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Beyond Time & Culture: The Revitalisation of Old Norse Literature and History in Yukimura Makoto's *Vinland Saga*

Maxime DANESIN

Abstract

Due to unprecedented opportunities of global and cultural exchanges in the past decades, fragments of our past go beyond borders, nationalities and cultural differences. Contemporary popular culture is an important vector to convey them, even on the other side of the Earth, where European's past can become the future inspiration for foreign writers and artists. And Japan is no exception. It has started to be filled with European images from the past, whether it is in the medieval-fantasy backgrounds of video games or in highly praised literary works. Japanese popular literature participates in this movement, assimilating and reorganizing European cultural elements, before sending back to us those same fragments, deformed and/or revitalised.

*Amidst the various motifs extracted from our History and used by Japanese authors, one has caught our attention: the Vikings and their expedition to Vinland, in Yukimura Makoto's manga *Vinland Saga*. Far from presenting stereotyped images of simple-minded and brutal Norse warriors, this historical work offers a new and foreign approach of Thorfinn Karselfni's story and the two Sagas of the Icelanders mentioning him, the *Grœnlendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*. In this article, I study how Yukimura Makoto reconstructs the Icelandic's Sagas and develops its historical context, in order to create his own rewriting of this famous Norse cultural element. By doing so, I argue that he provides the Japanese readers – and by ricochet European ones – with a transcultural and revitalised Old Norse Literature and History in the 21st century.*

Keywords: *Vinland Saga*, Yukimura Makoto, Manga, Contemporary Japanese Literature, *Vinland Sagas*, Old Norse Literature, Vikings, European Middle Ages, Neo-Medievalism, Transculture, Intertextuality.

Introduction

The past decades have seen a massive and worldwide increase in cultural productions featuring medieval elements. Children's literature, novels, comics, even movies are now more than ever feeding our imagination with occasionally historically accurate but often in fact

mythical representations. What might be misinterpreted as seemingly trivial hides a deeper meaning: we have never severed our ties with the Middle Ages. Through the numerous forms it takes in our contemporary imagination, the medieval world remains vividly present, appearing as both a *commonplace* and *common pleasure* (Boulaire 2002, 294),¹ and a means to understand ourselves (Zumthor 1980, 17). In this sense, it is unsurprising that Japanese scholar Iguchi Atsushi has noted that “Europeans are vying to appropriate the Middle Ages for the sake of justifying themselves [...] to the extent that the ‘real’ Middle Ages are no longer recognizable” (Iguchi 2010, 64), such as the political use of Joan of Arc’s image in France (Amalvi 1996).

Crossing cultural boundaries, European medieval elements have established a strong presence in contemporary Japanese fiction, compelling Iguchi to mention the significant place they occupy on local bookshelves (Iguchi 2010, 65). Contemporary Japanese works dip heavily into this trend, whether in the form of manga (*Berserk*, *Akagami no Shirayukihime*, *Shingeki no Kyōjin*), light novels (*Slayer*, *Record of Lodoss War*, *Spice & Wolf*),² or even highly praised literary masterpieces (Hirano Keiichirō’s novella *Nisshoku*). Needless to say, the increase of creations set against a medieval background does not spare us from mythical representations and stereotypes, especially since most of them are fantasy-based. Nonetheless, the diffusion of European medieval elements into late 20th- and early 21st-century Japanese fiction invites us to investigate this trend, as this might enable us to reorganise the pieces

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are my own.

² A variety of entertainment novel in Japan, mainly targeting junior and high school students (Enomoto 2008, 9).

of our cultural memory into an original, intriguing and revitalised form, even perhaps challenging our perception of our past and culture through a new, transcultural, multicultural and globalised prism.

Among these transcultural works, the historical manga *Vinland Saga*, by Yukimura Makoto, winner of the 2009 Grand Prize in the Manga division at the 13th Japan Media Arts Festival, has caught my attention for its singularity, as it is the only manga entirely based on both Norse culture and Icelandic Sagas. The scarcity of historical literary works in Japan pertaining to Scandinavia, in contrast to the widespread references to its mythological elements, emphasizes the uniqueness of this series. The manga database website *Manga Updates*³ has only 6 references for the keyword “Vikings” – compared to the 203 results for “European Ambient”, 79 for “France” or 25 “Norse Mythology”. Among them, only *Vinland Saga* can be considered “historical” – putting aside its parodic spin-off *Ganso Ylva-chan*. The others use either a mythological background (e. g. Ashibe Yuho’s *Crystal Dragon*) or the word “Viking” as a synonym for pirate (Nakanuki Eri’s *King of Viking*). Despite the popularity of the Northman archetype in our literature since the 19th century (Wawn 2000, Boyer 2011 & 2014, Olsson 2011), its presence in contemporary Japanese culture is seldom found. Up until Yukimura Makoto’s work, for years the most famous Viking representation in Japan had been the 70’s Japanese animation *Vicky the Viking*, adapted from the Swedish writer Runer Jonsson’s novel of the same name (1963). Aimed at a young audience and absent of any

³ Since its foundation in 2002, this website has been a valuable and essential database for the manga readers’ community. Although it might not be perfect, it is a handy reference for researchers. The url: <http://www.mangaupdates.com> [Last Accessed: 12/06/2015].

violence, it mocked stereotypes such as ancestor worship created by Romanticism and Nazi ideologies (Olsson 2011, 118-119).



Figure [1]. A cameo appearance of Vicky the Viking and his friend Ylvie in Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 2, Kōdansha, 2006, p. 59. © Kōdansha.

Vinland Saga is centered on the fictional life of Thorfinn Karlsefni,⁴ a famous Icelander who carried on Leif Erikson's exploration of Vinland in Norse literature. In the first eight volumes, we follow this Viking mercenary's quest of revenge for his father's assassination during the conquest of England by the Danes, at the start of the 11th century. After a twist of events leading Thorfinn to fall into slavery, the second part is based on his path to redemption and his resolve to go to Vinland. The manga, which is still ongoing, is now in its third arc, starting with the fifteenth volume which is dedicated to the preparation for the expedition. I will focus on the two first arcs in this article.

