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Yngvars saga víðförla and the Ingvar Runestones: A Question of Evidence

Jim Gritton

Yngvars saga víðförla (Saga of Ingvar the Far-Travelled) is a fantastic story of adventure: a tale of exotic, faraway lands, heroes of extraordinary ability, and supernatural creatures such as dragons, giants and cyclopes. The saga recounts the adventures of an eleventh-century Swedish Viking who led a voyage East in search of a great river and kingdom in a foreign land. The saga has attracted the interest of many scholars over the years (cf. Braun 1910; Olson 1912; Melnikova 1976; Larsson 1983; Shepard 1984; Pálsson and Edwards 1989; Phelpstead 2009; Lönnroth 2014), and has been interpreted on many levels, for example as an adventure story and even as a biblical allegory. Despite the improbable and fantastic nature of the saga, it may have a basis in historical fact. In Sweden, a number of runestones bear the name Ingvar and reference a journey to the East. Many scholars (e.g. Davidson 1976; Larsson 1987; Logan 1991; Sawyer 2000; Jesch 2005; Barraclough 2016) argue the runestones provide tangible evidence of the journey immortalised in the saga. The general consensus is that Ingvar led an expedition of thirty ships from Sweden, ending in disaster somewhere southeast of Russia, around 1041 (Shepard: 1984: 222).

There are several reasons for arguing that the runestones commemorate a real, historical journey. Although reliable, documentary evidence of Scandinavia’s medieval history is scarce, runestones and their inscriptions are one of the few textual sources that speak to us from the medieval past (Sawyer 2000: 1). No other event or expedition of the size described in the saga has been recorded on so many eleventh-century runestones in Sweden (Davidson 1976; Shepard 1984). Indeed, ‘the greatest of all the Swedish Viking enterprises would [...] have been lost to history’ were it not for the evidence afforded by the runestones (Jansson 1962: 46). The fact that so many runestones mention the name Ingvar is
not in itself proof of a historical journey, but it does suggest that something momentous happened to prompt the erection of so many memorials. In many respects it is not unlike the modern-day phenomenon of roadside memorials and the tradition of marking death in public places (MacConville 2010).

The group of runestones that are believed to corroborate Ingvar’s calamitous expedition are today referred to as ‘Ingvar runestones’, and treated for the most part as a factual given, both historically and in relation to the saga: Ingvar, the saga’s protagonist, must by implication be the same Ingvar as his namesake on the runestones. However, this is problematic as there are many other stones that mention the name Ingvar which are not considered to be Ingvar runestones, suggesting that runestones have not received as much scrutiny as they should have done. Sadly, runic evidence is often neglected by literary scholars and addressed only casually (Page 1993: 145).

Although the saga may be rooted in a real historical event, the text has been embellished ‘with a considerable admixture of fantastic material’ (Finlay 2014: 65). Historical fact and fictional adventure are intertwined so tightly that it is difficult at times to separate one from the other. One of the resulting problems is that the sparse data on the runestones. Reference to Serkland on a handful of stones is an example which has been used to flesh out lacunae in the saga, and it is not uncommon to see Ingvar’s journey recast as an expedition to Serkland or even Persia, neither of which is mentioned in the saga. That Scandinavians regularly traversed the Baltic and Russia between the ninth and eleventh centuries, and were active in the Byzantine and Arab worlds both as traders and mercenaries, is well established (McGinnis 1983; Shepard 1984; Androshchuk 2008), but to what extent do the runestones bear witness to Ingvar’s expedition and is the Ingvar named on the runestones the same Ingvar as the protagonist in the eponymous saga? In order to answer these questions, we need to critically re-examine the runestones alongside evidence from both historical and geographical sources. Before doing so, let us briefly acquaint ourselves with the saga associated with the runestones.

**The Saga**

*Yngvars saga víðförla* was probably written during the early thirteenth century (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 2). It is thought to be a translation of a lost Latin text, preserved in two fifteenth-century manuscripts (Antonsson 2012: 75; Lönnroth 2014: 100). Although Oddr Snorrason, a twelfth-century monk at Ægir monastery, is usually cited as the author of
the saga, there has been much debate in the past about whether Oddr was the author or translator. The text appears to draw from a number of different sources, including oral transmission:

We have heard this story told, but in writing it down we have followed a book composed by the learned monk Odd, which he based on the authority of well-informed people mentioned by him in his letter to Jon Loftsson and Gizur Hallson [...] The monk Odd says he heard this story told by a priest called Isleif, and also by someone called Glum Thorgeirsson, and he had a third informant named Thorir. Odd took from each of these whatever he thought most interesting (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 68).

