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**Author:** Jakub Morawiec

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# Sveinn Haraldsson – The Captured King of Denmark

Jakub Morawiec

*University of Silesia in Katowice*

There is rather no doubt that Sveinn Haraldsson, known also as *tjúguskegg* (Forkbeard), the king of Denmark (ca. 986–1014) belongs to the most significant figures of the Viking Age Scandinavia. His military and political achievements, with taking over the English throne in 1013 as their peak, fully justify scholarly interest in his life and reign. This interest is determined by a variety of accessible sources that cast light on particular aspects of the king and his time.<sup>1</sup>

One can say that his reign is relatively well recognized and described. It seems to be true only to a certain extent. The successive stages of Sveinn's domination in Scandinavia and his activity in England create quite a vivid picture. There also seems to remain less and less controversy concerning his attitude towards Christianity and the development of the Church in Denmark. Despite the rebellion against his father that marked the dawn of his reign, Sveinn seems to have aimed at a continuation of Haraldr Gormsson's policy, both in Denmark and beyond. Still, the beginnings of his career contain a substantial portion of mysteries and uncertainties that puzzle scholars until today. Among such issues particularly perplexing is the incident or incidents of the king's capture by either Slavs or Northmen and the ransom his subjects were forced to pay for his freedom. This story is noted by several accounts, both contemporary to Sveinn and those written much later. Although of marginal role and questionable historicity, it had significantly supplemented the rather negative image of the Danish king and became a symbol of his political and military incompetence, cowardice, apostasy, and failure.

With this study I am not going to decide whether the story of the capture and ransom is reliable or not and, consequently, whether medieval authors were right using it in their reviews of the Danish king and his reign. Rather, I will

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, K. Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Danemark. The Formation of State* (London 1980); N. Lund, "The Armies of Swein Forkbeard and Cnut. Leding or lið?," *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 15 (1986), 105–18; N. Lund, *De hænger og de brænder. Danmark og England i Vikingatiden* (Copenhagen 1993); I. Howard, *Swein Forkbeard's Invasions and the Danish Conquest of England 991–1017* (Woodbridge 2003); M. H. Gelting, "The Kingdom of Denmark," in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900–1200*, ed. N. Berend (Cambridge 2007).

focus on various circumstances that potentially could have influenced the rise and development of the motif. Firstly, its analysis should provide an interesting link between the complexities of the royal power both in Sveinn's times and in the twelfth–thirteenth-century Scandinavia. Secondly, it would give us another intriguing insight into the modes of progress of medieval historiography.

The fully developed although slightly rearranged story of Sveinn's capture and ransom features in a relatively young account, namely in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, composed in late twelfth/ early thirteenth century. One of its redactions, preserved in mid-fourteenth century manuscript Codex Holmianus 7 4to, contains comparatively the most condensed version of the story:

Búrisleifr konungr átti þrjár dætr. Hét in ellzta Ástriðr; ok var hon hin vænsta kona ok hin vitrasta. Qnnur het Gunnhildr, þriðja Geira; hennar fekk Óláfr Tryggvason. Sigvaldi ferr nú á konungs fund ok býðr honum tvá kosti at hann muni eigi vera í borginni ella gefi hann honum Ástriði, dóttur sína. “Þat hafða ek ætlat,” segir konungr, “at hon mundi þeim manni vera gipt er tignari væri fyrir nafns sakir en þú ert. En þó væri mér nauðsyn at þú værir í borginni; ok skulu vér ráða um öll saman.” Konungr hittir nú Ástriði, dóttur sína, ok spyr hversu henni væri at skapi sá ráðahagr at hon sé gipt Sigvalda. Ástriðr segir: “Þér satt at segja þá vilda ek Sigvalda aldri eiga. Ok þat skal hann til vinna at koma af öllum sköttum af landinu þeim er vér höfum áðr goldit Danakonungi áðr hann komi í mína sæng. Hinn er annarr kost at hann komi Sveini konungi hingat svá at þú eigir hans vald.” Konungr berr þetta nú upp fyrir Sigvalda. En hann er fúss til ráðahags við Ástriði. Kæmr þar at Sigvaldi jatar þessu; ok binda þetta fastmælum. Skal þetta komit fram fyrir hin fyrstu jól elligar eru öll mál þeira laus. Sigvaldi ferr nú heim til Jomsborgar.

Ok litlu síðarr býr hann þrjú skip ok þrjú hundruð manna ór borginni ok ferr nú þar til er hann kæmr við Sjálönd. Hann hittir menn at máli ok spyr at Sveinn konungr tekr veizlu skamt þaðan. Þá leggr hann skip sín við eitt nes. Þar váru hvergi skip í nánd. Þat var skamt frá bæ þeim er konungr drakk með sex hundruð manna. Þeir Sigvaldi snúa skipum sínum ok láta framstafna horfa frá landi. Þeir tengja skipit hvert af stafni annars. Síðan sendir Sigvaldi tuttugu menn á fund Sveins konungs “ok segið honum svá at ek sé sjúkr ok at bana kominn ok ek vilja fyrir eins finna hann ok líf hans liggi við.”

Nú finna þeir konungr ok bera upp þessi ørendi. Konungr bregzk við skjótt ok ferr þegar með þau sex hundruð manna. En er Sigvaldi verðr varr at konungr er kominn þá lá hann á því skipi er first var landi. Hann mælti við sína menn: “Þá er þrír tigir manna eru komnir á it skip er næst er landi, þá skulu þér kippa bryggju af landi ok mæla at menn troði eigi skipit svá at sökvi. Ok get ek at konungr gangi í fyrra lagi. En þá er tuttugu menn eru komnir á miðskipit þá skulu þér þar kippa bryggju.”