Since the start of its serialization in 2005,⁵ *Vinland Saga* has become one, if not the main, herald of the Vikings and Sagas in Japanese cultural

⁴ In order not to confuse the readers, I will keep the manga and contemporary English versions of the main medieval names: Thorfinn (Þorfinnr), Leif Erikson (Leifr Eiríksson), Cnut the Great (Knútr), Thorkell (Þorkell) and even Æthelred (Aðalráðr), Swein Forkbeard (Sveinn Tjúguskegg), Gudrid Thorbjarnardóttir (Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir).

⁵ To be more precise, although the series was first published in the *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* (April 2005), it changed in December of the same year for editorial purposes: it was transferred to the monthly comic magazine *Afternoon*. The pace of productions seemed too quick for Yukimura Makoto.

productions. Its success, and current reception in Europe, is one component of a new dynamic of the representation of Norse culture in contemporary literary works. Therefore, I attempt in this article to determine to what extent this manga rewrites the original Icelandic Sagas and revitalises them – in the sense that it instils a new meaning, life or interpretation. Firstly, I expose the intertextuality mechanism, before examining how history and fiction are intertwined in the manga. Finally, I turn my attention to the representation of Norse culture in the series.

Revitalising the Sagas

Often understood as a synonym for a “tale”, the word “Saga” has been used as an exotic term in contemporary Japanese productions, whether in manga⁶ (Rikudō Kōshi’s *Excel Saga*) or light novels (Kurimoto Kaoru’s *Guin Saga*). However, it is important to avoid assuming this implies *Vinland Saga* might be the vessel of a literary exoticism, destined solely to bring readers a feeling of elation through this adventure in a foreign land and time. Through an unprecedented medium – a manga – and a foreign pen, it rewrites one of the most famous works in medieval Norse Literature: the *Vínland Sagas*,⁷ supposedly written in the 13th Century and consisting of two main texts: *Eiríks Saga Rauða* and *Grænlandinga Saga* – hereafter abbreviated respectively as *ESR* and *GS*. Describing the discovery of Greenland and North America, these texts are classified among the *Íslendingasögur* (*The Sagas of Icelanders*), a type of historical

⁶ The Manga Updates database gives more than a hundred titles that contain the word “Saga”.

⁷ The English titles are respectively: *Saga of Erik the Red* and *Saga of the Greenlanders*. A third saga, *Grænlandinga Þáttr* (*Greenlanders Tale*), does not concern us in this study since the manga bears no reference to it.

saga which portrays the lives of famous Icelanders – mainly between 930 and 1050 AD (Boyer 1978, 12). The *Vínland Sagas* have been widely discussed by historians and literary scholars, who have focused on issues such as their historicity and literary motifs (Frakes 2001), their mutual contradictions (Boyer 1987, 1607-1618; Boyer 2014, 309-341; Pálsson & Magnusson 1987, 7-43), and even on the *Grœnlendinga Saga*'s primacy (Boyer 1978, 148).

As the main peritextual feature, the title of Yukimura Makoto's work indicates a more than obvious influence. By putting the singular form of the word "Saga", the Japanese author chose to offer his own original rewriting of the Vinland discovery rather than following strictly either the *ESR* or the *GS*. As the historian Martin Arnold states, both medieval sagas "give quite dramatically different versions of events" (Arnold 2013, 202), thus rendering it impossible for any works based on them to follow both strictly. One could either choose to follow only one of the Icelandic sources, or draw from both of them what one wants based on one's own creative license, therefore devising an alternative and singular saga. Furthermore, the title suggests genre adaptation and intertextuality. Regarding the latter, I refer here to Marc Eigeldinger's conception of this mechanism as the presence of one or several texts in another, "establish[ing] an exchange, a dialogue between [them]". The key function of this mechanism is that the objective "is not the raw reproduction of the borrowed material, but its transformation and transposition [...] in order to introduce, to produce a new signification" (Eigeldinger 1987, 16). In this regard, the work of Yukimura Makoto follows these principles.

As a matter of fact, up until the fifteenth volume Thorfinn Karlsefni

has yet to start his expedition to Vinland in 1018. Nonetheless, this faraway land has already been mentioned multiples times. The main representation of its landscape is given by Leif Erikson's narration in the first volume (Vol. 1, 127-138). His description of the newfound shores and settlement is based on the *GS* version (Boyer 1987, *GS*, 361-363); both the speech and the drawings convey Vinland's original identification as a paradise on earth – a utopian conception which becomes the cornerstone of the manga. This view of an idealized landscape contains more than what meets the eyes, and it goes beyond the Icelandic sources. The *Vínland Sagas* are the heirs of “the larger genre of Eurocentric representation of the Outland or Other World”, and they convey the “utopic or promised land motif”, a literary pattern that goes back to Greco-Roman tradition and the Biblical tale of Eden (Frakes 2001, 168-170). According to the literature historian Jerold C. Frakes:

The ideal landscape is generally represented as little short of miraculous in its beauty, fertility and climatic benevolence, while its inhabitants are most often conceived as “primitives” incapable of truly enjoying the natural wonders of the landscape or even of appreciating its bounties. These ideas contribute to the common (especially in the late medieval period) European conception that some paradisaical land was to be found to the west across the ocean. (Frakes 2001, 170)

Referring directly to the original sagas, Frakes continues:

The *Vínland Sagas* also represent the typical signs of the quasi-paradisaical lands of the West: an idealized landscape where winters were so mild that livestock could overwinter outdoors, where pasturage was lush year-round, where the dew on the grass was the sweetest thing they had ever tasted, where timber abounded, where grapes not only grew wild but were immediately intoxicating direct from the vine, where wheat grew wild, and salmon all but clogged the rivers. (Frakes 2001, 172)

Although it is considered less descriptive and mythical in its representations, the manga does convey some of these features and the general atmosphere of an earthly paradise, enhanced by the contrasting discourse on the hardships of living in the cold of Greenland and Iceland (Vol. 1, 143-145). Vinland appears as a symbol of hope and a colonial project that could ensure higher-quality everyday life.

