

Michael Irlenbusch-Reynard

Universität Bonn

www.irlenbusch-reynard.net/michael

Character metamorphosis in German versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga*

The existing translations of *Jómsvíkinga saga* into German add up to precisely four, none of which being more recent than 1924. These are indeed genuine translations, even though their fidelity to the Old Norse text varies significantly.¹ The first one was published in 1827 by Ludwig Giesebrecht as a contribution to Pomeranian local historiography, representing the version of SKB 7, 4° in a very preserving and accurate manner.² Only an excerpt of the same text, now slightly smoothed, appeared in an anthology of Scandinavian literature by Anton Edmund Wollheim dating from 1875.³ We encounter a third translation in 1892, presented by Ferdinand Khull in an Austrian school yearbook and following the manuscript AM 510, 4°.⁴ Khull handled the Old Norse text quite freely both in terms of formulation and completeness; on the other hand he also provided a supplement on the medieval Latin version by Arngrímr Jónsson. Eventually in 1924, the prestigious (but disputed) *Thule* series of Old Norse literature featured a volume containing translations of *Knýtlinga saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga* (again SKB 7, 4°) and *Orkneyinga saga* by Walter Baetke;⁵ to its quality applies once more the overall criticism to the entire series, particularly concerning the treatment of proper names.⁶

Nevertheless, all the four of these translations deserve this very nomination as they all adhere to the original saga both in word (whilst taking certain liberties) and meaning; the abridgement of the SKB 7, 4° texts by the first part about the Danish kings is an editorial decision to concentrate solely on the Jómsvíking story and does no harm in a literary sense. The three translations complete so far, that means with the exception of Wollheim's whom I just included in order to give an overview, were widely adopted – or rather *adapted* – between the early 1920s and the early 1940s, with a significant peak during the mid- and late 1930s, in two ways, but with a common intention: either they

would be used as raw material to pick from to compile anthologies and to back up treatises or they served as source of inspiration for narrative activities. In practical terms, it is almost exclusively Baetke's *Thule* translation underlying those adaptations which facilitates tracing and comparison for this analysis.

I am not going to dwell here on the first kind of utilization mentioned;⁷ this consists mostly of a selective treatment of the Jómsviking material, that means of cutting out a great deal of it and of elaborating on certain details and episodes. The aim is not simply to emphasize the heroic and unspoiled nature of alleged ancestors; for such the *Íslendingasögur* are preferably exploited. The actual aim is to present a rôle model for recent kinds of leagues of men and warriors, hence – as most of these publications were issued between 1934 and 1939, culminating in 1937 – to legitimize the social and political importance of everything from *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) to SS and the *Führer* state. It is thus the entire saga – represented by mostly unaltered excerpts, sometimes a full passage, sometimes merely single phrases, from Baetke's translation – that is used as evidence in publications aimed at an *adult* audience.⁸

In the retellings of the Jómsviking story for the *youth* instead, alteration through character metamorphosis is a usual phenomenon, and it applies to the five main personalities of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, that is to Pálna-Tóki, Björn brezki, Vagn Ákason, Sigvaldi and King Sveinn. It is not a simple matter of clumsy exaggeration of some basic character traits like heroic, cowardly or treacherous, but of modification in order to achieve an exploitable literary product. The result is in any case an alteration of the original saga story that is still complete, but cuts deep enough to be called another *version*.

I shall begin with a relatively tame example of retelling: A leaflet of sixteen pages from 1937, titled *Wikingerefabrten* (Viking voyages) may set the key tone.⁹ It is also a hybrid of the ideological-didactic compilation type mentioned earlier and the narrative re-modelling as it condenses *Jómsvíkinga saga* entirely into three pages. Glancing through the short text reveals already a pattern of featuring personalities that is shared by all of these retellings: Pálna-Tóki and his prehistory become insignificant, and the youthfulness of the individual Vagn outshines the braveness of the Jómsviking collective. This is indeed remarkable because it sets the focus differently from the context into which *Jómsvíkinga saga* is usually embedded in the purely ideological literature, namely the *Männer(kampf)bund* idea, the league of (fighting) men; there, Vagn gets explicitly referred to only when illustrating either the true Germanic fighting spirit expected from a young boy or the qualities of a