Nú er konungr kominn á skipit. Þá gera þeir sem mælt var. Nú er konungr kominn á skip Sigvalda við tíunda mann. Þá spurði konungr hvárt Sigvaldi hefði mál sitt. Honum var sagt at máttir hans var sem minstr. Konungr gengr þá at rekkju Sigvalda ok spurði hvárt hann mætti mæla. Sigvaldi svarar: “Lúttu at mér nú.” En er konungr laut at honum þá tók Sigvaldi annarri hendi um þverar herðar honum en annarri undir hönd honum. Ok þá kallaði Sigvaldi at öllum skipum skyli í braut róa sem skjótast; ok svá gera þeir. En menn konungs stóðu eptir á landi ok sá á. Þá mælti konungr: “Hvat er nú, Sigvaldi, viltu svíkja mik eða hvat ætlask þú fyrir?” Sigvaldi segir: “Eigi mun ek svíkja yðr en fara skulu þér til Jómsborgar, ok skulu þér vera þar velkomnir. Ok vér skulum veita yðr alla virðing.” Konungr segir: “Þat munum vér nú ok þekkjask.”

Þeir fara nú til Jómsborgar, ok gera Jómsvikingar veizlu mikla móti honum ok kallask hans menn. Þá sagði Sigvaldi konungi at hann hefði beðit til handa honum dóttur Búrisleifs konungs er Gunnhildr hét, “sú er vænst er; en mér er fóstnuð systir hennar, er Ástriðr heitir. Nú mun ek fara á fund konungs ok vitja þessa mála fyrir þína hönd.” Konungr bað hann svá gera. Sigvaldi ferr nú á fund Búrisleifs konungs með hundrað manna ok talask þeir við. Lézsk Sigvaldi nú kominn til ráð við Ástriði. Gera þeir nú Búrisleifr konungr ok Sigvaldi ráð sitt. Eptir þat ferr Sigvaldi heim. Sveinn konungr spurði hversu gengi málin. Sigvaldi kvað þat á hans valdi “ef þú, konungr, vilt gefa upp Búrisleifi konungi skatta áðr hann gipti þér dóttur sína. Ok er þat meiri sómi báðum ykkir at þú eigir þess konungs dóttur at eigi sé skattgildir.” Svá kœmr Sigvaldi nú sínum fortölum at konungr vill þenna kost.

King Búrisleifr had three daughters. The eldest was called Astriðr, who was the most beautiful and wisest of women. The second was called Gunnhildr and the third Geira, who was married to Óláfr Tryggvason. Sigvaldi went to the king and offered to him two alternatives: that either he should leave the city or else the king should give him Astriðr, his daughter, as his wife. “I thought,” said the king, “that she should marry someone whose rank was more exalted than yours. But yet it is essential for me to keep you in the city. We shall all discuss the matter together.” The king met Astriðr, his daughter, and asked her what she thought about being married to Sigvaldi. Astriðr said: “To tell you the truth I would rather never marry Sigvaldi. But before he shall call me his wife, let him first accomplish the liberation of these lands from all the tribute which we have previously paid to the king of Denmark. The alternative is that he brings King Sveinn here so that you have him in your power.” The king told this to Sigvaldi who was still eager to marry Astriðr. It ended with Sigvaldi agreeing to the conditions, which they all then confirmed by oaths. Sigvaldi was to carry out his part of the agreement by the following Christmas or else they were all released from their obligations. Sigvaldi went home to Jomsborg. Not long after he made ready three ships and three hundred and sixty men and sailed from the city to Zeeland. He met some men from

whom he learned that King Sveinn was at a banquet not far from there. He anchored his ships by a headland, where there were no other ships in the neighbourhood and which was a short distance from the farm where King Sveinn was at the feast together with seven hundred and twenty men. Sigvaldi and his men turned their ships round letting the bows face the sea, and they tied the ships up alongside each other. Then Sigvaldi sent twenty men to find King Sveinn “and tell him that I am sick and at death’s door, and that I want to see him desperately about something in which his life is at stake.” They met the king and delivered their message. The king reacted quickly and set out immediately with seven hundred and twenty men. When Sigvaldi learned that the king had come he was lying on the ship which was furthest from the land. He said to his men: “When thirty men have come aboard the ship nearest the land, pull up the gangplank from the shore and tell them not to overcrowd the ship lest it sink. And I imagine that the king will be among the first. And when twenty men have come aboard the middle ship, pull up the gangplank.”

The king arrived on the ship and Sigvaldi’s men carried out his instructions. When the king had come aboard Sigvaldi’s ship with nine men, he asked whether Sigvaldi could speak or not. He was told that he was very weak. The king went to Sigvaldi’s bed and asked him whether he could speak. Sigvaldi replied: “Bend down to me.” When the king bent down to him, Sigvaldi gripped him with one arm round his shoulders and the other under his arm and shouted to his men that they should row away as quickly as possible. They did so. But the king’s men remained behind on the shore and looked on. Then the king said: “What is going on, Sigvaldi? Are you going to betray me or what are your plans?” Sigvaldi said: “I shall not betray you, but you must go to Jomsborg where you will be made welcome. We shall show you all the honour we can.” The king said: “I shall have to accept that.” They went to Jomsborg and the Jomsvikings prepared a great banquet for him and they called themselves his men. Then Sigvaldi said to the king that he had asked for the hand of King Þúrisleifr’s daughter, called Gunnhildr, on his behalf. She is the most beautiful one. And I am engaged to her sister Astriðr. Now I’ll go to the king to settle the terms of the marriage for you.” The king told him to do so. Sigvaldi went now with a hundred and twenty men to King Þúrisleifr and they discussed the matter together. Sigvaldi claimed that he had now won Astriðr. King Þúrisleifr and Sigvaldi made their plans, after which the latter went home. King Sveinn asked him how the suit was going. Sigvaldi said that it lay in his power “as Þúrisleifr will not give you his daughter until you relinquish the tribute which Þúrisleifr pays to you, your majesty. It will add to your honour and his if you marry the daughter of a king who does not pay tribute.” Sigvaldi was so persuasive that the king accepted the terms.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Jómsvikinga saga efter skinnboken 7 4to*, ed. G. Cederschiöld (Lund 1874), 21–23; *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ed. N. F. Blake (Toronto–New York 1962), 25–27. Slightly broader although featuring

