**Búi the Dragon**

**Some Intertexts of Jómsvíkinga Saga**

**DANIEL SÄVBORG**

Most readers of *Jómsvíkinga saga* remember Búi digri leaping over board with his chests full of gold during the battle of Hjǫrungavágr. Very few readers remember what happens to him afterwards. But the saga does return to him. Close to the end we read:

> En þat er sögn m anni sidan at Bui hafui at ormi ordit ok lagizst a gullkistur sinar. en ver hyggium þat til þess haft vera at þar hafui ormrinn setzst a Hiorungauogi ok kann vera at nökkur ill uettir hafui lagizst a fet ok synnzst þar sidan, en æigi kunnun uar at segia huort helldr er. ma ok vera at huorki se satt þuiat marga uega ma synazst. (Jómsvíkinga saga, ed. Flateyjarbók, 1860: 203)\(^1\)

In this article I will discuss this part of the saga by focusing on some Old Norse texts which have relation to this episode. I will partly use them to throw light on *Jómsvíkinga saga*, but I will also use the episode to throw light on other texts and scholarly problems in Old Norse literature. In particular I will attempt to increase our knowledge about the presence, role, and contemporary view of supernatural events. The texts concerned are *Þorskfirðinga saga*, *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, Arngrímr ábóti’s *Guðmundar saga*, and Árni Jónsson’s *Guðmundardrápa*.

*\

*Þorskfirðinga saga*, also known as *Gull-Póris saga*, is one of the less well-known Icelandic sagas. It tells the story of the Icelander Pórir and his

---

\(^1\) This is the text of the longer version, here represented by Flateyjarbók. The text in the shorter version in Sthm. perg 4:o nr 7, is in this case quite similar: “En þat er margra manna saugn at Bui hafi orðit at ormi ok laʒ a gull sitt. er þat til þess haft at menn hafa seð orm a Hiaurunga uági kann þat ok uera at nökcur uánd uéttir hafi laʒg a þat fe ok syniz þar siðan” (Jómsvíkinga saga, ed. Gustaf Cederschiöld, 1875: 35).

Daniel Sävborg

adventures. In his youth he steals a treasure in a dragon’s lair in Norway, an act that gives him the name Gull-Þórir. Back on Iceland he is involved in conflicts with his neighbours, which leads to feuds of the kind typical for the family saga as a genre. But at the very end of the saga something new happens. We read:

Þóri brá svá illa við þessi tóðindi [the message about his son Guðmundr’s death], er hann frétti, at hann hvarf á brott frá búi sínu, ok vissi engi maðr, hvat af honum væri orðit eðr hann kom niðr, en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka orðit ok hafi lagizt á gullkistur sínu. Helzt þat ok lengi síðan, at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan um þeim megin frá Þórisstöðum ok Gullfors er kallaðr ok yfir fjörðinn í fjall þat, er stendr yfir bænum í Hlíð.2

After this there are just a few lines about Þórir’s son Atli before the saga ends (227).

Porskfirðinga saga is a family saga and, as one would expect, it is included among them in the Íslenzk fornrit series, of which volumes 1–14 comprise the family sagas. However, Porskfirðinga saga is absent in Theodore M. Andersson’s The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading. Ever since it was published in 1967, this work has influenced the view of the distinctive character of the genre as a whole, the idea of how a family saga is structured, and what its typical plot looks like. The work claims to describe the whole genre — The Icelandic Family Saga. But in fact Andersson excludes several sagas from his analyses and structural schemes. His material consists of the sagas included in Íslenzk fornrit up to volume 12, and consequently Porskfirðinga saga and several other sagas are lacking.3 Volumes 13–14 do not follow the geographical order used in the rest of the series (where the sagas are ordered according to their geographical setting: moving clockwise around Iceland); instead they are presented without any order. The explanation in the preface of Íslenzk fornrit for the separate grouping of these sagas is their alleged later date of composition compared to the other sagas; they are dated to the time after 1300, while the “classical” sagas are dated to the thirteenth


3 For reasons of clarity it should be noted that volume 14, containing only “post-classical” sagas, had already been published by 1959 and was thus available for Andersson to consult. Volume 13 was not published until 1991, but all the sagas in that volume were available in good editions elsewhere long before.
century. Scholars have often referred to the sagas dated to the fourteenth century as “post-classical”.4