born leader.¹⁰ Furthermore, the short version of *Wikingerfabrten* values the moral victory of the Jómsvikings over the military triumph Hákon Jarl has gained – more precisely the clinging to their laws, thus keeping their honour: all personified in Vagn. The abridgement of this version conveys yet another aspect which becomes obvious in comparing the Jómsviking laws quoted with Vagn's vow taken: Women were not allowed inside the castle, the codex says, and – almost consequently – Vagn's only desire is to plainly kill Þorkell leira. While in this case it may be merely a simplification, the more sophisticated retellings do in fact elaborate on that point as will be shown later.

Another thin school reader, *Die Wikinger von der Jomsburg. Die Saga vom Heldenkampf einer germanischen Gefolgschaft* (The Vikings of Jómshorg. The saga of a Germanic league of men and their heroic battle) by Franz Fahneemann, published in 1937, dedicates all of its sixteen pages to the story.¹¹ Now also Sigvaldi and King Sveinn come into play. As both Sveinn's origin and Sigvaldi's trick on him are left out, Sveinn gets reduced to a jealous rival – which renders the Jómsviking chieftain virtually a peer to a royal ruler. For Sigvaldi as the current Viking leader, the text arranger does his best not to present him as cowardly; he pays much attention to the fight with Vagn and even lets Sigvaldi's retreat from the battle at sea appear reasonable. It is again the female factor that sets the accent: Neither Vagn's vow nor even the quarrel with King Sveinn carries this flaw; what remains is Sigvaldi tampering with the Jómsviking rules. Vagn instead attains another dimension in addition to his promising youth and his bravery. Being the only one who battles nude – in contradiction to the original saga –, he becomes iconic not merely in the tradition of the classic depiction of a warrior, but also in line with the latent homoeroticism that frequently goes along with the leagues of men.

I am going to focus a bit longer on the alleged relation of the Jómsvikings to women. So far a celibate attitude has been suggested by suppressing any insinuations, let alone open connections with the positive characters of Pálna-Tóki and Vagn. It can hardly be assumed that the celibacy found there is due to the overall abridgement and simplification; building up an otherwise unspoilt image is granted plenty of room.

All these brief versions mentioned have in common to belong to an official sector, to schooling and ideological forming; they do not pursue an entertaining intention. If authors are free to take artistic liberties, the result can turn out astonishing: Most prominently ranks here a retelling dating from 1923 titled *Die Wikinger von Jomsburg. Ein Zeitbild aus dem 10. Jahrhundert* (The Vikings of Jómshorg. An episode from the

10th century) by Elisabeth Hersen.¹² The novel-size book, containing 284 pages, sets in shortly after Sigvaldi's takeover. It features mainly Vagn and expands Björn brezki to his omnipresent mentor who is constantly occupied spreading his personal misogyny. Vagn instead is not willing at all to listen to such grumbling; only his respect for Pálna-Tóki's Jómsviking laws had kept him from abducting Ingibjörg, daughter of Porkell leira, already on last year's Viking raid. Still he is eager to marry her, and as Vagn swears this at King Sveinn's feast, Björn concludes his own oath with the explicit intention to prevent precisely that. Due to its late opening in the original timeline, the narrative is virtually lacking Vagn's prehistory – which is condensed into one sentence by Björn that marks his irregular admittance as the beginning of the overall decline – and until the actual battle Vagn shows little heroic character traits, but remains a womanizing rascal who is obsessed by his plans concerning Ingibjörg. Björn instead agitates the ancient *Männerbund* discipline of Pálna-Tóki's days and is unable to say one single line without cursing women as the doom of the genuine Viking spirit.