Scholars analysing the *Jómsvíkinga saga* narrative, stress the importance of its general antiroyal undertone.<sup>3</sup> Although the motif of the king's capture fully accords with the latter, it has not attracted more thorough attention. Moreover, it has not been studied in comparison with its analogues, found in older texts.<sup>4</sup> The story of the Jómsvíkings, especially its first part, dedicated to the kings of Denmark,<sup>5</sup> provides quite a negative image of the monarchs, especially of Haraldr Gormsson and his son Sveinn. Their powers are relatively weak, their authority questioned by the tendency to avoid direct challenges, promote plots and intrigues, and, finally, their inability to interpret correctly current political conditions. In the case of Haraldr, it is best proven by the circumstances of his death, when he is forced to confront the rebellion of his own, formerly rejected, son and dies in a most unhonourable way. Sveinn, although seems to be growing into an energetic and successful ruler, quickly proves to follow the negative image of his father. It is fulfilled by both his disability or lack of will to confront personally jarl Hákon of Hlaðir in Norway and the necessity to use deceit in order to make Jómsvíkings fight against the jarl on his behalf.<sup>6</sup>

The construction of the saga's narrative presents the story of Sveinn's capture as the first serious sign of his royal weakness. The king is not able to foresee and withstand the danger. His retinue, despite being numerous, remains entirely unable to prevent Sigvaldi and his men from action and effectively protect their lord. Finally, the king appears as ultimately naive and helpless when captured and forced to accept the conditions of a new peace, dictated by Búrisleifr. Nevertheless, the story is important for the whole narrative. Sveinn felt ashamed and dishonoured by Jómsvíkings, which was the reason for his will to take revenge on them and for the plot that led to their final destiny.

The reader of *Jómsvíkinga saga* cannot ignore the potential entertainment factor of the narrative. Indeed, the circumstances of Sveinn's capture may have

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the same elements versions of this story are to be found in another two redactions of the saga: *Jómsvíkinga saga eftir Arnamagnæska handskriften N:o 291 4:to i diplomatarískt aftryck*, ed. C. af Petersens (København 1882), 85–89; *Jómsvíkinga saga (eftir cod. AM 510 4:to)*, ed. C. af Petersens (Lund 1879), 46–51.

<sup>3</sup> J. Jesch, "History in 'Political Sagas,'" *Medium Aevum*, vol. 62, no. 2 (1993); Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The rise of literary fiction in thirteenth-century Iceland* (Odense 2002), 191–216; S. Aalto, "Band of Brothers – The Case of the Jómsvíkings," *Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechnie*, t. 1(5) 2009; J. Morawiec, *Vikings among the Slavs. Jomsborg and the Jomsvíkings in Old Norse Tradition* (Wien 2009); Þórðis Edda Jóhannesdóttir, *Jómsvíkinga saga. Sérstaða, varðveisla og viðtökur*, Ritgerð lögð fram til doktorspróf, (Reykjavík 2016).

<sup>4</sup> See Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, 193–97. Þórðis Edda Jóhannesdóttir, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, 144 refers to the story but does not provide any deeper considerations concerning its potential origin.

<sup>5</sup> Missing in one of the redactions of the saga, preserved in manuscript AM 510 4to.

<sup>6</sup> J. Morawiec, *Vikings among the Slavs*, 90–143.



sounded amusing as they still do. It refers especially to the scene of king's final approach to the supposedly-sick Sigvaldi, who orders the former to bow in front of him. It is followed by another image, that could have been seen as humorous, namely the king gripped by the jarl, unable to move and react. Last but not least, it is hard not to see the irony in the scene of the banquet for Sveinn, given by Jómsvikings, who called themselves king's men. Another distinguished factor of the story is a sophisticated interplay of numbers, directly pointing to the royal advantage over the jarl, indirectly leading to a rhetorical question: how many people one may need to capture a king?