The “post-classical” family sagas are frequently described as a separate category. This implies a particular view concerning both their age, usually the year 1300 is mentioned as the border-line, and their thematic and fundamental individual character, which supposedly represents a change compared to the character of the “classical” saga. Primarily a preoccupation with fantastic/supernatural motifs and a non-realistic character are mentioned among the peculiarities of these “post-classical” family sagas.5

The assumption that this interest in the fantastic/supernatural is a post-classical feature and belongs to a late period of saga-writing has frequently been used as a clear criterion for dating sagas. *Yngvars saga víðförla*, with its depiction of a member of the Swedish royal family in the late Viking Age, is related to the *konungasögur*, and in the text of the saga itself is attributed to Oddr Snorrason, fl. c. 1200. In the plot of this saga there are a great many monsters. The hero encounters a giant (*risi*; *Yngvars saga*: 12–13), later he and his men kill another *risi* (19–20), and even later they meet some more giants (34), and in all three cases they steal treasure from the giants; they fight dragons (*drekar*) several times (14, 21, and 42) — one of the dragons (21) lies on a golden treasure-hoard which is stolen by the heroes, just as in *Þorskfirðinga saga*. In his edition of the saga Emil Olson rejects the attribution to Oddr (Olson 1912: xcix). From the context it is clear that his reason for doing so is the fact that he dates the saga to a later period, and this dating, in turn, is based on his opinion that the saga has an “efterklassisk prägel” (lxxii) and is full of “efterklassiska motiv”, and then he lists the encounters with giants and dragons mentioned above (lxxvii). The assumption that such motifs in Icelandic sagas must be late and “post-classical” is for Olson obvious, so obvious that he does not need to argue for it.

Another alleged difference between “classical” and “post-classical” sagas is partly related to the perception of this fantastic tendency. The “post-classical” sagas are, to a large degree, supposed to have been written as pure fiction, and thus not be based on historical tradition like the “classical” ones. The “classical” sagas are supposed to transmit an oral tradition, while the authors of the “post-classical” sagas are described as

---

5 See, for example, Vésteinn Ólason 2007: 15. The description is the standard view; cf. for example Sigurður Nordal 1953: 261.
creative authors who invented their stories. This has long been described as a fundamental characteristic of the group. Finnur Jónsson claimed that in the fourteenth century, family sagas were written with completely invented characters, they are “sagaromaner”. An important model was, according to Finnur, the fornaldarsögur, in which a great part was “bevidst digtning” (1924: 77). Vésteinn Ólason has expressed a similar view. In the “post-classical” sagas the authors invent large parts of the story, while the “classical” sagas transmit an existing tradition (Vésteinn Ólason 1998: 20–21). Similarly, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson wrote: “people cease to concern themselves with history, and sagas in the end become pure fiction, like Víglundar Saga and Finnboga Saga” (1958: 126). Paul Schach has described the “post-classical” sagas as “escape literature” (1989: 417), and it is precisely this escapism that is seen as their distinctive feature in contrast to the foundation of reality in the “classical” saga.

The change is usually explained as a fundamental shift in taste at the end of the thirteenth century. Often the loss of independence in 1262–64 is pointed out as the cause of this change; the political upheaval is supposed to have transformed the Icelanders’ mentality and literary taste.6 As a parallel expression of this alleged change in taste, the origin of the written fornaldarsaga genre is frequently mentioned; it, too, is supposed to have originated relatively late, in the second part of the thirteenth century.7 The fornaldarsaga is a genre which also puts emphasis on fantastic/supernatural, non-realistic motifs. When scholars try to describe and explain the distinctive character of the “post-classical” family saga the fornaldarsaga is usually pointed out as the closest model.8