However, as we do not have Ingvar’s first-hand account – the saga tells us he ‘died in the year of Our Lord 1041’ (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 60), more than one hundred and fifty years before the saga was supposedly written – analysis of the historical basis of the saga must proceed with caution, especially as Þingeyrar monastery was renowned for its ‘hagiographic and legendary tendencies’, for producing ‘light reading’, and synthesising ‘the learned and the entertaining’ (Andersson 1964: 76).

Structurally, the saga can be divided into three parts. The first part introduces the reader to Ingvar’s family, his childhood, and his maturation as a young man and aspiring adventurer. The second part focuses on Ingvar’s journey east and his many adventures en route. In the last part of the saga, Ingvar’s son Svein retraces his father’s voyage, eventually marries Queen Silkisif (with whom his own father appears to have had a romantic dalliance) and establishes Christianity in her dominion.

Most commentators, for example Mitchell (2008) and Ross (2010), categorise \textit{Yngvars saga víðförla} as a \textit{fornaldarsaga}, a legendary saga or ‘saga of ancient time’. As a genre, the \textit{fornaldsögar} are characterised by their mythical and heroic content and encounters with supernatural creatures and/or villains (Mitchell 2008: 319). Most were written between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Driscoll 2009: 79) but tend to be set in prehistoric Scandinavia, before the settlement of Iceland, or other far-off lands. However, \textit{Yngvars saga víðförla} is an exception as it is set during the eleventh century. It also deviates from the usual \textit{fornaldarsaga} formula in that it purports to be an account of an actual Viking expedition and is not set in a legendary past, even though it is replete with otherworldly episodes. Despite its classification as a \textit{fornaldarsaga}, \textit{Yngvars saga víðförla} shares stylistic similarities with \textit{konungsögur} (kings’ sagas) (Wolf, 2016: 740; Lönnroth 2014: 103), but also leans towards
the *heilagra manna sögur* (‘sagas of holy men’) genre, as Ingvar assumes a quasi-missionary role during the middle section of the saga.

The fantastic is a constant companion in the saga and remains an important part of the narrative following Ingvar’s expedition. The journey takes place across two worlds: a historically authentic world of recognisable people and place names, and a fantastic world awash with supernatural beings. Dragons, including Jaculus, the venom-spewing ‘Über-dragon’ (Larrington 2010: 53), appear four times in the saga and echo the frequent use of dragon motifs in German mythology (cf. *Das Nibelungenlied*, ‘The Song of the Nibelungs’). Glazyrina (2006: 292) argues that the repeated appearance of dragons in the saga is not accidental and serves an edifying purpose. Indeed, the dragon leitmotif follows a common man-gold-dragon formula that reflects man’s greed for gold. Greed, of course, was viewed as a cardinal sin and antithetical to the Christian values that had taken root in post-pagan Scandinavia.

Upon first reading, *Yngvars saga víðförla* impresses as a fantastic tale of adventure and heroic exploits. Although it can be viewed as a larger-than-life historical account of Viking expansion eastwards, the saga can also be read as a biblical allegory since religious themes and Christian motifs permeate the narrative. For example, Silkisif’s conversion to Christianity and the building of a church dedicated to Ingvar give the saga a ‘hagiographic touch typical of religious medieval literature’ (Lönnroth 2014: 107). Christian symbolism dominates the last few pages of the saga and Svein’s final expedition takes on many of the characteristics of a religious crusade (Antonsson 2012: 78). Ingvar himself is portrayed as a ‘paragon of Christian virtue’ (Lönnroth 2014: 106) and his career as an adventurer concludes ‘with a Christian martyr’s death’ (Righter-Gould 1980: 434).

Antonsson (2012) avers that voyages to the East are often a metaphor for the pursuit of religious enlightenment in the Icelandic saga corpus. He argues that Ingvar’s search for the source of an unnamed river that empties into the Red Sea implies the expedition was more than an avaricious quest for gold and glory. In medieval times it was believed that earthly paradise could be found at the source of the four great biblical rivers: the Geon (Nile), the Phison (Ganges), the Tigris and the Euphrates. This notion is corroborated by Isidore of Seville (n.d.) in his *Etymologies* (*Book XIII*, Chapter XXI). Against this backdrop, Ingvar’s search for a lost river can be reframed as a spiritual quest for earthly paradise and his arrival at the Red Sea can be read as a proxy for the Old Testament story of ‘how the children of
Israel, led by Moses, crossed the Red Sea on their way from Egypt to the promised land’ (Lönnroth 2014: 112).

We should not forget that the Viking Age was an era of considerable religious turmoil and change in Scandinavia. By the mid-twelfth century, Christianity was already well established in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. Evidence of Scandinavia’s conversion to Christianity, for example crosses and religious invocations, can be seen on many runestones (Zilmer 2013), including the Ingvar stones examined as part of this study. Such symbols are physical remnants of the politico-religious context in which Ingvar’s eastern voyage is said to have taken place.