A closer inspection of the available sources shows that the motif in question was not created exclusively for the saga. Contrary, since it was definitely older, it was used and rearranged as very suitable for the whole story. Its earlier circulation is proved by the account of Sveinn Aggesen's *Brevis Historia Regum Dacie*:

Hic Haraldus multo post tempore regali sceptro regni gubernabat imperium. Is primus idolatriae respuens spurcitas, Christi crucem adoravit. Qui dum exercitum emitteret ad immanissimam petram protrahendam, quam matris tumulo ob memoriale insignium destinavit erigendam, intestina orta sedition, tum propter novae religionis ritum, tum propter servitutis iugum intolerabile popularis coepit effervere tumultus, adeo ut ipsum rehgem plebs insane regno expelleret. Qui cursu celeri fugam arripiens – pedibus enim timor addidit alas – ad Sclaviam profugus commeavit ibique, pace impetrata, primus urbem fundasse dicitur, quae nunc Hynnisburgh nuncupatur. Cuius menia ab archipraesule Absalone ego Sueno solo conspexi aequari. Quo exulante, filius in regno subrogatur Sueno cognomina Tycheskeg, qui sanctae Trinitatis fidem, quam profugus tamen pater abiecerat, verus Dei cultor amplexus est, sacrique baptismatis unda renatus, verbi divini semina per universam regionem propagari iussit. Successu temporum interveniunt legati, qui operam darent, ut discordia inter patrem et filium, regio regnantem solio, exorta ad concordiam revocaretur. Statuit igitur Sueno rex, ut pater cum Sclavis sibi in Gronesund de pace tractanda occurreret. Quo cum rex ad terminum constitutumcum Danorumexercitu advenisset, patris diu praestolatur adventum. Interea Haraldus profugus, cuiusdam Palnonis Tokki, consiliarii sui, suggestione monitus, laburnum remis aptissimam sibi fabrefecit, quam nautis instruxit probatissimis; cui et gubernatorem praefecit praefatum Palnonem, qui regi festinanter accelerabat occurrere. Is cum ad Danorum pervenisset exercitum, ordinatis per foros remis, dolum commentatus, puppi suam puppi regis iussit applicari. Quibus sic ordinatis, prima illucescente aurora, regem in reclinario dormientem clam excitavit. Expergefactus autem rex sciscitatur, quidnam esset. “Nos,” inquit, “patris tui legati sumus, ad te de pace tractanda transmissi.” Quod cum didicisset, patris statum diligentius cupiens percunctari, paulo extra navis suggrundam caput exseruit. Quem illico praetaxatus Palno Toki per aures et capillos

corripiens, licet frustra renitentem, in suam navim tunc potentior attraxit invitum, et quamvis pauxillum clamore perstreperet, ceteris ignaris, valido remorum impulsu fugam vehementius accelerabat, nec prius laboris pertaeus destitit, antequam ad urbem praefatam pervenisset. Quem Sclavi conuentes, populari orta seditione, diversis captivatum mortibus exquisitisque tormentis adiudicabant. Verum pars electa primatum saniori praecellebat consilio. Consultius namque autumabant censu eum plurimo redimendum, unde Sclavia perenniter locuples exhaustis Danorum opibus gauderet, quam brevi morte trucidatus interiret. Modicum etenim communi cederet utilitati si captivus mortis dampnaretur exterminio. Delegantur itaque legati, qui Danis denuntiarent, ut regem suum trino auri et argenti pondere redimerent. Quod diu exequi non distulerunt. Nam universe ferme regni censu coadunato, occurrentibus in Winnigha cum rege captivato Sclavis, Dani Sueonem redimere non detrectabant. Ast ubi census eius solutioni non sufficeret, decreverunt matronae suis ornatibus summam redemptionis explere. Igitur anulos, armillas, inaures, monilia, torques et quicquid illis pretiosum erat regi liberando impendebant. Quo expleto, Dani a rege silvarum et nemorum tum primum communia impetrarunt.<sup>7</sup>

This Harald held sway over the kingdom with his royal sceptre for a long time afterwards. This was the first king to reject the filth of idolatry and worship the cross of Christ. However, he sent the army to haul the immense rock which he intended to have raised over his mother's mound in memory of her achievements, and disorder began to seethe among the people. It was caused both by the new religious observances and by the unbearable servile yoke. Then the commons broke out in rebellion against the king, and all together they drove him from the kingdom. He fled with speed, for "fear added wings to his fleet," and arrived in Slavia as a refugee. There he is said to have had a peaceful reception and to have founded the city which is now called Jomsborg; whose walls I, Sveinn, saw levelled to the ground by Archbishop Absalon.

During his exile, his son Sveinn was raised to the throne; he was surnamed Forkbeard. And he adopted as a true worshipper of God the faith which his fugitive father had in the end renounced. Reborn in the holy waters of baptism and made orthodox in faith, he ordered the seeds of God's word to be sown throughout the land.

In the course of time envoys arrived to repair the discord which had arisen between the fugitive father and the son who occupied the royal throne. The king therefore decided that his father and the Slavs meet him in the straits of Grønsund to make peace. The king arrived there first with the Danish fleet at the time appointed, and waited a long time for his father. The fugitive Harald meanwhile accepted the suggestion of one of his councillors, that is, of Palna-Toki, a man with two names, and constructed for himself

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<sup>7</sup> *Sweni Aggonis Gesta Regum Danorum*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptorum, t. XXIX Hannoverae 1892, 32–33.



a rapid vessel best suited for rowing. This he manned with most experienced sailors and put the above-mentioned Palna-Toki in charge, who set off with all speed to meet the king.

When he reached the Danish fleet, he ranged his oarsmen on deck and, with treachery in mind, gave orders that his ship should make for the king's. With his crew in position, at the first light of dawn he quietly roused the king in his resting-place. When the king woke, he asked who it was. "It is us," he said, "the envoys of your father. We have been sent over to you to discuss peace-terms." When he gathered this, the king wanted to inquire more closely into how his father was, and he put his head a little way over the gunwale of the ship. Then Palna-Toki grabbed him by the ears and the hair, gave a more powerful heave against his unavailing resistance, and dragged him willy-nilly out of his own ship. Although he yelled and shouted just a little, they made their escape with furious oar-strokes while everyone else slumbered in ignorance. Nor did they heave to until they reached the city of Jónsborg.