---

7 The exact dating of the written fornaldarsaga as a genre differs slightly between the scholars. Jónas Kristjánsson notes that most scholars agree that “the oldest heroic sagas were written down about the middle of the thirteenth century or soon after”. But he also adds: “it is worth considering whether they might not be altogether younger than has been supposed” (1997: 342). Stephen Mitchell writes: “The extant fornaldarsögur date largely from the Icelandic fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (1993: 207). A different opinion is, however, expressed by Torfi Tulinius, who dates the origin of the genre to early thirteenth century (2002: 63).
8 The “post-classical” Íslendingasögur are usually claimed to have originated under the influence of the written fornaldarsögur. This view is clearly expressed by several scholars. Sigurður Nordal, writing about the family sagas from the time after 1300, says: “de efterhaanden blev mindre realistiske, sterkere paavirket af de flittigt dyrkede oldtidssagaers smag” (1953: 261). Jan de Vries also discusses the family sagas from the fourteenth century; one of their typical features is that they “zeigen besonders stark den Einfluß der zur Vor-
highlighted by these scholars is the occurrence of fantastic/supernatural motifs. The relation between the two genres has played an important role in shaping the standard view of the origin and distinctive character of the “post-classical” saga. The idea that fantastic/supernatural motifs, monsters and ogres of different kinds, constitute a late feature and bear witness to an emphasis on fiction rather than history, is a central part of the standard view of both these saga categories.

Because of its section on the hero’s adventures and confrontations with monsters, Porskfirdinga saga appears to be quite a typical “post-classical” saga. This has been claimed by many scholars. The element in Porskfirdinga saga that is most reminiscent of the standard view of a “post-classical” saga and which is described most clearly as a late feature is the dragon motif. But is it reasonable to see the dragon motif as typically late? And as having originated under the influence of the written fornaldarsaga genre? And as an expression of a fundamental change in taste in the Old Norse literature? I return to the end of Porskfirdinga saga, to the transformation of the protagonist into a dragon.

There are very few, if any, similar episodes in the fornaldarsögur or in other family sagas which could reasonably be the source of this episode.

---

9 Some examples: Paul Schach claimed that the saga “shows influence from the fornaldar­sögur and the riddarasögur” (1985: 27). Sigurður Nordal mentions “Gull-Þóris æventyr i Porskf. s.” as a typical example of how “post-classical” family sagas are influenced by the fornaldarsaga (1953: 262). Also according to Björn Sigfússon Porskfirdinga saga has “assimilerat icke så litet fornaldarsagostoff” (1960: 595). The same opinion is expressed by Jan de Vries: “Das ist also ganz wie in der Fornaldarsaga”. The stories about Pórir’s encounters with an un-dead mound dweller and about Vikings transformed into dragons lead de Vries to date the saga to the fourteenth century (1967: 533).

10 The most similar episode within saga literature is found earlier in Porskfirdinga saga itself, where Þórir steals the gold from dragons, who also are transformed humans, and these two dragon episodes are certainly related (Sävborg 2012a: 331). The fornaldarsaga Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar includes a story about men transformed into dragons, but in this saga there is a reference to Gull-Pórir’s adventure. This fornaldarsaga is obviously influenced by Porskfirdinga saga and can thus not be the source of it (see Sävborg 2012a: 326). In Völsunga saga we hear about Fáfnir’s transformation into a dragon, but the differences between this story and the end of Porskfirdinga saga will be discussed later. For a general discussion of the dragon motif in Old Norse literature and of the other occurrences of the motif, see Sävborg 2012a: 329–32.
But that does not mean that the episode is without parallels in the world of Old Norse literature. There is a story with many remarkable similarities with the current episode. It is the story about Búi digri after the Jómsvíking battle at Hjǫrungavágr, which I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The Búi story in the Jómsvíking tradition has several important elements in common with the episode in Þorskfirminga saga. In both cases the dragon is a transformed human. In both cases it is also a great hero, a relatively positive character in the story, who, after an impressive career, is transformed into a dragon; on this point the two sagas differ totally from, for example, the Fáfnir story in Völsunga saga. In both the case of Búi and of Þórir the events take place in “historical” time, the saga age, the tenth century, and not in a distant, more or less mythical, past. In both cases the dragon lies on his gold, and in both cases the hero was famous especially for the chests full of gold which he ends up lying down on. In both cases the hero’s name is prefixed with “Gull-”; Þórir is called Gull-Þórir in Þorskfirminga saga (175) as well as in Landnámabók (154) and Hálfdanar saga Eysteinsonar (248 and 285), and Búi is called Gull-Búi several times in Jómsvíkingadrápa (sts 26 and 37; Skj B2: 6 and 8).