The original antagonism in heroic terms between Vagn and Sigvaldi thus gets replaced by an ideological one between Vagn and Björn. As for Sigvaldi, he conducts in Hersen's version an untypical, seemingly less autocratic manner of leadership. He has not only his decision to weaken the formerly strict discipline by allowing women approved by the community of the Jómsvikings, in the withdrawal at Hjörungavágr he even picks up the unwillingness uttered by his men. Yet this serves purely to cover up the pursuit of his own ideas: The Jómsvikings urging Sigvaldi to cease battling against supernatural instead of human forces meet his search for a subterfuge to rescind his oath; the adoption of his wedding rules proposal is not solely pushed forward by his threat to resign as a leader, but is also promoted by his appeal to certain male interests. Sigvaldi's image has therefore shifted away from a sly and little heroic, loudmouthed Viking chieftain towards a populist, but nonetheless ineffective power holder.¹³

These are not the only substantial differences to *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Both the vindication and the *modus operandi* of permitting marriages are stunning. First, Pálna-Tóki's ban on females within the Jómsborg, which by no means constitutes that rule of strict celibacy it is presented as, gets ascribed to his obvious lack of interest due to his own high age.¹⁴ Then the new marriage rule replaces the plain interdiction – assuming that the established one disallowing women to cross the castle's threshold indeed aimed at regular couples rather than at visiting concubines – by a perk principle: The concession to marry should be granted by the leader and the community *together* as a privilege for “eine

Tat ‘verwegener Art’¹⁵ (an audacious deed), in other words as “sexuelle Kampfauslese”¹⁶ (sexual selection by struggling). Hersen apparently pursued life reformistic ideas typical for the *Völkische Bewegung*; the *Leitmotiv* of her Jómsviking narrative is a romantic, still moderately leader-oriented Germanic wildness¹⁷ with warriors wooing ladies who know their place. What is more, August Scherl, the founder of her publishing house, belonged to the national-conservative right-wing, and by the time of Hersen’s book being published, Scherl-Verlag had been incorporated into the media group of Alfred Hugenberg who significantly paved the way for National Socialism.

The last example to be presented is that of *Die Jomsburgwikingen. Der Geschichte und den alten Sagen nacherzählt* (The Vikings of Jómshorg. A retelling according to history and the ancient legends) published in 1936 by Kurt Herwarth Ball on 64 small pages.¹⁸ It concentrates its manipulation into one chapter that features Vagn pondering all the night the surviving Jómsvikings are spending on a tiny island: Vagn has now adopted a pan-Germanic attitude that rejoices upon “bis in das Herz des Mittelmeeres [...] nordischen Raum. Und Germanenstämme überall”¹⁹ (A Nordic world right down into the heart of the Mediterranean, and Germanic tribes everywhere), as Pálma-Tóki had sought independence from the Polish (sic!) king, with immortality deriving from deeds, not from belief in a cross symbol. Ball, who applies the *Volk ohne Raum*²⁰ (A people without space) idea, had been editor-in-chief of the anti-Semitic periodical *Hammer* since 1933, and even the preface to his Jómsviking narrative conveys this spirit as Ball refers to an otherwise welcomed eye witness, namely the historically known traveller Al-Tartushi, not without describing him as a slave merchant, a Spanish Jew whose real name had been Ibrahim ibn Jacub.²¹

Let me try to summarize briefly the means and meaning of character metamorphosis discussed: As soon as *Jómsvíkinga saga* is rendered in another form than straight quotation (usually from Baetke’s translation), one or several of its protagonists is respectively are subject to profound modification. These texts hence altered into new *versions* of the original saga then let most of those personalities fade into insignificance and concentrate upon Vagn Ákason. Above all, Vagn symbolizes the leap over the generation gap, skipping one inert generation – that of his father Áki, those who never went into combat – and answering all hope placed on the new youth growing up. The recipients targeted were presented a peer-aged main protagonist they could easily identify themselves with while Vagn and his rôle within the band of the Jómsvikings are turned into an allegory of the contemporary ideal of German society.