When the Slavs caught sight of him, the people rose up and condemned the prisoner to various forms of death and refined torture. However, the better sort of their leaders prevailed with wiser counsel. They decided that, rather than put an end to him by killing him forthwith, they would be better advised to have him ransomed for a large tribute; in that way the Danes would be impoverished and Slavia would perpetually rejoice in her wealth. It would yield but little profit to the community if they were to condemn their prisoner to death.

So they charged their envoys to announce to the kingdom that they may buy back their king with three times his weight in gold and silver; and they did so without much delay. The Danes collected a levy from almost the entire kingdom, and when the Slavs arrived at Vindinge with the captive monarch, they were eager to redeem their king. But the levy proved insufficient to release him, and in order to ransom him the married women agreed to make up the shortfall in coin with their own jewellery. They topped up the king's levy by adding rings, bracelets, ear-rings, necklaces and all their chains. And when it was complete, the Danes obtained from the king their first common rights over woods and groves. [...]

Sveinn's account seems to prove that particular motifs, known from the *Jómsvíkinga saga*, had been circulating separately and in different contexts already in the twelfth century, before the saga redactions were completed. Two skaldic poems, Þorkell Gíslason's *Búadrápa* and Bjarni Kolbeinsson's *Jómsvíkinga drápa*, both dated to approximately the same time, are the most visible evidence of that. The former dedicated to Búi digri, the latter, despite its title, to Vagn Ákason, indicate, that since its early stages of formation, the legend of Jómsvíkings had been based on the fame of particular leaders, repre-

sentatives of Danish nobility.<sup>8</sup> Despite its rather antiroyal flavour, the narrative of the royal capture constitutes a very close analogy. The story lives its own life and, as Sveinn Aggesen's account shows, could be used in various contexts. The author of *Brevis Historia* uses it to complete the whole passage on the king's rebellion against his father and on the direct military confrontation between both sides. The account of Harald's friendly reception in Jónsborg reveals either the influence of Adam of Bremen's account (see below) or some, most likely located at the royal court, common source. On the other hand, the decisive role of Palna-Toki, one of the most prominent figures of the *Jómsvíkinga saga*, strongly suggests that already at the time Sveinn Aggesen was writing his account, the story was connected with the legend of Jónsborg. This connection is even stronger if one remembers that, according to the saga, it was the very same Palna-Toki who was responsible for the fall and death of Haraldr Gormsson. *Brevis Historia* provides a different arrangement of the tale. The jarl supports Sveinn's father and it is he, not Sigvaldi, who captures the king. Sveinn Aggesen's story contains some inconsistencies. First of all, the figure of Haraldr Gormsson disappears in the middle of the plot and one cannot learn how the capture and liberation of his son determined his own position. On the one hand, one learns that Haraldr tried to regain the lost power and the action against his son aimed at bringing peace between both sides. On the other hand, the story lacks a definite answer to the question whether Haraldr achieved his goal. The second inconsistency refers to the role of Slavs in the whole plot. First, we do not learn why Haraldr decided to seek shelter in Slavia and how it was possible for him, as the refugee, to have the necessary time and resources to found there a new city, that is, Jónsborg. In this case this probably results from an exclusive hybrid of two accounts, Adam's *Gesta* and *Jómsvíkinga saga*. The former underlines the hospitality of the citizens of Jumne,<sup>9</sup> the latter labels Harald the founder of Jónsborg.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Sveinn Aggesen does not explain why the plot made up by both Haraldr and Palna-Toki abruptly turned into the initiative of the Slavs who, by ransoming Sveinn, wanted to impoverish the Danes and, thanks to this, rejoice in their own wealth, to cite the author

<sup>8</sup> One has to mention the tradition of family ties between Sveinn Aggesen and Vagn Ákason. The former's great-grandfather, called Þrugot, was said to marry Þorgunn, the latter's daughter. The tradition is preserved in *Knyttlinga saga*. See *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Íslenzk fornrit 35 (Reykjavík 1982), 159. On the status of Danish nobility in the *Jómsvíkinga saga* tradition, see J. Morawiec, "Ekskluzywni wojownicy – elitarny wymiar legendy o Jomswikingach," in M. Rębkowski, ed. *Ekskluzywne życie – dostojny pochówek. W kręgu kultury elitarnej wieków średnich, Wolińskie Spotkania Mediewistyczne I* (Wolin 2011), 87–109.

<sup>9</sup> *Adami Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, MGH Scriptorum Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum, ed. B. Schmeidler (Hannoverae 1917), 87.

<sup>10</sup> Although it has to be noted that it refers only to a version of the saga preserved in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and some of the kings' sagas (*Fagrskinna*, *Knyttlinga saga*). See J. Morawiec, *Vikings among the Slavs*, 41–48.

himself. A conclusion that both Haraldr and Slavs wanted literally the same sounds abstract and it is hard to assume that it was Sveinn's intention to make his readers believe it. The inconsistencies concerning the Slavs may again, be probably explained by the way Sveinn Aggesen used his sources, both literary and oral. In this very case it was due to the decision to adhere closely to Adam of Bremen's account where the Slavs are mentioned as responsible for capturing the Danish king. On the other hand, one cannot exclude the possibility that contemporary, twelfth-century Danish-Slavonic encounters also heavily influenced Sveinn Aggesen's account.<sup>11</sup> All in all, it looks like the story of the capture and ransom of the king was too intriguing and perhaps too important to be rejected by the author of *Brevis Historia* to be too much worried about the inconsistencies listed above.