The similarities are obvious. A connection between Gull-Þórir’s transformation into a dragon and the story about Búi appears to be very likely. The “story about Búi” is, however, a somewhat vague description of the origin. It actually does seem possible to point out a direct model for the concluding episode of Þorskfirminga saga. This is Jómsvíkinga saga itself. Exactly as in Þorskfirminga saga we are dealing with information right at the end of the saga, immediately after extensive descriptions of purely human conflicts and violence, which means that there is a remarkable structural similarity between the two sagas regarding the treatment of this similar motif. The episode has the same narrative position in both cases. But there are further correspondences. Several elements in Þorskfirminga saga, even precise details, have parallels in Jómsvíkinga saga. Just like in Þorskfirminga saga, the hero in Jómsvíkinga saga disappears

11 The fact that the dragon is called ormr in Jómsvíkinga saga and dreki in Þorskfirminga saga is not of fundamental importance, since these two concepts (originally probably distinct) in the thirteenth century seem to have fused (cf. Acker 2013: 54–57 and 63).

12 The similarities between the names Gull-Þórir and Gull-Búi are noted also by Strömbäck 1954: 385 and 387. Strömbäck, too, puts the two dragon stories in the same tradition. It is not clear if he imagines a direct connection between the texts.
Búi the Dragon

voluntarily; it is not clear where to. Just like in Porskfírðinga saga, the concluding episode in Jómsvíkinga saga mentions that people claimed that the hero was transformed into a dragon and that he laid down on his treasure, a treasure that in both cases is famous and strongly linked with the hero. Just like in Porskfírðinga saga, the treasure in Jómsvíkinga saga is specifically mentioned as being kept in chests of gold (the word “gullkistur” is used by both sagas). Just like in Porskfírðinga saga, the people in Jómsvíkinga saga have seen this dragon at a specified location (“[…] at þar hafui ormrinn setzst a Hiorungauogi”, Jómsvíkinga saga, ed. Flateyjarbók, 1860: 203; cf.: “[…] at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan um þeim megin frá Þóristöðum ok Gullfors er kallaðr”, Porskfírðinga saga: 226). Just like in Porskfírðinga saga, the author of Jómsvíkinga saga distances himself from the information that the hero is transformed into a dragon on his gold — the saga refers at this point to what people say (“þat er sögn manna”) — while he describes as more of a fact that people have seen a dragon in the area (“ver hyggium þat til þess haft vera at þar hafui ormrinn setzst a Hiorungauogi”; Jómsvíkinga saga, ed. Flateyjarbók, 1860: 203). The same distinction is found in Porskfírðinga saga. Þórir’s transformation into a dragon on his gold is described as something that people say (“þat hafa menn fyrir satt”), but it is described as a fact that people saw a dragon (“Helzt þat ok lengi síðan, at menn sá dreka fljúga ofan”; Porskfírðinga saga: 226). Finally, and possibly most importantly, there are also verbal correspondences in the description: In Porskfírðinga saga we read: “en þat hafa menn fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka ordit ok hafi lagizt á gullkistur sínar”. And in Jómsvíkinga saga: “En þat er sögn manna sidan at Bui hafui at ormi ordit ok lagizt a gullkistur sínar” (203; italics by me in both quotes). The correspondences are so many, so close and so detailed that there can be hardly any doubt that they are due to a direct influence from Jómsvíkinga saga on Porskfírðinga saga.

Indeed, Porskfírðinga saga thus seems to be influenced by another saga. But it is not from a fornaldarsaga it has borrowed its dragon story — Jómsvíkinga saga is difficult to classify in terms of genre, but with its description of events during the Viking Age in an environment of kings and jarls it is most closely related to the konungasögur. It is not