The Runic Evidence

There is little agreement among scholars as to the exact number of runestones that purportedly commemorate Ingvar’s journey east, with estimates ranging from twenty-one (Fuglesang 1998: 2010) to more than thirty (Sundqvist 2015: 530). However, most scholars estimate the number to be in the mid-twenties, for example twenty-three (Lindkvist 1999: 49), twenty-five (Sawyer 2000: 119); and twenty-six (Jesch 2001: 103; Scheel 2015: 960):

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The *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* (‘Scandinavian Runic-text Database’) (2014) contains more than 6,500 inscriptions, of which circa 1,993 are runestones. Forty-five of these mention the name Ingvar.\textsuperscript{11} To these, we must add a further four runestones that do not mention his name but which are nevertheless thought to be possible Ingvar stones for inferential reasons which will be explained later.\textsuperscript{12} This is almost twice the number of runestones usually associated with Yngvar víðförlí, but are they all Ingvar stones and evidence of his journey east? In order to answer this, the inscriptions on all forty-nine runestones were re-examined using a simple assessment tool constructed following a review of the literature. Transliterations, normalised Old Norse text and English translations were drawn from the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* and cross-checked against available photos of the runestones. A number of criteria acted as a basis for assessment:

1) The runestone should date from the Viking Age, preferably after 1041 when Ingvar is thought to have died. The *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* assigns runic inscriptions to a broad time period and for some entries provides a more specific, numerical date but the methods used to calculate such dates are unclear.\textsuperscript{13}

2) For the majority of inscriptions, typology is an effective methodology for dating runestones as it tells us when the rock was worked. Gräslund’s (2006; 2015) simple but effective method of dating runestones, based on zoomorphic principles, was used in this study. Each of the ornamental styles corresponds to a specific time period, which offers a convenient, but not always exact, basis for dating.
 Assuming the inscriptions were carved within a year or two of the commemorated person’s death, we can assert with reasonable confidence that runestones without ornamentation were carved before Ingvar’s death, although there are some exceptions to this, and those decorated using styles Pr4-Pr5 were carved too far into the future given that Ingvar is thought to have died in 1041. This leaves us with bird’s-eye-view, Pr1, Pr2, and to a lesser extent Pr3 as qualifying styles.

3) The remaining criteria for determining a runestone’s status as an Ingvar stone derive from the wording of the inscriptions. Ingvar’s name should normally be mentioned, but there may be exceptions to this. Jesch argues that ‘only those in which a person of this name is neither the commemorated nor related to the commemorated [...] can be considered ‘Ingvarr’-stones’ (Jesch 2001: 102), but this may be too restrictive as a criterion. The inscription should also reference the East and/or Serkland, although two runestones, i.e. Sö 179 and Sö 279, imply Serkland is in the South. One of the most commonly found phrases on many stones is mel Ingvari (‘with Ingvar’), for example the commemorated travelled mel Ingvari or the subject met his end mel Ingvari. Stated membership of Ingvar’s troop or retinue is another important indicator of a runestone’s status as an Ingvar stone.

Collectively, the criteria formed the basis of the following assessment tool (figure 1) which was used to appraise each runestone.
Both the Viking Age and decorative style of the runestone acted as important screening criteria, as of course did mention of Ingvar’s name, but the absence of his name was not an automatic ground for exclusion as several stones were damaged or fragmented. In order for the inscription to be classified as a probable Ingvar stone, at least one or more of the remaining criteria needed to be met, but if none of the remaining criteria was met, the stone was automatically classified as doubtful. In all other instances, the status of both the stone and inscription was assessed on a case-by-case basis.

Following detailed reappraisal of the runestones, nineteen were confirmed as probable Ingvar stones, and five more as possible Ingvar stones; twenty-five were rejected as implausible or too evidentially wanting to be categorised as Ingvar runestones. Generally speaking, there was a relatively strong correspondence between the results of this study and customary listings of Ingvar runestones. However, there are points of difference which are discussed later in this paper. In short, several stones were demoted from probable to possible Ingvar runestones, namely Sö 179, Sö 277, Sö 279 and U 1143. A fifth runestone, i.e. M4, which does not feature in more established listings (cf. Fuglesang 1998; Lindkvist 1999; Sawyer 2000; Jesch 2001; Scheel 2015), was added as a possible Ingvar stone. However, several established Ingvar stones, i.e. Ög 145, Sö 96 and U 837, were rejected along with Ög 30 which Scheel (2015) had included.

