Yngvar's Saga* compares unfavourably with the saga accounts of the Vineland expeditions where any geographical or ethnological fit is much harder to explain by anything other than the real experience of the explorers themselves.

¹³ Palsson and Edwards, 3–5.

¹⁴ Hofmann, 209–211, 220–221.

¹⁵ While Old Norse poetry, compact and formally demanding, is obviously intended to be retained word for word, its highly irregular preservation in extant manuscripts throws some doubt on the long-term accuracy of oral transmission.

¹⁶ The early codification of Icelandic law means that the preserved texts reflect a long development in written form. There is no way to know how much of the law was ever transmitted orally, for how long or how accurately. The concept of an authoritative “recital” of the entire body of law, while contained in the written law codes, is not, perhaps, likely to reflect oral practice.

¹⁷ The appearance of Icelandic genealogy, from the 9th century onward, as a coherent body of knowledge, is deceptive. Since the *Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*) was originally compiled, in some form, in the early 12th century, its genealogy represented a standard followed to a large extent by later saga texts. From this nothing can be concluded about the coherence of genealogical traditions as orally preserved. There is, indeed, any number of small disagreements, even between versions of the *Book of Settlements* itself. In his recent doctoral



study, Gísli Sigurðsson has (129–247) compared several Sagas of Icelanders set in Eastern Iceland, argued that they generally make little use of the *Book of Settlements*, and shown how widely they differ in their genealogies, not only from the *Book of Settlements* but from each other, obviously reflecting the fluid state of such knowledge in the oral tradition.

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