\[13\] The following references and quotes from Jómsvíkinga saga follow the long version, here represented by Flateyjarbók, because this version is considered the most original by all scholars (see, for example, Blake 1962: xvi, Degnbol 1986: 145, and Degnbol & Jensen 1978: 10). It should, however, be noted that the shorter version of the saga (primarily represented by Sthm. perg 4:o nr 7), has a very similar text in these cases.
a late saga at all that has influenced Porskfirðinga saga on this point. Jómsvíkinga saga is certainly not post-classical. It is one of the oldest Norse sagas we have. It is considered to have been written c. 1200 or even somewhat earlier.\footnote{Ólafur Halldórsson claims that Jómsvíkinga saga is written “around or possibly before 1200” (1993: 343). Blake 1962 dates it to c. 1200 (1962: xviii). Jakob Benediksson dates it to not later than “begyndelsen af 1200-tallet, måske ca. 1200” (1962: 608). Jónas Kristjánsson claims that the saga was written “shortly after 1200” (1997: 165). Helle Degnbol claims that the saga was written “about 1200, certainly not later than 1230” (1986: 144).} If my hypothesis is correct, the dragon episode at the end of Porskfirðinga saga is thus not a fornaldarsaga influence and cannot be described as a post-classical influence.

But the manuscripts themselves are clearly from after the time about 1200. Could the episode in Jómsvíkinga saga not be a late, post-classical, interpolation in a basically old saga? This is the type of argument Emil Olson used in the case of Yngvars saga (described above). It should, however, be noted that Emil Olson’s view of Yngvars saga has now generally been rejected, and most scholars today consider the existing Yngvars saga, with all its strange beings, to be a work from the end of the twelfth century.\footnote{See, for example, Hofmann 1981; see also Cormack 2000: 308 ff.} And there is good reason to believe that the same is true of Jómsvíkinga saga. The story about Búi transforming into a dragon after leaping overboard does not occur only in the two (usually rather different) versions of the saga, it also appears in Bjarni Kolbeinsson’s Jómsvíkingadrápa. In stanza 37 we read:

Nam eldbroti Yggjar
ýgr fyr borð at stíga;
út bar hann af húfum,
hraustr Gullbúi, kistur;
ok optliga eptir
óblauðir þar síðan
kneigu lýðir líta
langan orm á hringum. (Skj B2: 8)

Jómsvíkingadrápa was composed c. 1200.\footnote{For the dating, see Fidjestøl 1993: 48.} It proves that the motif of Búi’s transformation into a dragon was old and that it already belonged to the story about him and his participation in the battle of Hjörungavágr by about 1200. There is every indication that this element in Jómsvíkinga saga has been there since the beginning, from the same time as Bjarni
Kolbeinsson’s poem. The motif with the hero who is transformed into a dragon can be regarded neither as late nor post-classical.

What about Þorskfirðinga saga then? It is, as already mentioned, seen as a late and post-classical saga, written after 1300. Its dragon episode is, as already mentioned, considered to be influenced by the fornaldarsögur, and they, in turn, are claimed not to have originated as a literary genre until the end of the thirteenth century. But as I have shown, the dragon episode in Þorskfirðinga saga has a different origin than the fornaldarsögur and it cannot be regarded as influenced by them. The dating of Þorskfirðinga saga to the fourteenth century is problematic for another reason as well. The saga is explicitly mentioned in Landnámabók, the Sturlubók redaction, generally dated to 1260–80; Sturla Þórðarson’s death in 1284 is thus the terminus ante quem. “[A]f því gerðisk Þorskfirðinga saga” (154), Sturla says after relating the episode about Gull-Þórir’s treasure from Finnmark (“hann fekk gull mikit á Finnmǫrk”) and about the conflicts evolving around this treasure. Scholarship has usually tried to harmonize this reference with the traditional dating by assuming that Sturla’s reference is to an earlier, “classical”, version of the saga, a version which would thus have lacked the typical “post-classical” motifs of dragons and haugbúar.17 But the idea of such a fundamental revision is primarily based on the presumption that such motifs are loans from the fornaldarsögur, and thus have to be late, and as I have shown this idea is untenable. I have argued elsewhere that the existing Þorskfirðinga saga is the saga with that name mentioned by Sturla in Landnámabók.18 The saga can therefore be supposed to have existed in the middle of the thirteenth century.