However, the Japanese rewriting is not completely loyal to the original sagas. For example, when Leif mentions his peaceful encounter with the Skraelings – the natives – (Vol. 1, 137-138), the event differs entirely from the medieval texts. In the *GS*, it is not Leif but his brother Thorvaldr who made this encounter, and it was not in the least peaceful, as it resulted in hostilities and his own death (Boyer 1987, *GS*, 365). Whereas in the *ESR*, the first mention of the natives happens later during Karlsefni's expedition, and it was certainly a peaceful encounter (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 349-350). However, after a second meeting which ended in a scene of trade, or to be more precise, a “systematic defrauding of the ‘natives’ [...] all too familiar to us from later explorer narratives” (Frakes 2001, 181), the third meeting resulted in killings (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 350). It seems that since there is no trace of hostilities (yet) in the manga, Leif's narration is based on the *ESR*'s first encounter. This can be corroborated by the manga's character making a clear reference to the Skraelings' fascination for the Norsemen (Vol. 1, 137; Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 349-350). Nonetheless, the peacefulness of this meeting is exaggerated in the Japanese rewriting; Leif mentions that they became “immediately *friends* despite not having the same language” (Vol. 1, 137). Furthermore, despite an implied technology gap between the Vikings and the natives (they had “stone spears”), the manga's narration does not represent the

Native Americans as inferior, only stating that they were small and beardless with black hair and eyes (Vol. 1, 137). This neutral statement goes against the way the Skraelings are originally described in the medieval sagas, that is to say in accordance with the Eurocentric discourse tradition and its “paradigmatic mode of representing ‘native inhabitants’ [...]”:

A cardinal principle of Eurocentric discourse is that European culture is assumed superior to non-European cultures in most respects: economics and material culture, the physiology of the population, intellectual life, religion and morality. (Frakes 2001, 180)

Jerold C. Frakes reminds us that the “physical nature of the non-Europeans is represented as inferior: they are of smaller size, strength, and beauty [...]”, stating clearly that the *Vínland Sagas* “confirm the pattern” of the way the natives are portrayed (Frakes 2001, 183): Native Americans “were dark (small), ugly, and had ugly hair on their heads” (Frakes 2001, 183; Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 349-350). Hence, the medieval description is clearly Eurocentric. In other words, by removing the Eurocentric discourse, the rewriting of this encounter creates an even ground between the natives and the Vikings. This modification contributes to the rendering of Vinland as a dreamscape free from wars and suffering, far more utopian than the original. This amplification of its idealization creates an even bigger gap between the cold, harsh and brutal reality of the characters’ everyday lives, whether in Iceland, Greenland or on the battlefields of England. This mythical image becomes a leitmotiv throughout the manga (Vol. 1, 126-127, 181; Vol. 12, 115-119; Vol. 13, 170-171, 184-190; Vol. 14, 138-139), and plays a central role in the narrative.

Moreover, by setting Leif's narration in 1002, Yukimura establishes another gap: a small chronological disparity from the sagas. This has crucial consequences for the manga narration, as it delays Thorfinn's original expedition⁸ and entwines his fate with the Danish King Cnut, as this article will show. Despite being anachronistic, this choice firmly anchors the sagas in the historical reality.

Yukimura chose to make Thorfinn the main character of his manga, in the same way the *ESR* does. While the *GS* depicts Thorfinn as a central figure in only its seventh and ninth chapters, the *ESR* portrays him as such in six of its fourteen chapters, thus justifying its second name, *Porfinns Saga Karlsefna* (*The Saga of Thorfinn Karlsefni*) (Boyer 1978, 147). However, despite this focus on his character, there is but scarce information about Thorfinn's life before his expedition in both original sagas. Karlsefni is described as a rich merchant, a ship captain and a great trader (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 344-345; *GS*, 368). Neither his birth date nor death is known, and the two sagas even contradict each other regarding his lineage. He is described as the son of Thórdr Horsehead and Thórunn in one (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 344), whereas the other does not mention his mother (Boyer 1987, *GS*, 368 & 1623).⁹ Yukimura uses the information gap left in the *GS* to create Thorfinn's mother, Helga, and designates as his maternal grandfather the Jarl Sigvald Strut-Haraldsson (Vol. 6, 108), chieftain of the Jomsvikings and famous character of the

⁸ It is supposed to have taken place around 1010 AD (Byock 2007, 400). This delay also creates a small gap in the carbon dating of the famous Viking archeological site in North America, L'Anse aux Meadows, where there is "a probability of 68% that the [Viking] occupation occurred between AD 1000 – 1018 and 95% from AD 986 – 1022" (Nydal 1989, 983-984).

⁹ Boyer mentions in his translation notes (Boyer 1987, 1623) that Karlsefni's hometown could be Reynines, in the Skagafjörður, whereas Yukimura chooses an unnamed village in the south of Iceland (Vol. 1, ending map).

Jómsvíkinga Saga (*The Saga of the Jomsvikings*). Owing to the brevity of the *Vínland Sagas* (Boyer 2014, 332) and its scarcity of personal details, this expansion upon the original materials is necessary for the manga's consistency. Similar to the transposition of myths onto novels, this adaptation applies the literary mechanism theorized by Gérard Genette called "amplification", defined as the addition of events, places or even characters (Fouquier 2008, 34-35). Yukimura has plenty of room to imagine Thorfinn's physical appearance, his life prior to his expedition, and his reason for embracing his destiny. In the original medieval texts, Thorfinn's ulterior motive for going to Vinland do not seem to differ from his contemporaries: to earn fame and wealth (Boyer 2002, 139), and more particularly in this case discovering wealthy lands that can be colonised (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 346; *GS*, 369). In other words, his adventure is but the continuation of "the historical Norse movement across the Atlantic", what Jerold C. Frakes terms the "trans-Atlantic colonial project" (Frakes 2001, 195). This being said, if the Japanese writer does use the wealth of Vinland as a motivating factor for the expedition, he freely invents a more profound and personal purpose for his protagonist, that is to say that of establishing in Vinland a utopian country without slaves or wars, where Thorfinn will be able to atone for his past sins as a mercenary. By doing so, Yukimura revitalises the whole meaning behind Thorfinn's exploration of Vinland.

