

Dragon Motifs in *Yngvars saga víðförla*¹

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Composed no earlier than the end of the twelfth century, *Yngvars saga víðförla* (YS, ed. Emil Olsen, København, 1912) is largely devoted to a voyage to the East which a Swedish chieftain Yngvar Akason undertook with a fleet of thirty fully manned ships. The saga falls naturally into three parts: 1) a story of Yngvar's family, his childhood and youth and his setting out on a journey to the East; 2) Yngvar's travels from Russia to distant lands in the East, during which he wins many victories in combats against pagans and supernatural creatures and dies of an unknown decease; his companions bring his body to Queen Silkisif who is willing to be baptized and to convert her people to Christianity; 3) an account of Yngvar's son Sveinn, who follows his father's route and also defeats many enemies; he brings bishops to Silkisif's country, establishes Christianity there and marries the queen. A short epilogue closes the saga.

The fantastic emerges in the description of Yngvar's travels and it remains an important element of the narrative almost till the end of the story. The travel pattern, significant in other types of sagas (Lönnroth, 1976, 42–103), is the dominant action in the major part of YS. It allows the author to create travel scenes that can either be part of the narrative or, on the contrary, scenes which have no evident connection with each other. It incorporates many episodes and details of unrealistic or legendary character which became natural elements of the saga plot. The author of YS might have been following the model of medieval stories about travels to distant lands which gained great popularity in Europe in the twelfth century with the beginning of the crusades. Such stories combined oral tales based on traditional subjects with retellings of anecdotes borrowed from encyclopaedic literature and designed for a large audience; the two groups of stories can be easily guessed in the saga.

Yngvar's travel takes place in two worlds. He starts out from a historically authentic world which is documented in the saga by place-names and personal names from Sweden and Garðaríki (Old Russia), while on the other hand he encounters a world far to the East peopled by monsters such as giants (some of whom are cannibals), crawling and flying dragons, a man with bird's nose and magic apples, cyclops and, finally, the devil. These parts of the narrative – one of which is mainly based on historical (or rather historicized) matter whereas the other incorporates fictional and fantastic materials – have been clearly demarcated in YS:

'So on they sailed for many days and through many regions until they began to notice that the animals' colours and habits were changing, evidence that they were getting away from their homelands' (Hereafter: trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Vikings in Russia* (1989), 51–52, cf. YS 13–14).

¹ I am grateful for the financial support provided by the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Studies for my work on the project 'An Electronic Catalogue of Eastern European Plots and Motifs in Old Scandinavian Narratives'.

This is not only an expression of the medieval world view (Hofmann, 1981, 196), but here the author draws a borderline between the two worlds, one of which depicts a human world to which his audience belongs, and the other world which is different, and he makes the reader aware of the difference between them. As soon as the travellers crossed the border, a series of encounters with supernatural beings began, the first of which was a monstrous dragon.

Together with other features, the dragon episodes in YS contribute to a fantastic atmosphere which has sometimes led to the saga being erroneously classified as a *fornaldarsaga*. In composing these episodes the author made liberal use of the dragon motifs that were popular in Old Germanic epics ('dragon from transformed man lying on his treasure', 'dragons guard treasure', 'flying dragons', 'dragon spews venom', 'fire-breathing dragon', 'fight with dragon', see Boberg, 1966, 38–9), but presented a new interpretation which is not found in earlier tradition. The details with which the author ornaments his tale, combining them with popular motifs in the manner of a skilful narrator, add artistic expression to the whole scene. He also uses a variety of traditional beliefs and observations which can be traced to Scandinavian folk traditions.

A whole group of motifs is employed when the travellers first meet the dragon Jakulus as he sleeps on top of the treasure he is guarding on the river-bank. It says in the saga:

'...one evening it seemed to them that in the far distance they saw what appeared to be a half-moon rising up from the ground. That night it was Valdimar's turn to keep watch, and he went ashore to investigate what they had seen. He came to a piece of rising ground, golden in colour, and he saw that the cause of this was a carpet of glittering dragons. All of them appeared to be sleeping so he stretched out with his spear-shaft towards a particular gold ring and pulled it towards him. At that, one of the smaller dragons woke up and roused the others, till the Jakulus himself was awake. Valdimar raced back to the ships and told Yngvar what had happened, at which Yngvar ordered his men to get themselves ready for the dragon and move the ships into the harbour on the other side of the river, and so they did. When they saw this terrible dragon come flying across the river, most of them hid in terror. The Jakulus flew above a ship captained by two priests, and spewed so much venom on it that both the ship and the crew were annihilated. After that it flew back across the river' (*Vikings in Russia*, 52, cf. YS, 14).