All of this calls into question the traditional picture of the development of saga literature and of the occurrence and role of the fantastic/supernatural motifs within it. Furthermore, there is no reason to regard such motifs as expressions of a shift in literary taste brought about by political changes and the rise of new literary genres at the end of the thirteenth century. Such motifs were already essential by 1200 in stories about heroes during the Viking Age, the period where most family sagas and kings’ sagas take place. These were motifs that were popular and used during the “classical” age of saga writing as well as later.19 This conclusion is important for our

18 For an examination of this, see Sävborg 2012b: 43–45 and 49–53.
19 For a more extensive discussion about dragons in Old Norse literature, see Sävborg 2012a: 329–32.
understanding of the alleged post-classical sagas in general, those sagas which are grouped together in volumes 13–14 of Íslenzk fornrit and are rarely examined.

*  

But maybe the story about the dragon in Hjörungavágr can throw light on another issue too.

One of the characteristics that has been ascribed to the “post-classical” saga in contrast to the “classical” is, as mentioned, that the former is supposed to have been written as fiction and the latter is supposed to have been based on oral tradition. The “classical” sagas are supposed to have been regarded as basically historical by the contemporary Icelanders. This does of course not mean that they were historically correct (in the modern sense), but they pretended to relate real events and were perceived true by the contemporary audience. In contrast, the “post-classical” sagas are not thought to have had any other pretentions than being fiction created by the individual authors, either from their imagination or as a result of borrowing from other fictitious works.

Generally it is difficult to test how medieval authors understood their material. It seems, however, clear that the medieval authors had a different view on the existence of dragons, trolls etc. than modern philologists do. This does not mean that people believed all stories about such beings. How can we decide which monster stories were perceived as true and which were perceived as pure fiction?

Here we may turn to folkloristic theory for help. In folkloristic theory there is an important distinction between folk legend and folktale (Sage and Märchen in German), which seems useful here. Both folktale and legend are deeply concerned with people’s encounters with supernatural beings, beings from the Otherworld, but in many ways the differences between the two categories are more important. One difference is that the legend is often tied to specific locations in the narrator’s vicinity, while the folktale is set in a diffuse location. The main difference is, however, that the legend generally was regarded as fundamentally true, while the folktale was not perceived as true but as pure ‘entertainment’, that is: not as history.\(^\text{20}\) This in no way means that the legend really was true, but rather that it was told with a claim to veracity and appears to have been perceived as true by its intended audience.

\(^{20}\) For a definition and description, see for example Lüthi 1961: 23–24.
This means that stories about encounters with the Otherworld were not seen in a uniform manner by people who did after all believe in the existence of monsters and supernatural events. There were both stories perceived as true and stories perceived as fiction. And more importantly: it was possible for a contemporary audience to distinguish between the two types.

How then was the story about Búi and his transformation into a dragon perceived? This is difficult to judge merely on the basis of the saga and the drápa. They certainly take place in “historical time” and include several undoubtedly historical persons, which could speak for the story being perceived as true, as a historical event. But at the same time we are dealing with genres where we have relatively limited knowledge about how the contemporary audience viewed the historicity or fictitiousness of the motif. Anyway, it seems possible that we are dealing with a genre where history and fiction could be mixed, and where the audience would perceive it as such a mixture.

But the dragon in Hjǫrungavágr occurs in some further texts. Arngrímr abóti’s version of Guðmundar saga Arasonar from the first part of the fourteenth century relates several of bishop Guðmundr’s deeds, deeds showing him to be a holy man. As part of his career Guðmundr travels to Norway and comes to Hjǫrungavágr, and Arngrímr notes that this was the place where Hákon jarl fought the battle with the Jómsvíkings (“þar barðist forðum Hákon Hlaðajarl við Jómsvíkinga”; Guðmundar saga Arasonar: 129). Arngrímr continues:

Í þeim stað varð svá mikit undr, at einn ormr með xij lykkjum flotnaði upp ór sjánum, ok lá optsinnis um þveran váginn, en leyndist stundum í kafi, ok kom þá upp er verst gegndi mönnum ok skipum, þváat inn á váginn var gott lægi; fekk því margr hér fyrir úhagligan steyt. (129)

When Guðmundr and his men arrive, the passage is blocked by the dragon (“þeir sá allir orminn upp liggja þvert yfir váginn”; 129). But Guðmundr sprinkles holy water on the monster, and by the next day a miracle has taken place (they could “sjá mikit verk himnakonúngsins”; 129): “ormrinn var bolaðr sundr í xij stykki ok svá kastaðr á land” (129). The episode concludes with the remark that people were never again harmed by this beast. We are obviously dealing with the same dragon as in Jómsvíkinga saga and Jómsvíkingadrápa, although Búi’s name is not mentioned in Guðmundar saga.21