As I have already mentioned, the author of *Brevis Historia* probably relied with his account of Sveinn's disturbances on other sources, including Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*:

[...] Quo tempore cum magnam Suein rex persecutionem christianorum exercuisset in Dania, fertur archiepiscopus supplicibus legatis et crebris muneribus laborasse, ut ferocis animum regis christianis mansuetum redderet. Quibus ille reiectis in sua crudelitate ac perfidia saevire cepit. Secuta est ultio divina in regem Deo rebellem. Nam cum bellum susciperet contra Sclavos, bis captus et in Sclavianiam ductus tociens a Danis ingenti pondere auri redemptus est.

At that time, while king Sveinn was preparing a fierce persecution of the Christians in Denmark, the archbishop is said, through suppliant legates and by frequent gifts, to have endeavoured to mollify the king's ferocious spirit in regard to the Christians. But the king rejected these overtures and began to rage in his cruelty and perfidy. Divine vengeance pursued him in his rebellion against God for, when he undertook a war against the Slavs, he was twice captured and led off into Slavia and as many times ransomed by the Danes for an immense amount of gold.<sup>12</sup>

A short look at Adam's account shows that Sveinn Aggesen willingly used the motif of the king's capture by the Slavs, whereas ignored the former's rather negative opinion on the king's attitude towards Christianity. It was definitely the driving force of Adam's narrative on the Danish king. The capture and the ransom are put in the same category of God's punishment as the king's loss of power and subsequent exile.<sup>13</sup> The basic and general methodological problem with Adam's account is that a substantial part of the information he provides

<sup>11</sup> See Morawiec, *Vikings among the Slavs*, 51–89.

<sup>12</sup> *Adami Gesta*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Adami Gesta*, 94–95. See also J. Morawiec, *Knut Wielki. Król Anglii, Danii I Norwegii (ok. 995–1035)*, (Kraków 2013), 38–44.

cannot be verified elsewhere. This situation has been confusing for scholars for a long time, resulting in very radical views on the credibility of Adam's work. This time, however, the situation is different. The account of Sveinn's capture and ransom, that had to be paid to make him free, appears in bishop Thietmar's *Chronicon*:

[...] immundis canibus impositum sibi census quotannis solverent et maximam regni suimet partem, capto ac interempto habitatore, tunc hosti fiducialiter inhabitandam invite reliquerent. Consetiente hoc Domino et ob castigandas quorundam suimet infidelium culpas hostes predictos ad hoc instigante, tantum insevnt persecutor, qui nec suis parcere umquam didicit. Ille, inquam, supra memoratus, non rector sed destructor, post mortem patris sui a Northmannis insurgentibus captus, cum a populo sibi tunc subdito cum ingenti precio solveretur, quia ab occulta pessimorum susurracione se ob hoc servum nominari comperitet, quod salubriter in paucis ulcisci potuit, hoc impaciens communi dampno et, si voluisset scire, sibi maxime nocenti mediator vindicare. Potestatem namque suam hostibus extraneis tunc relinquens securitatem vagatione, pacem bello, regnum exilio, Deum caeli et terraediabolo mutavit et habitata quaeque vastando sic se suorum non empticium neque volentem dominum, sed spontaneum crebro se iactavit late, pro dolor! regnantem.

[...] Then he reluctantly handed over the greatest part of their kingdom to the enemy as a permanent place of residence, its inhabitants having been captured or killed. The Lord agreed to this and compelled the enemy to do it in order to punish the sins of certain non-believers. So much did the persecutor rage that he did not even know to spare his own people. Sven, whom I have mentioned above, not a ruler but destroyer, after the death of his father, was captured by the invading Northmen and redeemed by the people subject to him at great cost. He then learned that, because of this, rumours spread by the worst of people were secretly referring to him as a slave. The revenge which could profitably have been exacted from the few, he rashly inflicted on all. Had he wished to consider this, he might have realized that he inflicted the greatest damage on himself. For, by giving over his power to foreign enemies, he traded security for constant wandering, peace for war, a kingdom for exile, the God of heaven and earth for the Devil. He wasted a populous land and often boasted that he was not a lord who could be bought or influenced by other people, but rather one who, according to his whim, could rule far and wide as an enemy.<sup>14</sup>

Thietmar's account remains the oldest surviving instance of the narrative in question, featuring its two basic ingredients: the capture and the ransom. It is

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<sup>14</sup> *Thietmari Merseburgensis Episcopi Chronicon*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum Nova Series, t. IX, ed. R. Holtzmann (Berlin 1935), 442.

thus not surprising at all that the scholars interested in the turbulences of the early stages of Sveinn tǫguskegg's reign, have had to refer to the bishop's words. These considerations included attempts to answer two questions: whether the tale itself is reliable or rather it was Thietmar who made up the story himself or followed an account(s) of others. According to Svend Ellehoj, the narrative can be found reliable as it explains Sveinn's later activity in England and his will to gain as much English silver as possible just to compensate the costs of the ransom.<sup>15</sup> Also Ian Howard concluded in his study on the king's English campaigns that the story seems plausible, as mentioned by Adam of Bremen, despite the fact of its later legendary accretion.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, Niels Lund, investigating the same problem, voiced his doubts whether there is any element of truth behind the tradition of Sveinn's capture.<sup>17</sup> It is, however, Peter Sawyer, who, in his study on the negative image of the Danish king in German sources (Thietmar, Adam), referred to the problem in the most thorough way so far.<sup>18</sup> According to Sawyer, the accounts of both authors are in total opposition to what can be deduced from other kinds of data, especially archaeology. The latter points at constant development in Denmark whose economic growth that could have happened only as a result of a strong and unshaken royal power.<sup>19</sup> Sawyer is right when he claims that Sveinn's successes were hard to stand for his enemies, especially the ecclesiastic circles in Germany whose claims to control the developments of Christianity in the North were challenged effectively by the king of Denmark. Envy, anger, and helplessness could have furnished the conditions where stories of this kind would be very easily and willingly created and put into further distribution. The special focus on the king's miseries and misfortunes could have served as a reflection of divine justice that eventually could have balanced any piece of painful news about Sveinn's following political and military achievements.