**Preliminary Analysis**

Before we examine the runestones in more detail, what does preliminary analysis tell us about Ingvar’s journey east? The *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* conveniently provides map coordinates
for the oldest known location of each of the Ingvar runestones. Apart from the possible M4 stone, which is situated in Medelpad, a historical province in the north of Sweden, the majority of runestones are spread across Södermanland, Uppland and Östergötland (see figure 2). It is therefore not unreasonable to surmise therefore that the men commemorated on the stones either hailed from or were recruited from central Sweden, bordered by the Baltic Sea in the East. This makes logistical sense as ‘Yngvar put out to sea with his thirty ships and sailed from Sweden [...] till he came to Russia’ (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 50).

Unfortunately, the Ingvar runestones tell us very little about those who travelled with him. In fact, they tell us more about those who erected the stones and their relationship to the deceased. Although the saga tells us that ‘all his best men and more than half of his force’ died of sickness (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 59), there is no such detail on the runestones which simply record that the subjects died in the East, with Ingvar, as members of his troop. However, given that only one runestone, U 654, alludes to a violent death (see below), it is perhaps not unreasonable to conjecture that sickness may have been the cause of death for the others.

Andvéttr and Kárr and <kiti> and Blesi and Djarfr raised this stone in memory of Gunnleifr, their father, who was killed in the east with Ingvar. May God help their spirits. Alríkr(?), I carved the runes. He could steer a cargo-ship well.

Four of the deceased were clearly seamen. Indeed, the runestones tell us that three were able to steer a ship and one of them even owned his own ship, suggesting he was a man of means. Apart from reference to Ingvar and a possible reference to Ingvar’s father, Eymund, no other persons whose names are carved on the runestones are mentioned in the saga. Little detail is provided regarding the route Ingvar took. Ten runestones point to an unspecified destination in the East and a further five mention Serkland, sometimes in addition to the East, although two stones tell us that Serkland was in the South.

It is worth noting that the majority of Ingvar runestones are adorned with crosses. Zilmer describes the use of crosses on runestones as an ‘externalized marker of Christianity’ (Zilmer 2011: 89). Given that King Olof of Sweden converted to Christianity in about 1000 (Sanmark 2004: 22), it is perhaps not surprising that crosses appear so frequently. According to Shepard, ‘this suggests that they belong to a period when Christianity was fairly well established in the upper levels of Swedish society in Uppland and Södermanland’ (Sheppard 1984: 232). It also suggests that the families of the deceased were of higher social status and committed Christians already. This is reflected by the fact that a number of Ingvar stones are characterised by Christian invocations such as ‘May God help Ulfr’s soul’ on Sö 9.

Probable Ingvar Runestones

Following reappraisal, nineteen runestones were categorised as probable Ingvar stones, which is fewer than the twenty-plus stones usually classified as such. It would be wrong to assert that they are irrefutably Ingvar runestones as the evidence is mostly circumstantial. However, on the balance of probability, they are thought to be Ingvar runestones. Each date from the Viking Age and the majority of stones are decorated in a style that is consistent chronologically with the date of Ingvar’s presumed death and the expedition east.

Ten runestones tell us that the subject met his end or died with Ingvar (Ög 155, Sö 9, Sö 173, Sö 254, Sö 287, Sö 335, U 644, U 654, U 661, U Fv1992;157). Although death is not mentioned on an eleventh stone, Sö 131, it is implied by the phrase ‘in Serkland lies Eyvindr’s son’.
Spjóti, Halfdan, þeir reistu stein þennna eptir Skarða, bróður sinn. Fór austr hædan með Ingvari, á Serklandi liggr sone Eyvindar.

Spjóti (and) Halfdan, they raised this stone in memory of Skarði, their brother. From here (he) travelled to the east with Ingvar; in Serkland lies Eyvindr's son.

Five runestones explicitly mention travel or a voyage with Ingvar (Sö 105, Sö 107, Sö 108, Sö 131, Vs 19). Four of these are situated in Södermanland and the fifth in Västmanland in central southern Sweden. Although two of the runestones, Sö 107 and Sö 108, are located adjacent to each other (and to Sö109 which is not an Ingvar stone), they were not originally co-sited, and we should not therefore draw any false inferences from their current shared geography. Travel is implied on two more runestones whose inscriptions talk of steering a ship east with Ingvar or as a member of his retinue (U 439, U 778). What is unusual about the latter stone is that it commemorates someone who sailed his own ship with Ingvar, although he is not named in the saga. In addition to U 778, membership of Ingvar’s retinue/troop is mentioned on two further runestones, Ög 155 and Sö 254.