21 This seems to have been first noted by Dag Strömbäck (Strömbäck 1954).
The story about bishop Guðmundr defeating the dragon in Hjǫrungavágr also occurs in Árni Jónsson’s *Guðmundardrápa* from the second half of the fourteenth century. It says:

Beimum vann í byskupsdómi
bæði holds ok andar græðir
fleiri tákn, en ferðum reiknist,
fagr ok merkr, í litlum verka;
sundur sprakk fyr signan handar
sjóvar grímr, er langan tíma
prúða gat með prettum lýði
plágat mest á Hjǫrungavági. (Skj BII: 455)

Árni, too, stresses that the bishop’s victory over the monster was a result of his holy act, he too stresses how the dragon burst into pieces, and he too stresses the fact that Guðmundr saved the people from harm through his deed.

As mentioned, *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Jómsvíkingadrápa* belong to genres where it is difficult for us to assess the contemporary perception and pretension of truth/historicity. In the case of *Guðmundar saga* we are, however, dealing with literature where we, at least partly, have a better knowledge about the pretensions of reality/truth/history. In Arngrímr’s case the purpose of his version of the saga is usually claimed to be the canonization of bishop Guðmundr (see, for example, Strömbäck 1954: 387), and all the deeds he performs are meant to support this objective. Defeating the dragon in Hjǫrungavágr is one of these holy acts, and it could thus be seen as an indication that the episode is presented as a story about an event from real life, as a historical fact. Regardless of what really happened and regardless of what Arngrímr himself believed, the story is probably not intended to be perceived as made-up fiction of the kind that many scholars have described in connection with the “post-classical” family sagas and their stories about encounters with Otherworldly beings. We should, however, not overstate this argument, since the saints lives’ relation to historical reality is debatable and stories about dragon slayings might be seen as a common element in the genre (cf. Acker 2013: 55–56), possibly a symbolic defeating of the devil (cf. Mundal 2006: 718).

More important, however, is the relation between the dragon story and the surrounding stories in the saga. Somewhat earlier in *Guðmundar saga* there is a story about Guðmundr defeating another malicious being. It is the story of Selkolla, a monstrous
woman who occasionally appeared with a seal’s head, and she seduced and destroyed men who crossed her path (77–82). This story belonged to the essence of the stories about Guðmundr and is already told or mentioned in the earliest versions of his saga. Selkolla’s terror and the bishop’s confrontation with her were undoubtedly perceived as an historical event from thirteenth-century Iceland, equally as real as the civil wars on Iceland during the Sturlung era. Selkolla’s acts of terror and defeat are also mentioned, as a well-known event, in Sturlunga saga (Sturla Þórðarson’s Ísleninga saga). 22

In the case of Selkolla both the type of story and the type of supernatural being are well-known. Stories about erotic female beings that seduce and destroy men are also common in records from later times. In Sweden during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these stories were told about skogsrån. 23 Most of the features in the Selkolla story are also found in recently recorded folk legends, Sagen, even the switching between the appearance of a beautiful female and a monstrous, animal-like, appearance, 24 and the confusion between the skogsrå and a man’s wife (Granberg 1935: 249). And we know that these kinds of Sagen were generally perceived as basically true; in several cases the transmitters themselves comment and discuss this matter (see, for example, Nilsson & Bergstrand 1962: 57–59). We also know from court records from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that these kinds of monsters were viewed as realities (see Häll 2013).

Therefore it is interesting to see how the story about the dragon in Hjörungavágr is presented in Árni Jónsson’s Guðmundardrápa. The stanza about the dragon (st. 58) is immediately followed by a stanza about Selkolla (st. 59). Together these two stanzas constitute a “monster section” in the poem. This coupling suggests that Árni treats the two episodes in the same way. He obviously seems to view the dragon in Hjörungavágr and Selkolla on Iceland as monsters of basically the same kind. If we use the folkloristic notions Märchen and Sage, we may say that both of them belong to the Sage, to a type of stories which were perceived as depictions of reality, not as fiction.

