



Leeds Medieval Studies

Vilmundar saga viðutan: The Saga of Vilmundur the Outsider, ed. and trans. Jonathan Y. H. Hui, Viking Society Texts (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2021), lx + 57 pp. ISBN 9781914070006

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Leeds Medieval Studies, 2 (2022), *pagination to be finalised

DOI: [10.57686/256204/15](https://doi.org/10.57686/256204/15)

ISSN: Print 2754-4575

ISSN: Online 2754-4583

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Reviews

Vilmundar saga viðutan: The Saga of Vilmundur the Outsider, ed. and trans. Jonathan Y. H. Hui, Viking Society Texts (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2021), ix + 57 pp. ISBN 9781914070006

Vilmundar saga viðutan is a ‘late’ saga, probably written in the fourteenth century and preserved in over fifty MSS of the fifteenth century or later. This good new edition of a ‘legendary romance’ (p. vi) can be seen as part of a recent flourishing of interest in *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur* (‘sagas of ancient times’ and ‘sagas of knights’), until recently looked down on as low-grade fantasies inferior to the earlier ‘classic’ family sagas and kings’ sagas (*Íslendingasögur* and *Konungasögur*) and unworthy of consideration as documents of historical or anthropological value — hence sometimes called *lygisögur* ‘lying sagas’.

The saga’s hero is Vilmundur *viðutan* (‘from outside’), a strong, handsome and even literate peasant’s son who leaves home to seek a lost goat and finds Garðaríki (Novgorod) ruled by king Vísvalldur, who has a warlike son, Hjarrandi (who becomes Vilmundur’s blood-brother), and two daughters — Gullbrá, destined to marry a king (if Hjarrandi does not kill him) and Sóley destined to marry a farmer’s son (if her father agrees). To avoid one undesirable suitor, Sóley exchanges identities with a kitchen-maid Öskubuska (who moves to the palace with a lover, Kolur) and hides in the forest, where Vilmundur finds her (led by her missing shoe). After several adventures, Hjarrandi and Vilmundur are sent to kill Kolur (who has gone rogue). In doing which Vilmundur also kills Öskubuska (still disguised as Sóley) but is exiled after presenting her head to the king (who thinks it is his daughter). Vilmundr finds Sóley again who reveals her identity to him. On their return to Garðaríki all is made well. Vilmundr marries Sóley and is made a duke and Gullbrá marries a Galician prince who has come to woo her.

The introduction deals efficiently and comprehensively with genre, sources and influences, the folkloric background to the saga, and manuscripts and editions. A third of the introduction (pp. xxviii–lxix) is devoted to the saga’s chief claim to literary fame, which is that Öskubuska may be the first appearance of Cinderella in Iceland. However, in the discussion at pp. xlvi–xlvii, although it is noted that her name may mean ‘ash-broom’ (indicating menial status and low morals), her paramour is called Kolur (‘coal’), and there is the motif of a lost shoe, it is not noted that this malign pair probably owe their dusky colour and monstrous behaviour to un-Cinderella-like Scandinavian traditions of black-skinned *jötnar* and *pursar*. The introduction mounts an assault on previous generations of scholars who scorned the

crudity of *fornaldarsögur*. But if there is any literary merit to the saga (which must be slight) or a deeper, Bettelheimian aspect to its motifs, this is hardly touched on.

The text is close to Agneta Loth's semi-diplomatic edition of 1964, but the orthography is happily normalised to a pseudo-fifteenth-century standard form. The translation is on the whole fluent and accurate, but it sometimes has a slightly jarring mixture of modern colloquialism and translationese: 'fooled around with the bower-maidens' (p. 11), 'Buris was so ensorcelled' (p. 35), and (a fine piece of Webbe-Dasentese) 'He harried along the east-way' (p. 43). This capable edition fills a gap between previous scholarly and popular editions and is beginner-friendly in a way that will be useful for undergraduates. The saga is especially worth reading to the end, where the reader will find a very refreshing variation on the formula 'and they lived happy ever after'.

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