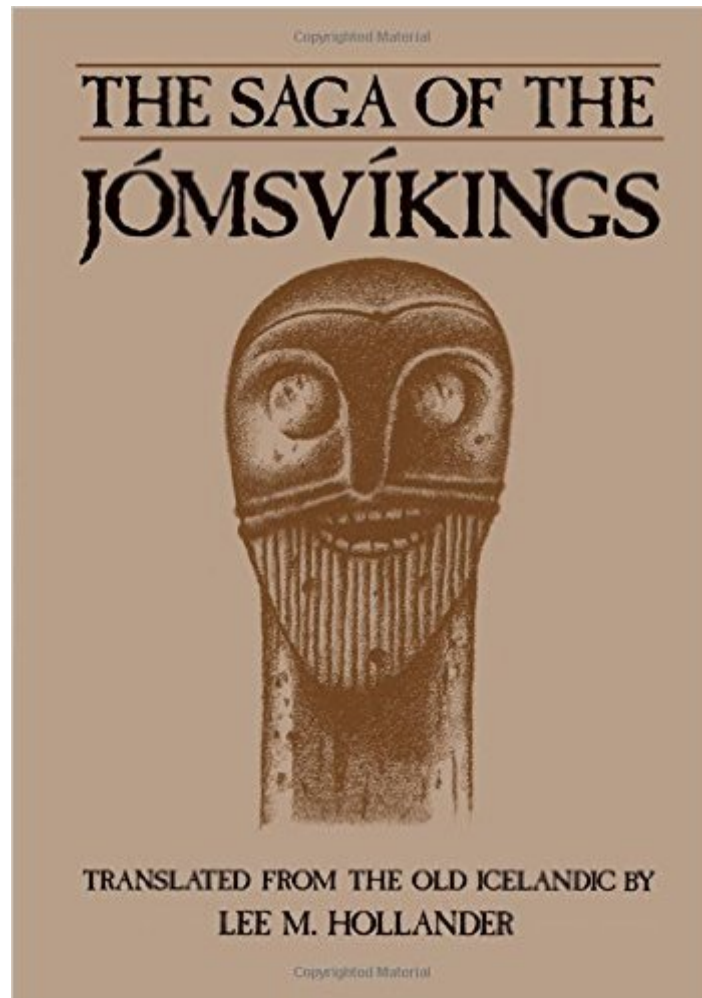


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Saga Of The Jomsvikings



Synopsis

In A.D. 986, Earl Hákon, ruler of most of Norway, won a triumphant victory over an invading fleet of Danes in the great naval battle of Hjörung Bay. Sailing under his banner were no fewer than five Icelandic skalds, the poet-historians of the Old Norse world. Two centuries later their accounts of the battle became the basis for one of the liveliest of the Icelandic sagas, with special emphasis on the doings of the Jǫmsvikings, the famed members of a warrior community that feared no one and dared all. In Lee M. Hollander's faithful translation, all of the unknown twelfth-century author's narrative genius and flair for dramatic situation and pungent characterization is preserved.

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Customer Reviews

This was the first of the Viking sagas I read and I almost didn't make it to the saga part of the book. The introduction reads as a very scholarly, ponderous doctoral thesis (which I think it was). Not knowing what to expect from a Viking saga, wading through this over-written deconstruction was not a promising start. I had visions of the saga itself being much the same--a chore to read rather than a pleasure. Fortunately I skipped ahead to the actual saga. The translation was bright and crisp, very well done, very readable. The story was excellent. This turned out to be a splendid Viking story that led me into all the others (the Paulson and Magnussen translations are equally good). The Saga of the Jomsvikings was exciting as an adventure story and fascinating as a look at the culture and thought processes of these people at this time (the beheading scene is particularly noteworthy).

This was only my second saga so I can't really compare it to many others. Having said that, this is a great saga to start out with. As expressed in previous reviews, "The Testing of the Jom'svikings" (chapter 23) is a great example of courage; men are able to face death completely void of all apparent fear, without so much as flinching at the blow of the sword. The excitement level is kept up very well throughout the story, especially for a tale which jumps around from different generations and countries as much as this. I never felt bored or that the book was slow moving. In other words, there was no constant strain for action. While it may be hard for the novice of the saga to get used to the long range of generations throughout the story, once you become used to it it becomes natural and easily comprehensible. Although many have expressed in previous reviews that the introduction was boring, I found it not too different from many other critical introductions I have read before. The introduction does what it needs to do, gives the reader an insight and an overview of the material that is to be read.

...And I'm not kidding. The Saga of the Jomsvikings is just about the best of the sagas (with the exception of, perhaps, the Laxdale Saga). The action is almost non-stop (once you get through the ponderous, but still interesting, introduction) and gives you a good idea about what the 12th-14th century poets/historians thought 9th-10th century exploits. The most compelling chapter is chapter 23 where, as stated in the introduction, the author shows us the face of "...Men who know how to die." There is no hyperbole in this statement, and has, I'm sure, been the impetus for more than one writer/screenwriter (insert sly sideways look toward Michael Crichton here).

A common theme in the Nordic sagas, was the formation of a close-knit band of Vikings, sworn to a particular task or mission. The Jomsvikings were very likely the most legendary group such as this. They were a collection of elite mercenaries from all over the Scandinavian lands, mostly from Norway. Their mission, to restore a king to the throne of Norway. Those who would join the organization had to pass an initiation phase, where their skills and endurance as warriors were tested. They had a charter of rules and standing orders, and operated out of a fortified island base on Jomsborg. In short, they were very much an early medieval special-operations unit. Sadly, they were defeated in the final battle at the end of the saga, but not without causing grievous damage to the opposing force. Most telling, is the valiant conduct of the Jomsvikings taken prisoner at this battle, and their reversal of a truly dismal fate! This scene alone is Viking valor at its highest! Even in defeat, they acquire glory, with a good ending for all.

Relentless as the Viking cultures were, it's often difficult to understand the sheer brutality of these people. In this Saga a moments chance to attain glory, a beautiful woman, riches, a claim/promise uttered while intoxicated, can lead to brothers, fathers, and long time friends to betray one another and even form alliances with former foes. The Jǫmsvǫ́ngs-kings, however, were loyal to the end and in doing so, etched their legend into the annals of history. It's hard to determine what is truth and what is artistic license in age old stories such as these. This does not detract from this saga's intrigue and was the first Nordic Saga I've had the pleasure of reading. I've purchased a number of other Sagas as a result and will continue to do so.

This is my first saga so I didn't really know what to expect from it but I found it to be enjoyable. I did have a little problem with remembering who was related to who because they go through so many generations of people with strange names and some of the people have the same name but I got used to it after a while. The first part of the book quickly goes through a few generations of vikings until it gets to the forming of the Jomsvikings who are the best of the best viking warriors who fear nothing. During a feast many of them make an oath to go to Norway and help take the crown so that's what they go do then a major sea battle takes place. After the battle some of the Jomsviking get captured then they are killed one at a time after telling their captives that they don't fear death but welcome it, which is the best part of the book. I was able to read through this book without much difficulty in a very short time and I would recommend it to anyone who like viking sagas about fearless warriors.

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