Notes

¹ For details on changes, omissions and errors cf. Michael Irlenbusch-Reynard, “Die deutschsprachigen Fassungen und Verarbeitungen der *Jómsvíkinga saga* von den 1920er bis zu den 1940er Jahren”, in Agneta Ney, Henrik Williams and Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (coll. and rev.), *Á austrvega. Saga and East Scandinavia. Preprint papers of the 14th International Saga Conference, Uppsala, 9th–15th August 2009*, 2 vols., Gävle 2009: Gävle University Press (*Institutionen för humaniora och samhällsvetenskaps skriftserie*, 14), vol. I: pp. 420–428; here: pp. 420–421.

² [Heinrich] Ludwig [Theodor] Giesebrecht (Aus dem Isländischen von ...), “Geschichte der Freibeuter von Jom”, in *Neue Pommersche Provinzialblätter* 1827: 1, pp. 90–139. – Text edition used: *Jómsvíkinga saga útgefn eptir gamalli kálfskinnsbók í hinu konúngliga bókasafni í Stockhólmi*, [transcript Carl Christian Rafn], Kaupmannahöfn 1824: Popp (*Fornmanna sögur*).

³ “Die Jómsvíkinger [sic!] Saga”, in A[nton] E[dmund] Wollheim da Fonseca (Herausgegeben von ...), *Die National-Literatur der Skandinavien. Eine prosaische und poetische Anthologie aus den besten nordischen Schriftstellern mit erläuternden, kritischen und biographischen Notizen*, 1: *Die altnordische Literatur*, Berlin 1875: Hempel (*Die Classiker aller Zeiten und Nationen* 5; 1. Abt.), pp. 154–159.

⁴ Ferdinand Khull (Erzählt von ...), *Die Geschichte Palnatokis und der Jomsburger nach der jüngsten altnordischen Bearbeitung*, Graz 1892: Leuschner & Lubensky, [Offprint from *Jahresberichte des k. k. zweiten Staats-Gymnasiums pro 1891 und 1892*]. – Text editions used: *Jómsvíkinga saga (efter Cod. AM. 510, 4:to) samt Jómsvíkinga drápa*, utgifna af Carl af Petersens, Lund 1879: Gleerup. / *Jómsvíkinga-saga i latinsk Oversættelse af Arngrim Jonsson*, udgiven af [Gustav] A[ntonio] Gjessing, Kristianssand 1877: Steen.

⁵ “Die Geschichte von den Seekriegern auf Jomsburg”, in Walter Baetke (Übertragen von ...), *Die Geschichten von den Orkaden, Dänemark und der Jomsburg*, 1.–3. Tsd., Jena 1924: Diederichs (*Thule*, 19), pp. 392–436. – Text edition used: *Jómsvíkinga saga efter skinnboken 7, 4^o å Kungl. Biblioteket i Stockholm*, utgifven af Gustav Cederschiöld, Lund 1875: Berling (*Lunds universitets årsskrift. Afdelningen för filosofi, språkvetskap och historia*, 11 [1874]).

⁶ Cf. Julia Zernack, *Geschichten aus Thule. Íslendingasögur in Übersetzungen deutscher Germanisten*, Berlin 1994: Freie Universität Berlin (*Berliner Beiträge zur Skandinavistik*, 3), pp. 83–89.

⁷ Cf. further Irlenbusch-Reynard 2009, pp. 423–425.

⁸ It should be pointed out that – in contrast to the short school readers

to be discussed later in this article – also school reading *books* usually present unaltered, although sometimes abridged passages mostly from the *Thule* translation series; e. g. Bruno Dauch (Bearbeitet von ...), *Von deutscher Art. Ein Lesebuch für höhere Schulen, 3. Teil*, 2nd ed., Frankfurt am Main 1940 (© 1939): Salle, pp. 176–180. Occasionally, Khull 1892 is used, e. g. in Paul Vogel (Bearbeitet von ...), *Die Germanen*, 3rd ed., Frankfurt am Main 1942 (© 1939): Diesterweg (*Volk und Führer. Deutsche Geschichte für Schulen. Ausgabe für Oberschulen und Gymnasien, Kl. 2*), pp. 147–150.

