Translation of *Jómsvíkinga saga*: The Latest Contribution to the Flourishing Old Norse Studies in Czechia

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Old Norse studies have surprisingly deep roots in Czechia. In the 19th century, interest in Old Norse culture began to spread from Germany into the Czech lands, finding its way into the works of Czech writers and scholars. Initially, Czech understanding of Old Norse literature and mythology was based solely on German translations and studies. In the first third of the 20th century, however, direct Czech translations of sagas and Eddic poetry began to emerge. Over the last century, numerous Old Norse works have been translated. Apart from both the Eddas — *Snorri's Edda* and *Poetic Edda* — this includes the most well-known family sagas following famous Icelandic families (*Íslendingasǫgur*), e.g. *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Njáls saga*, and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. The Czech audience was also introduced to sagas about the lives and deeds of Scandinavian rulers (*konungasǫgur*, or kings' sagas) and legendary heroes (*fornaldarsǫgur*, or legendary sagas), as well as several short stories called *þættir*.[1] In the 21st century, these translation activities continue to flourish. There is a quantity and diversity of translated sources and translators go to great lengths to remain faithful to the original texts. In line with this effort, some of the older translations have been reworked for accuracy.

As mentioned above, the most significant Old Norse works were introduced to the Czech audience in the 20th century. Translators today tend to focus on lesser-known works and genres of Old Norse literature that earlier generations, in Czechia and elsewhere, overlooked. There are several reasons why certain Old Norse sources received less attention: law books, for example, were considered less reader-friendly for modern audiences. Some genres were considered to be less realistic or not as historically credible: lying sagas (*lygisǫgur*), for example, as well as late family sagas and some *þættir*. These were labelled pulp literature (of their time) and therefore not worth translating.[2] Contemporary scholars take a different view. The prevailing

1 A detailed study of the Czech translations and literary adaptations of Old Norse works can be found in a Czech monograph addressing the reception of Old Norse literature in Europe, namely from the end of the 18th century to the first third of the 20th century. See Kristýna Králová, Magda Králová (eds.): *Nesmrtelní vikingové. Staroseverské motivy v novodobé literatuře*. Herrmann & synové, Praha 2017.

2 The pulp literature traits of some Old Norse genres, specifically lying sagas, late family sagas and *þættir*, were recently studied in an elaborate anthology devoted to popular litera-

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belief is that all surviving sources should be studied, because they can shed light on the historical and cultural context from which they emerged. In line with this approach, contemporary Czech translations of Old Norse works cover not only classical family sagas, kings' sagas, and legendary sagas, but also late family sagas, lying sagas, chivalric sagas, and contemporary sagas. Readers, moreover, can explore an extensive anthology of Old Norse Christian literature, an anthology of short stories about famous skalds including numerous skaldic poems (*skaldþættir*), as well as extracts from Old Norse law books. In the last three decades, the number of Old Norse works translated into Czech has rapidly increased, so much so that the Czech production can even compete with translations into English, German, and modern Scandinavian languages. Occasionally, Czech is the first language of translation for these source texts, as with *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, for example, published in an anthology of lying sagas.[3]

The most recent Czech Old Norse translation offers the wider Czech public a look at *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* (*Jómsvíkinga saga*), a work that is unique not only for its style but also for its dramatic narrative, which follows the political schemes of Scandinavian rulers and recounts one of the most famous naval battles in Scandinavia. Above all, however, it documents the acts of the mythical Jómsvikings, warriors who are widely believed to have reside in Slavic lands. The book was published as part of the editorial line Medium under Faculty of Arts Press, which has been providing access to high quality translations of a wide range of medieval texts of varied cultures and source languages to Czech readers since 2018. Eleven books have been published so far, five of which are centred around Old Norse literature, *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* being the latest. The Czech edition of this saga is accompanied by a substantially detailed commentary in which the translator, Marie Novotná,[4] shines a light on the customs and mentality of Old Norse people, the process of saga creation, as well as the different methodologies used to read and study these types of works.

The Saga of the Jómsvikings is also notable for the fact that researchers are still debating where it stands on the continuum between historiography and fiction, and under which saga genres it should be classified. Like kings' sagas, the work describes the lives and acts of Scandinavian rulers, at the same time drawing on elements of the family saga, in its attention to family ties and internecine conflicts. Meanwhile, in its mytho-heroic and supernatural elements it most resembles the legendary sagas. Yet it cannot be directly categorized as any of these — a fact that, as Novotná points out, is typical of early Old Norse works.

Researchers consider *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* to be one of the earliest written sagas, dating it roughly around the year 1200. There are several surviving versions,

ture in ancient and medieval cultures. This anthology was published both in Czech and English; for the English version see Sylva Fischerová — Jiří Starý (eds): *Ancient Weeds: Contours of Popular and Trash Literature in Ancient and Medieval Times*. Karolinum, Praha 2024.

3 Jiří Starý (ed.): *Lživé ságy starého Severu*. Hermann & synové, Praha 2015.

4 Dr. Marie Novotná is the Head of the Department of Languages and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University. In her research, she focuses mostly on Old Norse sagas, with a special interest in the differences between saga genres. Another of her main fields of study concerns the concept of body in Old Norse literature.