Sawyer seems to favour the idea that the story in question was a fruit of such an atmosphere giving up the effort to discuss its reliability. Consequently, he considers both options, Adam following Thietmar and the independent use of common source by both of them, equally possible.<sup>20</sup>

Generally, Sawyer's argument can be accepted.<sup>21</sup> Still, there is some room for its supplementation, that perhaps lets one place Thietmar's account in an

<sup>15</sup> S. Ellehoj, "Olav Tryggvesons fald og Venderne," (*Dansk Historisk Tidsskrift*, nr 11 b. 4–1 (1953), 39–40.

<sup>16</sup> I. Howard, *Svein's Forkbeard*, 8. The author ignores Thietmar's account in that matter.

<sup>17</sup> Lund, *The armies*, 115, note 43.

<sup>18</sup> P. Sawyer, "Svein Forkbeard and the Historians," in *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages*, ed. I. Wood and G. A. Loud (London 1991), 27–40.

<sup>19</sup> Sawyer, *Svein Forkbeard*, 30–31.

<sup>20</sup> Sawyer, *Svein Forkbeard*, 32–34.

<sup>21</sup> I do not, however, share his enthusiasm and trust towards the account of *Encomium Emmae Reginae* as evidence of Sveinn tǫguskegg's early reign. See Sawyer, *Svein Forkbeard*, 30–31.

even more accurate context. I agree with Sawyer and Lund, that the question of reliability of the capture and ransom story remains today almost pointless. It cannot be either totally rejected or confirmed. Moreover, the way the story is used by Thietmar suggests that even the bishop of Merseburg himself did not care much about the truthfulness of the account, being just willing to use any piece of evidence that would accord with his totally negative and hostile attitude towards Sveinn tjúguskegg. This attitude was determined by both personal experiences of Thietmar, captured by some Northmenn in 994 and the Danish king's ecclesiastical policy that ignored the claims of the German Church. As we can see, Thietmar, as a man and a bishop, could hardly find any reason to like the Danish monarch.

It is the term *susurruses* (rumours) that seems to play a key role in this context. Let me repeat that, according to Thietmar, as a consequence of both the capture and the ransom, those rumours were spread by the worst of people that referred to king Sveinn as a slave (“quia ab occulta pessimorum susurracione se ob hoc servum nominari comperitet”). There are a few instances of using the term “susurrus” by the author of the *Chronicon*. Every case provides rather negative connotations pointing at bad intentions of some people willing, by bad words, to hurt the object of their malice. The case of Sveinn tjúguskegg seems to fit this very category. There is, however, one striking element in Thietmar's account. One can read that once the king heard about those rumours, he decided to inflict rash revenge (“quod salubriter in paucis ulcisci potuit”) on his wrongdoers. Thietmar seems to both understand and criticise his reaction saying that the revenge could profitably have been taken on the few, not all. Had he wished to consider this, he might have realized that he inflicted the greatest damage on himself (“quod salubriter in paucis ulcisci potuit, hoc impaciens communi dampno et, si voluisset scire, sibi maxime nocenti mediator vindicare”). We do not learn from Thietmar directly who those the king took revenge on were and what exact means he employed to do it. The bishop is much more interested in the ultimate effect of the king's dealings that led to giving over his power to foreign enemies.

The motive of a king angered by the words of shame trying to save his honour by quick and stout reaction that led to an unfortunate end has its analogy in a very similar account on Sveinn's father, Haraldr Gormsson, provided by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla* and one of the redactions of *Jómsvíkinga saga* (AM 291 4to). The story begins with Harald's decision to wage war against Norway, ruled at that time by jarl Hákon of Hlaðir. The latter not only rejected Christianity and returned to pagan beliefs, but also raided Danish lands. Haraldr invaded and savaged with fire some parts of Hákon's dominion making locals flee and look for shelter in the mountains and forests. Immediately afterwards Haraldr decided to attack Iceland. He wanted to avenge the insults all Icelanders spread about him, according to their own law, as a reaction to the



stealing of goods from a ship that belonged to Icelanders and was shipwrecked in Denmark. Icelanders accused the royal steward Birgir for this deed thus he was insulted alongside the king.<sup>22</sup>

Both versions of the story feature an anonymous stanza shown as an example of the insults directed towards Haraldr and Birgir. Its content leaves no doubt that a poet's intention was to show the king, formerly a great warrior, as an ultimate, sexually abused, coward.<sup>23</sup>

In Snorri's version of the story, Haraldr decided to send a magician to Iceland, whose task was to investigate how to invade the island. The magician was, however, confronted by great *landvættir*, spiritual guardians of Iceland, who effectively blocked any serious moves of the invader. The only thing he could report to the king was that Iceland was not available to his fleet.<sup>24</sup>

Thanks to the stanza cited in both versions of the story, we can learn that both Haraldr and Birgir<sup>25</sup> were insulted through the concept of *nið*, pointing at their ultimately dishonourable behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The poet suggests that the king deserved to be called a *nidding* as he proved to be a coward. Besides, quite a sophisticated interplay of mare-stallion imagery, used by the skald in the stanza, points at the tendency of Haraldr to play a passive role in homosexual relations (*ergi*), something equally as bad as cowardice.<sup>27</sup>

The stanza leaves no doubt that Haraldr was fully justified to seek revenge although the story focuses on the ineffectiveness of these efforts that proved weak the condition of the king's power as a man and a ruler.