Although the *Vínland Sagas* have been and remain the core of the manga, they are not the only ones that enter into an intertextual relationship with Yukimura's work. Indeed, he combines his reconstruction of the Vinland discovery with elements from three

others Icelandic sagas: the *Jómsvíkinga Saga* (*The Saga of the Jomsvikings*), the *Saga of St. Olaf* and the *Knýtlinga Saga* – hereafter abbreviated respectively as *JS*, *SO* and *KS*. Quite singular among the others, the *JS* is dedicated to a legendary company of Vikings mercenaries from Jómsborg. They went down in history as the paragon of Norse warriors after the loss of the famous naval Battle of Hjörungavágr (Boyer 2011, 592; Boyer 1978, 90; Boyer 2012, *JS*, 339-343). The Jomsvikings hold an important place in the manga as a recurring mercenary force fighting alongside the Danish Kings, and as the group from which Thorfinn’s lineage originates.

In addition to his father-in-law being his chieftain, Thorfinn’s father was one of the four Jomsvikings captains in the manga (Vol. 6, 107). He fled from the Battle of Hjörungavagr – a deed that becomes the catalyst for his son’s fate (Vol. 2, 5; Vol. 6, 106-139). Although Thors is not mentioned in the *JS*, Búi the Stout – one of the original Jomsvikings captain – shares common ground with him. His nickname suggests a strong build, and he jumped into the water during the battle and was never heard of again (Boyer 2012, *JS*, 335). Furthermore, Yukimura amplifies the familial connection with another famous Jomsvikings captain, Thorkell the Tall, who is appointed as Thorfinn’s great uncle in the manga. Thorkell appears in both the *JS* and the *SO* (Boyer 2012, *JS*, 298-336; Sturluson 1983, 30-31 & 275), and he is a well-known historical figure (Boyer 1995, 235-236; Arnold 2007, 118-122; Haywood 1996, 120). Throughout the first narrative arc, Yukimura slightly twists history and the *SO*, by having him play a crucial role in the development of the storyline. Famous for changing sides, Thorkell battled the English camp before defending London against Swein’s army

in 1013 then joining Cnut in his conquest, as seen in both the original texts and the manga (Vol. 3, Ch. 18-19; Vol. 6, 214). Yukimura takes advantage of his behaviour to portray him as the archetype of the Norse warrior who takes pleasure in battles and seeks a glorious death to enter Walhalla (Vol. 3, 180).

Last but not least, the Danish King Cnut's life is depicted in both the *SO* and the *KS*. The sagas provide information on his conquest of England and his life as ruler of the North Sea Empire. However, he has nothing to do with Thorfinn in the original medieval texts. Furthermore, as Cnut's life before his father's death is hardly mentioned in the original sagas, Yukimura relies on the mechanism of amplification and his imagination to depict his ascension to the Denmark throne, allowing the readers to follow his development as a man and a king through both the narrative and drawings (Figures 2, 3 & 4). This has a double impact, since it gives a new representation to the life of one of the most famous historical figures of Denmark for both Japanese and foreign readers, in the same way the *Asterix* series has provided young French children with a vivid contemporary image of Julius Caesar.



Figure [2]. First appearance of Cnut, as a womanly and shy man, Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 4, Kōdansha, 2007, p. 38. © Kōdansha.



Figure [3]. Cnut's dark aura, as he is tormented by the power of the crown, Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 14, Kōdansha, 2014, p. 107. © Kōdansha.



Figure [4]. Last drawing of Cnut, freed from his father's shadow and appearing as Cnut the Great, Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 14, Kōdansha, 2014, p. 161. © Kōdansha.

Additionally, an unexpected intertextual inclusion should be mentioned. In the fourteenth volume of the manga, the readers witness Cnut showing the limit of his power against the ocean waves – he tries to use his royal authority, ordering them to stop moving (Vol. 14, 106-115). This event was reported by the English historian Henry of Huntingdon in his medieval chronicle (Henry of Huntingdon 1853, 199). As it was written almost one hundred years after Cnut's death, this episode is very likely to be more symbolic than historical. Nonetheless, it became an iconic representation of both humility/arrogance and God's power over kings. It even acquired a proverbial status in the English language. What is interesting here is that the intertextuality

mechanism is clearly obvious in the manga. Henry of Huntingdon starts by indicating that Cnut was at “the summit of his power”; in the manga, the Dane declares that “[he is] the sovereign [and] the strongest Viking of the North Sea” (Vol. 14, 107). Then, the Cnut in the former report invokes his power over the land and that “no one has ever resisted [his] commands with impunity”; the latter his military power and his control of the whole region (Vol. 14, 108). However, if their failures are the same, the results greatly differ. In Henry of Huntingdon’s report, Cnut realizes his inferiority and accepts that God is above all, whereas Yukimura revitalises this scene by giving it an antagonistic and tragic signification: a declaration of insurrection against God. This event is a final challenge to Cnut’s image as a Christian king and crystallizes the peak of his philosophical and religious struggle throughout the manga.

Hence, as Yukimura puts into motion his own rendition of *Vinland Saga*, he revitalises not only the original materials of the Vinland discovery, but also a whole part of the Norse literature in the process. By doing so, he also pays homage to one of the main features of the Icelandic sagas, that is to say, by creating an intertextual play between them (Boyer 1978, 13). Lastly, I would like to add that it goes even beyond the Nordic culture and literature, since the first narrative arc clearly refers, through Askeladd’s character, to the Arthurian legend – which would require a separate study.