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and the translator has chosen the oldest available (version AM 291, from the end of the 13th century), which is assumed to be a copy of an earlier original from the 1220s. Some of the saga's individual episodes and motifs can also be found in other sources, both prosaic and poetic, suggesting that it was popular among the Nordic people. In the introduction to the book, the author presents all the surviving manuscripts of the saga as well as other written sources that touch on its theme: Skaldic poetry from the 10th to the 12th century, various Latin chronicles, and Old Norse historiographical and narrative works.

Not unlike family sagas, *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* was put into writing rather later than its 10th century setting. In terms of its contents, the saga can be split into two parts: the first follows Danish rulers of the Jelling dynasty, while the second concentrates on the legendary hero Palnatoke. Of the Jelling kings, Gorm the Old and his son Harald Gormsson (a.k.a. Harald Bluetooth) had the famous Jelling rune stones erected in Jutland, on one of which the son proclaimed himself the unifier of Denmark and Norway. Indeed, Harald Gormsson spent much of his life defending his lands against Holy Roman emperors, Otto the Great and his son Otto II, which is also why he had the famous southern-Danish fortifications (Danavirki) built — or rather, expanded and perfected. The saga then moves on to introducing the hero Palnatoke who becomes a foster parent of Swein Forkbeard, the son of Harald Gormsson and later king of Denmark. Palnatoke eventually sets off to plunder foreign lands, ending up in Vinðland, a region that spanned the southern coast of the Baltic Sea, and a land of Slavs. The local ruler Bolesław I the Brave (Duke of Poland) gifts him with the land of Jóm, where Palnatoke goes on to build the Jómsborg stronghold. The exact location of this medieval settlement has long been debated by historians; however, the currently leading theory is that Jómsborg is an Old Nordic name for the town of Wolin found near the Oder river delta in northwestern Poland. According to the saga, Palnatoke had collected a group of Viking warriors known for their courage, excellent organization, and exceedingly effective pillaging by sea. Their reputation truly preceded them and even kings were afraid of them. The daily life of this band of Vikings within the walls of the Jómsborg stronghold is described rather idyllically and harmonically: nobody is allowed to start any manner of altercation, and all loot is to be shared. Young men would join these heroes to gain honour and fame. Eventually, this mythical brotherhood met its end in the legendary naval battle of Hjǫrungavág, a truly iconic battle in the Nordics. The Jómsvikings, provoked by the Danish king Swein Forkbeard, attack jarl Hákon Sigurðarson (Haakon the Powerful), the de facto ruler of Norway. Though they are eventually beaten, they exhibit exceptional bravery in the battle, and even when the Jarl has all remaining survivors executed, they show no fear in the face of their imminent demise. They thus live up to their reputation as fearless warriors who will not be cowed even by death.

As noted above, the translator accompanies the saga with an extensive study of its style and contents, following numerous approaches that include memory studies, searching for a connection between the storytelling, society and history, as well as onomastics, historiography, archaeology, and cultural anthropology. Admirably, and unlike other scholars, Novotná does not limit herself to a single methodology, arguing indeed that a saga cannot be truly grasped in all its layers and complexity without combining multiple different methods. Yet even while these approaches vary widely

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in the methodological sense, their results often complement each other and create a meaningful network of connections. Predominantly, however, Novotná's work is dedicated to various forms of literary analysis, given that the perception of narrative strategies is a necessary condition drawing historical and cultural conclusions from a work of literature.

The fitting title of the study, *How To Make a Saga*, highlights the fact that sagas do not start as a novel thought up and written down at random, but instead form part of a long-standing narrative tradition. *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* first spread through spoken word alone, before eventually being written down in many different versions. The story at its centre passed through many centuries, rolled off many a storytelling tongue, and found ink through the hands of well more than one writer. As such, we cannot treat it as an isolated unit of text, but rather as a sort of clay that had been moulded over long decades and centuries before arriving in our hands. Novotná points out that the different versions of the saga, as well as parts of the saga contained in other works, can vary substantially. Old Norse storytellers often convey a false impression of objectivity and factuality without significant embellishment. In reality, however, they are well aware of — and make use of — a selection of techniques to help them subtly amend the story to suit their own goals. In the version of the saga used by Novotná for her translation, for example, the storyteller describes the backgrounds, fates, and even appearance of the Jómsvikings in more detail than he does of the Scandinavian rulers, thus evoking the feeling that we, as readers, empathize and take sides with these heroes more than we do with the kings.

It is impossible to ascertain which of the saga's versions is closest to a truthful representation of history. Fortunately, modern scholars do not utilize sagas primarily as a source of factual historical events, but rather as a representation of Old Norse culture and mentality in the times of their settings, as well as the times in which they were written down. *The Saga of the Jómsvikings* can therefore be read in two distinct ways: as an adventurous tale or, on a deeper level, as a journey into the world of Old Norse people. The most important thing, however, remains the joy we share with the storyteller along the way.

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Marie Novotná (transl.): *Sága o jómských vikinzích*. Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Praha 2025. 248 pages.