The passage just cited is attractive for the skilful way that the author combines literary motifs within the same description. The motifs to distinguish here are 'half-moon close to the earth indicates hidden treasure' (Boberg, 1966, 202, N532.1; this motif is also known in folk tales from Gotland, see Nildin-Wall B., Wall J.-I., 1995, 127), 'dragons guard treasure' (Boberg, 1966, 39, B11.6.2), 'flying dragons' (Boberg, 1966, 38, B11.4.1), 'dragon spews venom' (Boberg, 1966, 38, B11.2.11.1), 'fire-breathing dragon' (Boberg, 1966, 38, B11.2.11). The mention of small dragons (in the original *yrmlingr*) around Jakulus gives a hint of a 'dragon develops from small worm placed on gold' (Boberg, 1966, 38, B11.1.3.1.1), etc.

A literary parallel to this episode in YS comes, it seems, from the dragon episode of *Beowulf*, (1999, 73–78, 2211–2344): a monstrous flying dragon who causes mortal fear in the Geats guards a treasure hoard. The circumstances of a robbery depicted in *Beowulf* and YS look quite similar: the barrow containing gold was found by the intruder by chance; the robbery happens at night-time when the dragon is sleeping. One would expect that Jakulus would either personally punish the thief who attempted to steal a gold ring but successfully escaped, or, according to the *Beowulf* pattern, that he would take vengeance on the whole group of people to which the thief belongs, as happens to the Geats. Instead of this, Jakulus unexpectedly attacks the ship, which is being steered by two priests: he spews venom which destroys both the ship and the people on it (YS, 14). This unconventional use of the venom-spewing motif makes us realise that the dragon sees Christian clerics as his real enemy. Yet another idea distinguishes YS from *Beowulf*: it is punishable not only to commit a theft of gold, but even to attempt it.

Later, when they have almost reached the end of their travels, Yngvar's party meets another monstrous dragon, 'the like of which they had never seen, and under it a great hoard of gold'. By feeding him with the salted leg of a giant they have killed (which the travellers providently keep with them), they succeed in making him go to the river to drink. While he is away they steal a precious gold piece from his house and hide with it among the reeds.

'Yngvar warned them not to be too curious about the dragon and most of them obeyed, but a few stood upright and saw the fury of the dragon over its loss, rising up on its tail, whistling like a human being and whirling round and round above its gold. These men described what they had seen, then dropped down dead' (*Vikings in Russia*, 56, cf. YS, 22–23).

The last detail in the passage about the men who died after they watched the dragon has been left without any comment by the author. A plausible explanation can be found in *Liber de Natura Rerum* by Thomas Cantimpretanus, a thirteenth century encyclopaedist: men cannot tolerate the direct gaze of a dragon; some people may die if they see its eyes (Thomas Cantimpretanus, 1973, VIII, 16, quoted from *Liber de monstris et beluis*, 2004, 114–116). From the same source the author might have borrowed the idea about feeding the dragon with the salted leg, though Thomas refers to the necessity of giving it the meat of a calf pickled in slaked lime (*ibidem*). The author compares the dragon's furious reaction to that of a human being in a similar situation, which suggests that this may be a case of shape-shifting, which is a widespread motif in Icelandic writings; see the many variations for 'transformation: man to animal' (Boberg, 1966, 55–56, D100–199).

This motif of 'dragon from transformed man lying on his treasures' (Boberg, 1966, 38, B11.1.3.1.1) is repeated in a didactic tale told to one of Yngvar's pagan followers by the devil. This is a traditional motif (cf. e.g. Fáfnir in *Reginsmál*, Valr and his sons in *Gull-Póris saga* and *Vals þáttur*), but it is given an unusual outcome in YS. Not far from the place where they met the second dragon the travellers come ashore and find a castle with a great hall richly furnished with precious things. One of Yngvar's men, Soti, agrees to spend the night there. When it gets dark there materializes a devil in human shape (Boberg, 1966, 143, G303.3.1) who tells Soti a tale:

'Once upon a time there was a strong and forceful man called Siggeus, who had three daughters and endowed them richly with gold. He died and was buried just where you saw the dragon, but after his death the eldest sister so begrudged the others their gold and treasure, she killed herself, and the second sister did likewise. The third lived on and inherited her father's wealth, remaining in control of the estate even after her death. She gave the name of Siggeus to the headland. Every night she fills the great hall with demons, and I am one of them, sent to tell you this story. Dragons ate the bodies of the king and his daughters, and it was into dragons that some people believe they were transformed. [...] Tell Yngvar this, too, that he and most of his men will die on this expedition. You, Soti, an unrighteous, faithless man, must remain here with us, but Yngvar will be saved by his faith in God' (*Vikings in Russia*, 57, cf. YS, 23–24).