Figure 3. Sö 281 (© Christer Hamp 2010).
Twelve runestones, which include two of the five runestones cited above, mention the East in relation to Ingvar (Sö 131, Sö 173, Sö 281, Sö 320, Sö 335, U 439, U 644, U 654, U 661, U 778, U Fv1992;157, Vs 19), whilst Sö 131, Sö 281 and U 439 provide the strongest indication that the end destination of Ingvar’s voyage was Serkland. Sö 281, like many surviving runestones, is fragmented. What remains of the original stonework (see Figure 3) is embedded in the wall of Strängnäs Cathedral in the Lake Mälaren area of Sweden, northwest of Stockholm.

Although neither death nor troop is mentioned in the inscription, travel is however implied and Sö 281 meets other criteria sufficiently for categorisation as a probable Ingvar runestone.

...vé lét gera kuml eptir ... bróður Ulfs. Þeir austr/austarla ... með Ingvari á Serklandi.

...vé had the monument made in memory of ... Ulf's brother. They in / to the east ... with Ingvar in Serkland.

U 439 poses a number of interpretative challenges, not least because the runestone disappeared during the sixteenth century (Wessén 1945: 232) and all that remains is a woodcut made by the Swedish runologist, Johannes Bureus (1568-1652). Much therefore depends on the accuracy of his original transliteration of the runic inscription. A key focus of debate in recent years (cf. Shepard 1984: 244; Jesch 2001: 92; Zilmer 2005: 170) has been the meaning of the transliterated word askalat – does it mean Estonia or Serkland?

harlaif auk þurkarþr litu raisa stain þina at sabi faþur sin isturþi austr skibi mæþ ikuari a/askalat/-skalat-

Herleif ok þorgerðr/þorgarðr létu reisa stein þennu at Sæbjörn, fóður sinn. Er stýrði austr skipi með Ingvari á Eistaland(?) /Serklandi(?)

Herleif and Þorgerðr/Þorgarðr had this stone raised in memory of Sæbjörn, their father, who steered a ship east with Ingvar to Estonia(?) /Serkland(?)

Although Wessén (1945: 232-235) suggests that Eistaland (‘Estonia’) may represent the closest fit with Bureus’ reading, he concedes that carver error or misunderstanding by Bureus could be responsible for the ambiguity today. However, given that no other runestone bearing the name Ingvar mentions Estonia and the fact that askalat is closer phonetically to Serklandi
than *Eistaland*, Serkland is a more logical interpretation and probable destination. It is worth noting that only one other runestone, Vg 181, the so-called Olsbro stone, which is not an Ingvar stone, mentions Estonia in full.

**Possible Ingvar Runestones**

A small number of runestones were judged to be possible rather than probable Ingvar stones. Although they meet a number of the preconditions for inclusion, elements of doubt undermine their respective claims for categorisation as Ingvar stones. M4 (figure 4) is not usually classified as an Ingvar runestone, perhaps because it is a geographical outlier.

![Figure 4. M 4 (© Christer Hamp 2014).](image)

It is situated in Attmarby, more than two hundred miles north of the Lake Mälaren area where most other Ingvar runestones are located. The main problem with this stone is its poor state of repair. Only a fragment now remains and much of the stone’s surface is heavily worn, making transliteration problematic.
Tóki/Fullugi/Illugi raised the stone ... travelled to the east with Ingvar(?) ... ... this stone

If \( f(u)r \) austr \( m\text{í}r \) ... can be normalised as \( fór \) austr meðr Ingvari ('travelled east with Ingvar'), it becomes a strong candidate for classification as an Ingvar stone as it meets most criteria for inclusion. It is worth noting that a number of other stones are also fragmentary, worn, and in some instances omit Ingvar's name, yet are still thought to be possible Ingvar runestones, for example Ög 145 and Sö 96 (Lindkvist 1999; Sawyer 2000; Jesch 2001; Scheel 2015). We will return to the reasons for this shortly, but the non-inclusion of M4 is both contradictory and inconsistent.

Sö 179, known as the Gripsholm runestone (see figure 5), meets most criteria for categorisation as an Ingvar stone, but whether it qualifies as such depends on whether Ingvar had a brother:

Figure 5. Sö 179 The Gripsholm Runestone (© Christer Hamp 2007).
Tóla lét reisa stein þenna at soninn Haraldr, bróður Ingvars. Þeir fóru drengila fjárrí at gulli ok austarla erni gófu, dóu sunnarla á Serklandi.

Tóla had this stone raised in memory of her son Haraldr, Ingvar’s brother. They travelled valiantly far for gold, and in the east gave (food) to the eagle. (They) died in the south in Serkland.