Fiction & History Entwined in *Vinland Saga*

Rewriting the *Vinland Sagas* as a contemporary manga implies genre adaptation. As such, it is necessary here to review some essential elements of the Norse literature. A saga is defined as “a story in prose –

an essential element –, more or less historical, either based on an oral tradition or not, [...] and written in a distinctive style [...] (Boyer 1978, 9).¹⁰ The French historian Régis Boyer states that it combines various genres – with epic, heroic, dramatic or even satirical sections (Boyer 1978, 194) – and follows Aristotle’s definition of tragedy (Boyer 1978, 159-168). Nonetheless, it never appears to be lyrical (Boyer 1978, 155 & 159). The sagas are “[...] severe and serious, often dark and cruel, extremely tense [...]” (Boyer 1996, 54), and were written for the reader’s “entertainment” and “pleasure” (Boyer 2012, 11). They convey as their cornerstone what the French historian named “the dialectic of destiny-honour-revenge”, here understood as the fundamental notions of the *Weltanschauung* (worldview) of the Norse. (Boyer 1978, 194; Boyer 2002, 174-175; Boyer 2011, 428-431, 538-541). For an individual, such a dialectic consists of learning his destiny, and accepting and assuming it with honour and dignity; if anyone ever impairs it, the Viking would have then the imprescriptible right to take revenge (Boyer 2011, 428-431). Furthermore, despite “fostering our knowledge of historical facts [...]”, the sagas are not historically faithful documents (Boyer 2012, 11). Boyer states that the sagas must be interpreted as a type of historical novel:

“Taking [the saga], as it is, for an objective historical chronicle would mean committing a serious misinterpretation; conversely, solely seeing this work as a literary fiction would mutilate its value. It is really at the midway between these two attitudes that we must be.” (Boyer 1978, 146)

Obviously, the manga cannot strictly follow the literary

¹⁰ I base my understanding of the Sagas mainly on Régis Boyer’s works (1978, 1996, 2012, 2014).

characteristics of the medieval genre. Nonetheless, it respects most of them, whether through the use of a strong historical basis, through the intertextuality mechanism, or with the way tragedy permeates the whole story. For instance, while Thorfinn's desire to kill Askeladd in a fair duel is naïve and contradictory to the saga style (Boyer 1978, 183), the latter emphatically stresses this mistake as he narrates his own past and personal revenge (Vol. 7, 119-147). In this way, Askeladd's cleverness and guile echo the ideal qualities of the Icelandic sagas' characters. Needless to say, the dialectic of destiny-honour-revenge is at the core of Yukimura's narration, from Thorfinn's purpose in life throughout the first eight volumes to Askeladd's youth (Vol. 7, Ch. 46).

This dialectic is one of the most romanticized elements of the depiction of Vikings in popular culture. However, Yukimura is not using this manga to glorify the values of the Norse; rather, he confronts them and he has even mentioned how much he hates the Norse conception of "honour above all" (Vol. 7, author's ending notes). His contemporary view is related to the essential question of "what is a true warrior?", which is continuously repeated in *Vinland Saga*, embodied by Thors (Vol. 2) and passed onto his son during the second arc of the manga. Finding the answer to this question emerges as Thorfinn's true destiny and leitmotiv for his expedition (Vol. 8, 120-122; Vol. 10, 203-205). The Icelander realizes it through his meeting with Askeladd, in his nightmare about Walhalla – dreams as a source of divination being a characteristic of the Norse dialectic (Vol. 10, Ch. 70-71; Boyer 1978, 177). However, this essential question of "what is a true warrior?" is neither Norse nor Christian; it appears in other Japanese manga – even

as a central theme in Oh! Great's *Tenjō Tenge*.¹¹ It appears as the main foreign, anachronistic, and unexpected element of Yukimura's work, and therefore, it interferes with the Norse's *Weltanschauung* by enforcing a contemporary view that questions and challenges the third part of its dialectic, that is, revenge (Boyer 2011, 430). On one hand, as he learns, accepts and assumes his destiny of going to Vinland, Thorfinn does indeed follow the worldview of his culture; on the other hand, through his wish to atone for his sins and to avoid killing and seeking revenge, thus becoming a "true warrior", he firmly rejects his imprescriptible right as a viking. This modifies the original meaning behind Karlsefni's exploration of Vinland, which was most likely to earn fame and wealth, in the usual Viking way. In the manga, Thorfinn's ulterior motive has less to do with gaining such things than it does with striving to atone for his sins. *In fine*, it is by rejecting a fundamental element of his Viking nature that he strengthens his resolve to leave for Vinland. Thus, his expedition appears more as a voluntary and necessary exile rather than one intended to establish a Viking colony as in the original sagas (Boyer 1987, *ESR*, 346; *GS*, 369). However, since the mastermind behind his father's assassination is still alive as of the fifteenth volume, we have yet to witness whether Thorfinn's new resolve to not seek revenge will last.

Despite these disparities between the manga and the original sagas, there can be no saga adaptation without a proper historical setting – a cornerstone of the Icelandic sagas. Through the fictionalised life of

¹¹ Published by Shūeisha from 1997 to 2010, the 22-volume series is based on the art of combat conception, and also highlights the fundamental question of what it means to be a true warrior.

Thorfinn Karlsefni, the readers witness not only the events leading to his Vinland expedition, but also the rise of the Danish King Cnut. Thorfinn's story develops simultaneously along with the historic birth of the North Sea Empire (Figure 5).

Volumes	Thorfinn Karlsefni	Cnut the Great
1 - 8 (Ch. 54)	Viking mercenary <i>From revenge to nothingness</i>	Prince of Denmark <i>The Rise of the King</i>
8 - 13	Slave <i>The path of Redemption</i>	King of England & Denmark <i>The path of Kingship</i>
14¹² (Transition)	From <i>Leysingi (freed slave)</i> ¹³ to Explorer <i>The Two Paradises</i> , ¹⁴ <i>Toward Vinland</i>	From Sweinsson to Cnut the Great <i>The Two Paradises, Toward the North Sea Empire</i>

Figure [5]. The parallel evolution of Thorfinn and Cnut's situations.