This aspect allows, in my opinion, to link the stories of both Danish monarchs. Sveinn is insulted as a slave, an accusation that perfectly fits the *nið* format. He, and his father are put in a controversial situation that challenges their honour and demands a quick and stout reaction. Finally, both kings fail to get a positive result, turning into perfect candidates for examples of the failed royal power.

It is tempting to see in Thietmar's *susurruses* another instance of poetic lampoons, known as *niðvísur*. Analogies with the *nið* concept are too numerous to be rejected: the bad opinion on those who spread rumours in question, their content questioning the male honour, and the object of the rumours reacting

<sup>22</sup> *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 26, 4th edition (Reykjavík 2002), 270 (further cited as ÍF 26); *Jómsvikinga saga eftar Arnarnagnaeska handskriften N:o 291*, 35–36.

<sup>23</sup> *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas I. From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. D. Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1* (Turnhout 2012), 1073.

<sup>24</sup> ÍF 26, 271.

<sup>25</sup> One cannot exclude a possibility though, that the name Birgir, mentioned in the second couplet of the stanza, referred in fact, contrary to the prose commentary, to Harald.

<sup>26</sup> B. Almqvist, *Norrön niddiktning. I. Nid mot furstar* (Uppsala 1965); F. Ström, *Nid, ergi and Old Norse moral attitudes* (London 1973).

<sup>27</sup> See A. Finlay, "Monstrous Allegations. An Exchange of *yki* in Bjarnar saga Híttoelakappa," *abvissmál* 10 (2001), 21–44.

very rapidly and trying to take a large-scale revenge. The potential thematic link between both stories does not make either of them more reliable. This is not the point. On the other hand, the situation when both Danish kings, ruling one after another, “deserved” such an antipraise, simply cannot be ignored. Consequently, the point is not about deciding authoritatively whether a situation such as a capture and a ransom happened to Sveinn (and potentially to Haraldr as well) or not. It is, rather, about considering the circumstances such stories could have originated and developed in, especially in reference to Thietmar’s account, the contemporary of both kings.

One cannot reject the possibility of Thietmar making up the story of Sveinn’s capture, ransom, and unsuccessful revenge by himself. However, the existence of a very similar motif, with Haraldr Gormsson as its protagonist, suggests a rather independent circulation of this kind of stories, strictly connected with these two monarchs. It is possible to define the factors likely responsible for this phenomenon. The most obvious one is the very turbulent political situation in Denmark in the times of rapid downfalls of both Haraldr Gormsson (ca. 987) and Sveinn tjuguskegg (ca. 991–994). It resulted in both the weakening of the royal prestige, and in creating a chance for local elites, whose status had previously suffered much during the reign of Haraldr aiming to unify the Danish land under his rule. The example of the local power centre in Lejre seems to be a good example of the latter. On the other hand, the status of Odinkar the Elder, the bishop of Ribe, points at a continuing existence and some prominence of the circles that, opposed to the Jelling dynasty, could have taken advantage because of royal misfortunes.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, those circles could have been in fact responsible for the creation and circulation of the stories that presented both kings in a very negative light. Odinkar the Elder is said to have cooperated closely with the archdiocese in Hamburg-Bremen. The archbishops in particular, and German Church in general, were doing their best to withstand Harald’s and Sveinn’s resistance to accept the ecclesiastical hegemony of the See in Denmark. It could explain how Thietmar could have got access to the material of this kind which must have been very attractive to him bearing in mind the purposes of his writing.

If one is to doubt the reliability of the stories of capture and ransom, the question about the reasons to make and distribute such rumours remains. Again, an answer seems to be found in the political turbulences that marked the reigns of both monarchs. The saga accounts make us believe that *niðvísur* were a controversial if attractive weapons that triggered various conflicts on different social levels. In the cases of insulted rulers, poetic lampoons were a serious threat towards their relations not only with the poet but also, if not first of all, with their subjects. The questioned honour had to be defended in the way clearly

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<sup>28</sup> See Morawiec, *Knut Wielki*, 313.

visible not only for an insulter but also for the whole community. Interestingly, in the cases of both Haraldr and Sveinn, such a reaction is employed. Thietmar does not seem to understand it and his own opinion is perhaps a result of the lack of acquaintance with the concept of *nið*.

To conclude, it seems very probable that stories of this kind, in a form of *niðvísur*, distributed as insulting rumours, were used during the rebellion against Haraldr Gormsson and the Swedish attack on Denmark in 991/994 as an additional but spectacular tool of propaganda. Rapid and perhaps unexpected downfalls of both monarchs only stimulated the rise and distribution of such stories, especially as their situation meant a complete lack of means to react properly. The latter element is even more striking when confronted with the motive of a seemingly proper reaction that only led to a bitter end. The ambiguity of the written sources contributes to our rather limited knowledge of the circumstances and the course of both events. Perhaps the stories in question could be treated as an intriguing and exclusive insight into the political encounters in the late-tenth century Denmark. Paradoxically, the authors of those rumours could not have even dreamed of such long and spectacular careers of their accounts as the later narratives, especially the *Jómsvíkinga saga*, indicate.