Braun (1910) theorised that Ingvar was son of the Swedish King Emund, who had two wives: Tóla, mother of Haraldr, and Ragnhildr, mother of Ingvar. If Braun’s theory is true, Ingvar and Haraldr would have been half-brothers, but Jesch (2001: 102) doubts this and suggests ‘brother’ may have been used metaphorically – Ingvar and Haraldr were simply brothers-in-arms.

Sö 277 is another fragmented runestone with an incomplete inscription (see figure 6):

\[
\text{u-} \rightarrow \text{r auk inkiburk litu ra... ...<a at uerþr iki inkuars ma... ...} \\
\text{... ok Ingibjörg létu reisa ... ... <at> verðr engi Ingvars manna ...}
\]

... and Ingibjörg had raised ... ... ... in memory of ... will not be among Ingvar's men ...

Figure 6. Sö 277 (© Christer Hamp 2010).

Whether it qualifies as an Ingvar stone depends on whether the incomplete phrase \textit{inkuars ma...} can be normalised as \textit{Ingvars manna} (‘of Ingvar’s men’). Jesch (2001: 103) believes it does, but Larsson (2002: 91–92) is more doubtful and suspects the stone may commemorate
Ingvar himself. He suggests that *ma* might instead be interpreted as *maki* meaning equal. If so, *uerþr iki inkuars ma...* might then be normalised as *verðr engi Ingvars maki* (‘no-one will be Ingvar’s equal’).

Sö 279 is also fragmented and thought to commemorate Ingvar himself (Larsson 2002: 87). Indeed, both Sö 279 and Sö 277 are co-located at Strängnäs Cathedral. Although the remnant does not actually mention Ingvar, the name Eymund is mentioned and thought by Larsson to refer to Ingvar’s father, as he is so named in the saga. Serkland is also mentioned on the stone.

U 1143 is generally classified as an Ingvar runestone. Jansson (1957: 556) categorises it as such because the inscription contains the phrase *Hann fór burt með Ingvari* (‘He travelled away with Ingvar’). However, the reference could apply to anyone named Ingvar and the vague destination could be anywhere. There are too many ambiguities concerning this runestone, which is why it has been demoted from a probable to a possible Ingvar stone.

**Doubtful Ingvar Runestones**

Twenty-five runestones were rejected as potential Ingvar stones. These include several runestones (Ög 30, Ög 145, Sö 96 and U 837), which other scholars have listed as Ingvar stones (see table 1). About half did not meet the basic eligibility criteria for inclusion. A number of stones postdate Ingvar’s voyage east by too wide a margin. Indeed, eleven runestones (U 101, U 143, U 147, U 266, U 287, U 307, U 309, U 310, U 363, U 540, U 1032) are decorated in Pr4 style, which came into use approximately thirty years after Ingvar’s presumed death, whilst U Fv1988;241 is decorated in Pr5 style, which did not appear on runestones until about 1100.

Ög 38 and U 513 predate Ingvar’s presumed death in 1041 and are therefore rejected as potential candidates for inclusion. The former is dated to the tenth century, whereas the latter is dated to the 1030s (Samnordisk runtextdatabas 2014). Ingvar is also named as the sponsor of Ög 38 but given that he is said to have died on the expedition east, this makes Ög 38 even less plausible.

Although Ingvar is not named on Ög 145 (figure 9, left), a number of scholars, e.g. Lindkvist (1999) and Scheel (2015), have nevertheless categorised it as an Ingvar runestone. Jesch (2001: 103) includes it as a possible Ingvar stone as the inscription contains the word *hilfnai*, which has been normalised as *helfningi* meaning ‘troop’.

69
... ...ur sin er furs ... hilfnai austr

... fjödur/bródur sinn, er först ... helfning(?) austr.

... his father/ brother, who perished ... troop(?) in the east.

Jesch points out that the only other occurrence of the noun hilfnai is to be found on the nearby runestone Ög 155, which is an Ingvar stone. Whilst her reasoning is persuasive, the runestone could theoretically be dedicated to anyone who perished in the east. Similarly, Ingvar is not mentioned on Sö 96 (Figure 7, right), yet a number of scholars categorise it as an Ingvar stone (Lindkvist 1999; Sawyer 2000; Scheel 2015). Jesch (2001: 103) considers that it may be an Ingvar runestone as it ends han uar fa. . . which is similar to the wording Hann var farinn med Ingvari (‘he travelled with Ingvar’), found on Sö 105 and Sö 107 a few miles away in Eskilstuna municipality, about fifty-five miles west of Stockholm. However, this is speculative as the stone could be dedicated to anyone who travelled anywhere.