Readers are taken through crucial historical events – often indicated by the captions –, which help advance the narrative. The plot starts with the mention of the St. Brice's Day massacre on 13 November 1002 (Vol. 1, Ch. 5), which saw the English King Æthelred carry out the slaughter of the Danes living in England. This gave the Danish King Swein Forkbeard the opportunity to claim revenge and attack England (Vol. 1, Ch. 5; Boyer 1995, 233). In the manga, this event becomes the triggering factor of Thorfinn's fate – and saga –, as it leads to his father's death (Vol.

¹² Published in October 2014, the fifteenth volume opens a third arc, as Thorfinn puts his expeditionary plan into motion.

¹³ Thorfinn is not yet a *bóndi* (farmer) since he has no possessions. He also never claimed the *Jarl* title (earl) that he could have inherited from his father.

¹⁴ Title of the ninety-eight chapter.

2) and transforms him into a Viking mercenary.

Another historical turning point is the London siege by Swein Forkbeard's army (Hagland & Watson 2005, 329) at the end of the year 1013, and its outcome (Vol. 3). Facing the strong defense of Thorkell the Tall's mercenaries, the Danish army was forced to withdraw (Arnold 2007, 119; Haywood 1996, 120). Yukimura Makoto's narration uses this event to alter history slightly. According to the historian Martin Arnold, the London siege was led by Cnut himself, and, in the manga, it results in the Danish Prince becoming Thorkell's prisoner. This leads to the first encounter between Thorfinn and the future Danish King (Vol. 4), which will be the trigger for the rise of Cnut (Vol. 6, 7 & 8) and the fall of the Icelander into slavery (Vol. 8). Moreover, Yukimura exploits the lack of historical documentation to create a dramatic end for Swein Forkbeard (Vol. 8, 96-97). Whereas the *SO* asserts that he dies in his bed in February 1014 (Sturluson 1983, 31), in the manga the Danish King is murdered by Askeladd – thus allowing Cnut to seize the throne. The altered aftermath of the London siege culminates ten volumes later, in Thorfinn and Cnut's fated confrontation in 1018, during which they establish their new resolutions (Vol. 14). Cnut's personality and policies are strongly influenced by his fictional meeting with Thorfinn and Askeladd. This way, Yukimura's imagination fills in the blanks left by the *SO* and *KS* through intertextual play with the *Vinland Sagas*. On the other hand, by entwining Thorfinn's life prior to his expedition with the historical legacy of Cnut, the Japanese author gives a proper European geopolitical setting to the Vinland discovery that is nowhere to be found in the original sagas.

Blending fictional elements with history necessitates several choices

that affect our present perception of the Nordic past, such as the choice to clearly indicate that, in order to achieve his ambitions, Cnut ordered the poisoning of his own brother, Harold II (Vol. 11, Ch. 72), and his enemies, the English Kings Æthelred the Unready and Edmund Ironside (Vol. 9, Ch. 62) – although there is no historical evidence of these acts. This choice reinforces Cnut’s unwavering determination to ensure the establishment of his “Arcadian dream” for the Vikings (Vol. 11, 24), even if it means walking down the same accursed path as his loathed father (Vol. 11, 33). Additionally, Cnut’s peculiar struggle against the “will of the crown” (Vol. 11-14) appears in the manga as a tragic flaw that creates a singular representation of this character, beyond historical sources. First mentioned by Swein in the manga, the crown has its own will, slowly subjugating its owner (Vol. 7, 40-43). Cnut is tormented by it and the hallucination of his father’s head, and his kingship is gradually stained by murders and betrayal. This tragic situation is similar to the fate of kings in Shakespearean tragedies and what the literary theorist Jan Kott described as the “Grand Mechanism” (Kott 2006, 23). The tragic turn of Cnut’s reign – visually symbolized by his hallucination –, is cut off by his confrontation with Thorfinn (Vol. 14, 160-161). Yukimura uses this scene to reintegrate Cnut back into the course of history – where he is viewed as a great ruler (Arnold 2007, 122; Boyer 1995, 238) –, and thus returns the narrative to the events prior to the Vinland expedition.

Hence, Yukimura’s adaptation mixes together history, fiction, and the essential characteristics of the sagas. By doing so, *Vinland Saga* conveys not only new significations of Norse literature but, as noted previously by the historian Boyer, it decidedly locates this manga on the “midway” status in the historical manga genre, perpetuating the traditional

conception of the sagas.

Conveying Nordic Culture and History Through Manga

Following his wish to showcase the various aspects of Viking culture (Vol. 1, author ending notes), Yukimura Makoto indulged himself in historical reading and even went to Iceland for his documentation work (Vol. 2. 228-229). In the process, he chose to avoid the usual mythical images that have been propagated since the Romantic movement in the 19th century (Boyer 2011; 2014) but which are criticized by historians, such as the extravagant helmets with horns or human sacrifices. The readers are immersed in a more accurate depiction of the Viking era thanks to detailed historical aspects of Nordic culture, conveyed by both the drawings and the narration.

Among those, I must first mention Thors' longhouse – *skáli* – inspired by the famous Icelandic ruins of Stöng, as it is suggested by a quick comparison between the latter's archeological survey (Byock 2007, 57) and the Japanese drawings (Vol. 1, Ch. 3 & ending notes; Vol. 14, Ch. 100; Vol. 15, Ch. 101). From the fireplace and its wooden benches along the walls (Vol. 1, 135-136) to the well-known vertical loom and its tools (Vol. 3, 213-215; Figure 6), every element of the typical Icelandic residence described by historians can be found throughout the manga (Boyer 1992, 90-93 & 100; Boyer 2001, 240 & 249-251; Byock 2007, 57-62). Besides architecture, everyday clothes also reveal the particular attention by the mangaka to create a realistic setting.