It thus seems likely that the dragon in Hjörungavágr during the fourteenth century was considered to belong to the realm of history. This is

---

23 For the traditions about skogsrån, see, for example, Granberg 1935, Klintberg 2002, and Häll 2013.
24 See, for example, Granberg 1935: 90, Klintberg 2002: 96.
an indication of how the story about the same dragon, about Búi and his transformation, was already perceived during the thirteenth century. The story about the dragon has not been perceived in the way the scholars have claimed in connection with the “post-classical” family sagas. It has not been perceived as fiction made up by creative authors for the purpose of pure entertainment. It is not a *Märchen*, but is generically closer to the *Sage*. With the *Sage* it shares the general pretension of telling stories about real events from the historical past. The existence of the dragon in Hjörungavágr was probably viewed in the same way as the existence of Hákon jarl. Both belonged to reality.

**Bibliography**


Summary

The article discusses the information given at the end of Jómsvíkinga saga, where Búi digri after the battle of Hjǫrungavágr is said to have transformed into a dragon. This story is analysed in the light of some other sources which might elucidate the episode: Jómsvíkingadrápa, which confirms that the story of Búi’s transformation is essential in the Jómsvíking story, Þorskfirðinga saga, which ends in a similar way with the hero transforming into a dragon, Árngrímr abóti’s Guðmundar saga byskups, and Árni Jónsson’s Guðmundardrápa, which both relate bishop Guðmundr’s encounter with the dragon in Hjörungavágr. The article argues for a direct connection between Jómsvíkinga saga and Þorskfirðinga saga and uses this connection to question the standard picture of Þorskfirðinga saga as a late, “post-classical” saga influenced by fornaldarsögur. The treatment of the dragon story in the two works about bishop Guðmundr is used to interpret how the story about Búi was perceived by the contemporary audience.

Keywords: Jómsvíkinga saga, Jómsvíkingadrápa, Guðmundar saga Arasonar,
Guðmundardrápa, Þorskirðinga saga, post-classical sagas, fornaldrarsögur, Old Norse-Icelandic literature, dragons, Scandinavian folklore

Daniel Sävborg
Professor of Scandinavian Studies
University of Tartu
Skandinavistika
Ülikooli 17
51014 Tartu
Estonia
Tel: +372 737 6250
daniel.savborg@ut.ee
Publicerad med stöd från Vetenskapsrådet.
## Contents

Preface ................................................................................................................. 5

**Þórdís Edda Jóhannsdóttir & Veturliði Óskarsson**, The Manuscripts of *Jómsvíkinga Saga*: A Survey ................................. 9

**Workshop Articles**

**Sirpa Aalto**, *Jómsvíkinga Saga* as a Part of Old Norse Historiography ................................................................. 33

**Leszek P. Słupecki**, Comments on Sirpa Aalto’s Paper .................... 59

**Alison Finlay**, *Jómsvíkinga Saga* and Genre .......................... 63

**Judith Jesch**, *Jómsvíkinga Sögur* and *Jómsvíkinga Drápur*: Texts, Contexts and Intertexts ........................................ 81

**Daniel Sävborg**, Búi the Dragon: Some Intertexts of *Jómsvíkinga Saga* .................................................. 101

**Alison Finlay**, Comments on Daniel Sävborg’s Paper ................. 119

**Jakub Morawiec**, Danish Kings and the Foundation of Jómsborg ... 125

**Władysław Duczek**, Viking-Age Wolin (Wollin) in the Norse

Context of the Southern Coast of the Baltic Sea ......................... 143

**Michael Lerche Nielsen**, Runic Inscriptions Reflecting Linguistic

Contacts between West Slav Lands and Southern Scandinavia ... 153

**Henrik Williams**, Comments on Michael Lerche Nielsen’s Paper .... 173

**Jürgen Udolph**, On the Etymology of *Jómsborg* ......................... 183

**Alexandra Petrulevich**, Comments on Jürgen Udolph’s Paper .... 211

**Marie Novotná & Jiří Starý**, Rendering Old Norse Nouns and

Names in Translation into West-Slavic Languages ..................... 213

**Isländska sällskapet**

**Agneta Ney & Marco Bianchi**, Berättelse om verksamheten under 2013 ................................................................. 237