Figure 7. Ög 145 (© Christer Hamp 2016) and Sö 96 (© Christer Hamp 2013).
Ingvar’s name is also missing on U 837, yet some scholars, e.g. Sawyer (2000), Scheel (2015) and to a lesser extent Jesch (2001), have included it as the word lið, meaning ‘retinue’, is used in the inscription. The incomplete runic sequence that precedes it, ...(r)s, is thought to read Ingvars, but like Ög 145 and Sö 96, this is no more than supposition and the stone could conceivably be dedicated to anyone.

Finally, Ingvar is mentioned on Ög 30, but the father’s name is given as Sigsteinn, whereas in the saga, Eymund is named as Ingvar’s father:

But then Eymund began to long to go home and visit his estates […] Soon afterwards he began looking for a wife, and married the daughter of a landed man, having a son by her called Yngvar (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 46-47).

Jesch argues that the existence of the name Ingvar on a runestone does not of itself make it a candidate for inclusion as an Ingvar stone: Ingvar should neither be the commemorated nor related to the commemorated. She concludes that Ög 30 is not an Ingvar stone as ‘the deceased just happens to have the same name as the more famous Ingvarr, and happens to have died some-where in the east, but not necessarily on Ingvarr’s expedition’ (Jesch 2001: 102). Although Scheel (2015) includes Ög 30 in his list of Ingvar runestones, this is not supported by the available evidence.

The Geographical Evidence
The actual route followed by Ingvar on his journey east is uncertain. Various theories have been advanced, particularly in relation to the great river mentioned in the saga, but none have proved conclusive (Jackson 2011: 125). A number of experimental boat journeys have been made by explorers (Widerbeg 2013; Edberg 2014) during the last twenty to thirty years on rivers in Russia, Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Despite the hype that often precedes such trips, the results have largely been disappointing (Westerdahl 2015: 78). It is one thing to follow a river on a map but another to sail it. River travel against strong currents is not impossible, but it would have been necessary to swap the Vikings’ large ocean-going ships for smaller boats suitable for river travel and portage (Edberg 2009).

In terms of the route followed, scholars fall into two camps: those who favour the Volga and a route which takes Ingvar towards the Caucasus and/or Caspian Sea (Arne 1947; Bronsted 1965; Lindqvist 1968; Melnikova 1976; Shepard 1984; Blöndal 2007; Hjardar and Vike 2016) and those who favour the Dnieper and a route which takes Ingvar towards
Byzantium instead (Olson 1912; Davidson 1976; Pritsak 1981; Markarian 2000). Each claim has merit as artefacts have been found along both rivers, confirming their usage as raiding and/or trading routes over a long period of time (cf. Androshchuk 2002 and Hårdh 2016). Given that both waterways were regularly navigated, Ingvar could have sailed down either river.¹⁹

Frustratingly, the runestones do not shine more light on this conundrum. They simply tell us that the East, or sometimes Serkland, which is not mentioned in the saga, was the general direction taken. Interestingly, a common characteristic of adventurers with the cognomen víðförla is that their voyages usually took them to a destination in the East (Jakobsson 2006: 936). The adverbial austr (‘east’) can be found on approximately fifty runestones and on more than half the Ingvar stones. It is seldom defined but often used adverbially to modify specific regions in the East, e.g. Serkland (Jesch 2001: 89). It is worth noting that, geographically, the Old Norse word austr does not correspond exactly with modern-day ‘east’. According to Shafer the Viking compass is ‘rotated 45° to 60° clockwise from the true, geographical compass: ‘thus norðr refers to northeast, austr to southeast’ (Shafer 2010: 32). This is significant when we consider where Serkland might be located. Austr also had a mythical connotation, since few parts of the world were more distant, or arguably exotic, than the east during the Viking Age (Sverrir Jakobsson 2006: 935).

Serkland, like austr, is an indistinct concept of uncertain etymology. It has been suggested that Serkland derives from the Latin sericum for ‘silk’ (Shepard 1984: 235) and thus means ‘land where people wear long gowns or särkär, as many Arabs did’ (Lönnroth 2014: 103). However, more popular definitions suggest that Serkland refers to the land of the Saracens or Muslims (Jesch 2001; Zilmer 2003; Adams and Heß 2015; Sverrir 2016) and thus Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa (Källström 2016: 169) or around the Caspian Sea, with the name possibly deriving from the city of Sarkel in Khazar territory (Jesch 2005: 125).²⁰ Despite the fact that the Caspian Sea seems to be many scholars’ preferred destination, Melkinova doubts whether many Scandinavians knew where Serkland was other than a ‘vague notion that it lay somewhere at the southern edge of the habitable world’ (Melkinova 1995: 655). This includes both carvers of the runestones and the commemorators of the deceased. Several toponyms are mentioned in the saga and warrant closer examination. The saga tells us that Ingvar originally set sail from Sweden with thirty ships, but the expedition proper began from an unspecified location in Russia:
From Russia, Yngvar prepared for an expedition to find the length of this river [...]
They launched their thirty ships into the river and Yngvar set course towards the east (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 51).