Figure [6]. The Icelandic vertical loom. Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 3, Kōdansha, 2006, p. 213. © Kōdansha.

Moreover, writing a manga about the Vikings necessitates portraying their ships, as the two are integral to each other (Boyer 2002, 136). Yukimura reinforces this relationship with several representations of *langskip* and *knörr* from the very start by depicting them on the cover of the first volume. Even throughout chapter one, the readers can enjoy the representations of historical navigation elements, from the famous shield-rail *skjaldrim* (Boyer 2011, 348) to the chests used as benches and to store personal belongings (Durand 1996, 74). In addition to the drawings, the author shares with his Japanese readers' historical knowledge regarding the traditions of Viking boats, such as sailor law, mentioned by Leif (Vol. 1, 167), in which the wooden figurehead of the ship is dropped when returning home or approaching friendly land (Boyer 2011, 448; Durand 1996, 64) – it can be seen when Cnut arrives in York (Vol. 7, Ch. 48; Figure 7).

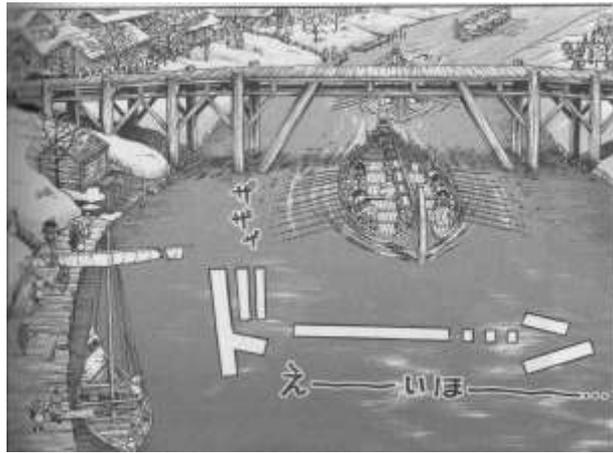


Figure [7]. Vikings ships with their figureheads dropped, Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 7, Kōdansha, 2009, p. 162. © Kōdansha.

What of the image conveyed by the warriors? Countless mythical images in American or European literature have twisted our perception of the historical facts. In *Vinland Saga*, the Vikings portrayed are not common farmers going on a summer raid. They are Danish mercenaries, such as Askeladd or Thorkell's troops, professionals in a time of conquest, strong and well-trained men who offer their services to make a living, whether to the Franks (Vol. 1, Ch. 1) or to Swein Forkbeard's campaign in England. Overall Yukimura is respectful in his historical representation of their equipment, which would depend on the character's social status (Boyer 2001, 66-68; Boyer 2011, 312-316).¹⁵ Only the *Jomsvikings* are distinctive in their rather professional-looking uniform; a clear indication of their discipline and unity as a legendary mercenary band (Figure 8).

¹⁵ Askeladd's intriguing armor, a muscle cuirass, is related to his invented Roman ancestry.



Figure [8]. The Jomsvikings (top) against under-equipped farmers (bottom). Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol.13, Kōdansha, 2013, p.100. © Kōdansha.

Another significant element of cultural representation in the manga is slavery, which is depicted in a realistic and historical way, without the usual polarization of Good and Evil that is typical of an entertainment medium. Slavery played an important social and economic role, yielding great profit – Vikings were known for having slaves as their main merchandise (Vol. 7, 152-158; Boyer 2011, 395). Nonetheless, slavery in those times was different from our contemporary conception of it (Boyer 2011, 463-465; Boyer 1995, 257-260): slaves could earn back their freedom and were respected as human beings. With the example of Erlingr’s farm management narrated in the *SO* (Sturluson 1983, 39), Yukimura applies this aspect of slavery during the second arc of Thorfinn’s story (Vol. 8, 182; Vol. 11, 41-49; Vol. 9, 206-207). Furthermore, the author makes use of this slavery episode to portray the agricultural cycle and medieval farming, such as the wheat harvest (Vol. 8-13; Vol. 9, 57). In the same way, various passages are used to portray Nordic farming lives, through such representations as the wheat

harvest (Vol. 9, 5-11; Figure 9). These scenes are not only essential for the evolution of the protagonist, since they serve as humble life lessons for Thorfinn who has spent his youth as a mercenary, but also to the readers who are educated through them about a specific aspect of Norse culture, far from the stereotypical images of barbarians craving for blood. Both the main character and the readers learn from these representations.



Figure [9]. Harvesting, Yukimura Makoto, *Vinland Saga*, Vol. 9, Kōdansha, 2010, p. 6. © Kōdansha.

Slavery is even more important for the narration. The background of Askeladd, a former slave himself, is at the center of the first arc's narration, and it is a contributing factor to his beheading the King Swein Forkbeard (Vol. 7, Ch. 47; Vol. 8, 63-64). It is also a key factor for Thorfinn's expedition. As already mentioned, Vinland is regarded as a symbolic utopia untouched by wars and slavery. The guiding principle of a peaceful land far beyond the horizon is first seen in the young slave

Hordaland's words (Vol. 1, 126-127). Her words, remembered by Thorfinn during his time in slavery (Vol. 12, 115-119), become the spark that lead him to decide on starting his expedition. However, chronologically, it was his father, Thors, who first describes Vinland to a dying slave as a utopian place free from wars and slave traders (Vol. 1, 181). Almost like a magical incantation, the same speech is used by Thorfinn at the death of the slave Arneis (Vol. 13, 170-171), clearly establishing that the Icelander is now walking in his father's footsteps, ready to embrace his destiny. Therefore, slavery is undoubtedly one of the manga essential elements, acting as the cornerstone of the rewriting of the original *Vínland Sagas*. It gives a whole new meaning to Thorfinn Karlsefni's expedition.