⁹ *Wikingerfahrten*, Paderborn [1937]: Schönigh (*Schönighs Arbeitsbogen. Germanentum*, A 80), pp. 8–11. – It contains, besides the story of the Jómsvikings, a fictive daily-life scene plus an account of the Norman settlement and the discovery of Vinland.

¹⁰ Cf. Fritz Wüllenweber (Nach den Quellen bearbeitet von ...), *Germanische Jungmannschaftszucht. 1: Die Sippengefölgenschaft*, Hamburg 1937: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, p. 10. – The episode of Vagn's incorporation into the Jómsvikings is quoted by Fritz Wüllenweber, *Altgermanische Erziehung. Dargestellt auf Grund der Islandsagas und anderer Quellen zum Frühgermanentum*, Hamburg 1935: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, pp. 130–131, and Ludwig Meyn, *Altgermanisches Leben. [3:] Kampf und Kurzweil*, Frankfurt am Main 1938: Diesterweg (*Nationalpolitische Sammlung*, [338]), pp. 3–5. – Wüllenweber 1935, pp. 128–129, claims that Sveinn's raids on King Haraldr are primarily meant to attract attention and recognition from his natural father; Pálna-Tóki's revenge is not taken into consideration. Beyond this, all of these works make no further reference to *Jómsvíkinga saga*.

¹¹ Franz Fahnenmann, *Die Wikinger von der Jomsburg. Die Saga vom Heldenkampf einer germanischen Gefölgenschaft*, Saarlautern (et al.) [1937]: Hausen (et al.) (*Erlebte deutsche Welt. Arbeitsstoffe und Erzählungen für die deutsche Schule*, 18).

¹² Elisabeth Hersen (Nordischen Sagen nacherzählt von ...), *Die Wikinger von Jomsburg. Zeitbild aus dem zehnten Jahrhundert*, Berlin [1923]: Scherl.

¹³ The text introduces him as Pálna-Tóki's successor without any account of the circumstances, e. g. the doubts on him expressed in the original saga.

¹⁴ This idea appears – possibly inspired by Hersen – also in another retelling: Lydia Kath, *Jomsburg. Eine Wikingergeschichte* [Jomsburg. A Viking story], Berlin 1934: Junge Generation (*Trommlerbuch*). The book of 94 pages is little conspicuous otherwise in the context studied here, but its author held a Ph. D. in *Germanistik* and had, apart from the *Jomsburg* story, several booklets of similar content all published

with *Junge Generation Verlag* that issued numerous minor works for use within the *Hitlerjugend* and the *Bund deutscher Mädel* (League of German girls).

¹⁵ Hersen [1923], p. 29.

¹⁶ Jost Hermand, *Der alte Traum vom neuen Reich. Völkische Utopien und Nationalsozialismus*, 2nd ed., Frankfurt am Main 1995: Beltz Athenäum (*Edition Zeitgeschichte*), p. 79 (cf. also pp. 290–291); cf. further Karin Bruns, “Zeit der Frauen? Völkisch-nationale Konfigurationen des Geschlechterverhältnisses in Politik, Literatur und Film”, in Stefanie von Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht (eds.), *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne. Entwürfe „arteigener“ Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende*, Würzburg 2001: Königshausen & Neumann, pp. 75–98, especially p. 80.

¹⁷ The more as Björn brezki becomes increasingly reconciled and even Christianity is accepted; the latter aspect is not necessarily typical for *völkische* ideas that also include an anti-Roman (i. e. anti-Catholic) attitude which despises the proselytisation in the North.

¹⁸ Kurt Herwarth Ball, *Die Jomsburgwikingen. Der Geschichte und den alten Sagen nacherzählt*, 4.–8. Tsd., Karlsbad-Drahowitz and Leipzig [1941] (© 1936): Kraft (*Volksdeutsche Reihe*, 4).

¹⁹ Ball [1941], p. 55.

²⁰ The title of a novel (1926) by the *völkisch* writer Hans Grimm, soon adopted politically as programmatic slogan.

²¹ Cf. Ball [1941], p. 6.