The devil ends his tale with a reference to two alternative accounts of the fate of King Siggeus and the daughters who inherited his wealth after his death, with tragic results: 'Dragons ate the bodies of the king and his daughters, and it was into dragons that some people believe they were transformed'. He notes in passing that Siggeus was buried just where Yngvar's men had met the dragon, thus leaving us in no doubt about which of the two opinions he means to be right. From what the devil told Soti about the third of Siggeus' daughters one can guess that she, probably, turned into a witch (Boberg, 1966, 140, G211.9.1: 'transformation: man for dragon' about witches).

The last dragon episode in YS appears in the later part of the saga, when Sveinn Yngvarsson with his men and bishops travels to the country of Queen Silkisif along his father's route, winning victorious battles against monsters and pagan; he finds himself in the place where Yngvar's fleet had been attacked by Jakulus (YS 42):

'Once more Svein set out, and they travelled on until they came to a place where the half moon had seemed to stand upon the earth. There they made for the land and went ashore. Ketil told Svein what had taken place when he was there with Yngvar. Svein ordered his men to hurry from the ships and confront the dragon. They set off and came to a great thicket near to the dragon's lair, where they hid. Svein sent out several youngsters to spy out what they could of the dragon, and they saw lots of little dragons lying asleep, with the Jakulus encircling them all. One of the men stretched out the shaft of a spear to pick up some gold ring, and the shaft touched one of the little dragons, which woke up and roused the one nearest, and so each roused another until Jakulus itself reared up. Svein was leaning against a great oak-tree, and set onto his bow an arrow with tinder the size of a man's head on the tip, made with consecrated fire. When he saw that Jakulus was in the air flying towards the ships with its jaws gaping, he shot the arrow with the sacred fire straight into its mouth and right into its heart. The dragon crashed dead to the ground, at which Svein and his men rejoiced, praising God' (*Vikings in Russia*, 64–65, cf. YS, 41–42).

The composition and the choice of motifs in this scene parallel the first encounter with the dragon: the half-moon points to the treasure guarded by the dragon, Jakulus sleeps on the hill surrounded by young dragons, Sveinn's men try to get hold of the treasure

and wake up the dragons. Nevertheless some details contribute to a different atmosphere. It is not been specified when the scene is laid: it may happen at night, but it may happen early in the morning when the moon is still in the sky. The young men visit the dragon's nest deliberately, being sent there by Sveinn. Sveinn finally brings the conflict to a resolution when the dragon is slain by an arrow lit with consecrated fire.

This is not the first time that a particular kind of weapon – arrows lit from a tinder-box with a flame consecrated by the bishop – is mentioned in YS. Sveinn applies it against a man with bird's nose and magic apples because he saw that 'there's some diabolical power and weird custom behind all this' (*Vikings in Russia*, 62, cf. YS, 37). For the first time the consecrated flame is used by Yngvar in a battle against pirates (called 'the pagans', 'Vikings' and 'devil's people' in the saga) who have decorated their ships in such a way that they resemble 'floating islands' and are equipped with a kind of weapon which Yngvar and his people have never seen before, namely copper tubes throwing out fire which burnt everything around, both people and ships (identified as 'Greek fire'). It says in the saga:

'He bent his bow, strung an arrow and set to its tip the tinder-box with consecrated flame. The arrow flew blazing from the string straight into the tube jutting from the furnace, and so the fire was turned against the heathen, and in the blinking of an eye the island was burned to ashes – men, ships and all. Then the other islands came up, but no sooner had Yngvar heard the sound of the bellows than he began shooting the consecrated flame, and with God's help destroyed these human devils, reducing them to cinders' (*Vikings in Russia*, 56, cf. YS, 21).

Notice this description of the results of the application of the consecrated flame: 'the island was burned to ashes – men, ships and all', – this parallels the damage that Jakulus inflicted on Yngvar's fleet: 'The Jakulus flew above a ship captained by two priests, and spewed so much venom on it that both the ship and the crew were annihilated'. On each occasion the flame was used in a conflict which in the opinion of protagonists was provoked by a demonic power, and men had to fight against accomplices of the devil who use their own powerful magic weapon against Yngvar, Sveinn and their warriors. All the skills of the warriors are useless in combat with this enemy, and no ordinary weapon is effective. The only thing that can help the Christians in such a battle is God's intervention and the weapon He consecrates.

An answer to the question why Yngvar didn't make use of this divine weapon when he first encountered dragon Jakulus may be that this was needed so that he could complete his journey. Dragon episodes seem to play an important role in it.

The reiteration of dragon episodes in YS (four times in a short saga) suggests that their occurrence in the text is not fortuitous. They do not belong to those scenes in travel stories which can be easily removed from the narration without any harm to the story. All of them are meaningful episodes. No matter how complicated their structural pattern is and how many literary or folk motifs they incorporate, all the episodes are based on a repeated combination of 'man-gold-dragon'. Greed for gold is the main idea that unites all the dragon episodes. They have been deliberately related to each other by the author of the saga in order to condemn one of the seven deadly sins. Traditional motifs derived from folklore have been adapted to promote Christian ideas.

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