Lastly, I would like to mention a linguistic element that, interestingly, reveals itself only through the reception of *Vinland Saga* in France. Although the manga uses some original Norse words, the Japanese edition does not put any helpful notes for the readers, whereas the French version gives definitions and dates in footnotes – which are sometimes confusing.¹⁶ However, the French translators avoided using the word “drakkar” when mentioning the Vikings boats. This incorrect term, which has been sadly overused in popular French books and language for a century, has been subject to criticism and one of the main French stereotypes of the Norse culture (Boyer 2011, 448-449). And the Norse culture being, at best, mentioned in French schools, the efforts of these translators through the introduction of the manga *Vinland Saga* in France provides a good opportunity for young French readers to avoid

¹⁶ Such as for the battle of Hjörungavágr, first indicated in 986 (Vol. 2, 5) then in 980 (Vol. 6, 109).

repeating the mistakes of past generations. Of course, it would be quite naïve to think that this translation will suffice by itself to move the French readership's perception of Norse culture away from those stereotypes, but it is nonetheless an interesting and positive step in that direction.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the *Vínland Sagas* have been subject to a great number of rewritings, “function[ing] as a stage setting for a wide range of contemporary concerns for over a hundred and fifty years: politics, race, religion, and gender” (Arnold 2013, 199-201). As summarized by the historian Martin Arnold:

From the early nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, Vínland served as a location for expounding ideas about the superiority of traditional white European and/or American racial, religious, and gender values. Since then, the demands for civil rights, the perceived blight of industrial capitalism, an increasing consciousness of ecological vandalism, and a growing sense of shame over the past depredations of colonial powers, have prompted literary artists to see Vínland in increasingly abstract terms as a metaphor for American society. (Arnold 2013, 201)

In this respect, Yukimura Makoto's work can be characterized as representative of a new school of the literary tradition of post-war rewritings. Despite only offering a glimpse of Vínland itself, and it might be too bold to suggest that it is a metaphor for American society, the manga does share the “hallmark” of this post-war approach: an “implicit social critique, partly prompted by wartime disillusionment” (Arnold 2013, 201). Whether it is the leitmotiv of “what is a true warrior?”, the way the author rejects the notion of “honour above all” or embraces the question of slavery, or even his early depiction of the Skraelings which

is relatively free of the discourse of eurocentrism, all of these anachronistic ideas are post-war postures.

Such a literary heritage does not devalue the originality of the manga. Far from being a raw transposition of the medieval text or another repetition of the usual Viking stereotypes, the singularity of Yukimura Makoto's manga adaptation deserves praise. As an intertextual work, *Vinland Saga* achieves an outstanding revitalisation of the Norse Literature, displaying new significations through the reconstruction of its characters' lives and psychologies. As an historical manga, it draws away from the previous generation of representations, and restore the image of the Viking without many of the romantic stereotypes that have been attributed to them since the 19th century. It is a prime example of a new generation of books, which focuses more on realism and rejects past stereotypes.¹⁷ *Vinland Saga* contributes to the growing interest in historical representations in contemporary Japanese comics production's, alongside famous titles such as Sōryō Fuyumi's *Cesare*, dedicated to the eponymous Renaissance figure, or Iwaaki Hitoshi's *Historie*, based on the life of Eumenes, a general under Alexander the Great. This new wave raises such questions as how educational can these manga be? Can they even still be enjoyed as entertainment? Do these Japanese works have the potential to become an influential medium for the revitalisation of medieval literature and culture, in the same manner as children's literature (Boulaire 2002; Cazanave & Houssais 2010; 2011)? Our study answers some of these partially. Alongside the action, the tragedy, the elation of adventuring in a foreign

¹⁷ A wave already seen in Nordic children's literature (Olson 2011, 121 & 124-131).

land and time, it contains more than enough material to offer an introduction to the Norse culture, sagas and history to its readers. Therefore, *Vinland Saga* can be perceived to be both educational and entertaining – again, following the original functions of the Norse sagas. In fact, it is the readers themselves that hold the key on how educational these productions can be, if ever their curiosity pushes them to verify the historical elements portrayed. The revitalisation of the *Vinland Sagas* gives the opportunity to the readers – especially those who live outside of Scandinavian countries or who are uninformed about the history of the Viking Age – to discover medieval literature that they may have never heard of before, and to grasp a better understanding of the Norse culture and history, while simultaneously enjoying an entertaining work of fiction that enables them to go beyond their own time and their culture.

As the French historian Boyer often states, there is much to do yet when it comes to changing the perception of the mythical image of the Vikings. Yukimura Makoto's manga undoubtedly participates in the evolution of this perception and that of Nordic literature, whether we – the contemporary readers – are Japanese or European. *Vinland Saga* should draw the attention of future scholars researching how such literary works might challenge our perception of our history and culture in this age of globalisation. European cultural memories, and medieval ones in particular, are being extracted, revitalised, reorganised, tampered with, played with on both intertextual and transcultural levels, such as on the far shores of Japan, before being sent back to Europe in unexpected forms, with unexpected new meanings and perceptions. This ricochet effect should not be underestimated – not to say that we

should receive it with caution, uneasy feelings or suspicion. Do *Vinland Saga* and other similar transcultural creations have the ability to participate in the evolution of the stereotypical representations that have been Europe's since the Romantic era? Could they challenge the bias of our national identities and imaginaries? What lies beyond the intertextual and transcultural reorganisation of the medieval material in these contemporary and foreign works is difficult to predict. The outcome depends on too many factors, such as their reception in local markets, how they might interact with the reader's knowledge, their national identities, and with other local or translated creations. Will they have an ephemeral impact? A delayed one? We may not be able to decipher exactly the whole extent of their impact, since the contemporaneity of our object of study can be misleading (Gontard 2013, 7). However, this study does assure us that, from an unexpected country, *Vinland Saga* is an inheritor of the many post-medieval rewritings of the *Vínland Sagas* (Arnold 2013, 199-201). It participates decisively in the revitalisation of Norse literature and history in the 21st century.

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