Ingvar and his troop travelled through many regions, negotiating obstacles such as waterfalls, including a great waterfall that he named Belgsoti, and portaging where necessary. They visited a city built of white marble, which we discover later is Citopolis, the home of Queen Silkisif, and Heliopolis, the seat of King Jolf. Following directions given by the latter, they eventually reached Lindibelti, the source of the river, in the vicinity of the Red Sea and a headland known as Siggeum. All we know about the return journey is that survivors of the ill-fated expedition retraced their steps back to Russia following Ingvar’s death, although one retainer reached Mikligarðr with a single ship.  

Citopolis is thought to refer to Scythopolis, an ancient city on the River Jordan (Chekin 1989: 14; Barraclough 2016: 201; Pringle 2016: 356). It is now part of Israel and known as Beit She’an. However, Larsson (1987: 104–105) suggests that Citopolis could instead refer to Kutaisi, the old capital of Georgia because of what he describes as the resemblance between Citopolis and Cytaeia, the old Latin name for Kutaisi. He also speculates that the Bagrati Cathedral in the city, built during the early eleventh century, could well be the city of white marble described in the saga. However, Shepard (1984: 278) is of the view that the saga instead reflects ‘a story-teller’s pretensions to classical scholarship’, citing references to Heliopolis and Siggeum as evidence of this. Heliopolis (‘the city of the sun’), is the name of two ancient cities: one in Egypt, now part of Greater Cairo, and the other in erstwhile Phoenicia, now Lebanon, today known as Baalbek. Because of insufficient clues provided in the saga, we cannot be sure which Heliopolis Ingvar visited. Baalbek is about fifty-five miles inland from the Mediterranean coast whereas Heliopolis in Egypt is about one hundred and fifty miles from the coast. Whilst this might suggest Baalbek was Ingvar’s destination, since the saga implies Heliopolis is near water, Heliopolis in Egypt is the more likely destination as Cairo sits on the Nile which flows into the Mediterranean.

Siggeum, a headland between the sea and river, is thought to refer to the ancient Greek city of Sigeion (Sigeum in Latin) in Troas, the Land of Troy in modern-day Turkey (Schwertheim 2006). It marked the entrance to the Hellespont, more familiarly known as the Dardenelles today. It is not certain whether Ingvar reached the Red Sea, although it is implied because of its proximity to Siggeum:
There’s a tongue of land between the sea and the river, called Siggeum, and after the river has flowed only a short distance it pours down over the cliff into the Red Sea, and that’s where we think the world ends (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 54).

However, this makes no sense geographically. The Red Sea, as described, bears little resemblance to the region’s topography (Taylor 2014: 327) and the distance between the northern-most point of the Red Sea and Siggeum is about 1,000 miles. Larsson (1987: 107) contends somewhat fancifully that the Red Sea in the saga is another body of water on the eastern edge of the Caspian Sea, lit red by local atmospheric conditions. However, it is hard not to conclude that he is looking for evidence to support his own hypothesis that Ingvar’s expedition terminated in the Caspian.

The account of Ingvar’s journey highlights a number of incongruities with the runes that bear his name. According to the runestones, Ingvar headed east towards Serkland, but it is clear from our analysis of place names in the saga that the route described would take Ingvar broadly south rather than east or southeast. One wonders whether the place names and topographic details supplied in the saga for example waterfalls, rapids and whirlpools, have been added for artistic purposes as they are not consistent with the geography of the places supposedly visited.

Ingvar asked Jolf if he knew the source of the river, and Jolf said he knew for a fact that it flowed from a spring. ‘We call it Lindibelti,’ he said, ‘and from the same spring another river flows in the Red Sea where it creates the huge whirlpool we call the Gapi’ (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 54).

It is true that eddies can occur almost anywhere in the Red Sea (Zhan et al. 2014), but a whirlpool such as Gapi stretches credulity. It is also true that Vikings had to negotiate rapids on the Dnieper, when following the western route (Logan 2013: 183), but it is impossible to verify claims of waterfalls, rapids and cliffs without more reliable geographical data from the era concerned. Sadly, this is not available to us. Interestingly, the tenth-century treatise De Administrando Imperio (Constantine VII) contains a detailed account of the Viking Road to Byzantium which made extensive use of the Dnieper (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 34).
The Historical Evidence

Yngvar’s saga viðförla contains very little historical material other than sketchy details of Ingvar’s family history and mention of the year of his death, making it hard to determine whether there is any solid historical foundation to the events recounted in the saga or connection to the eponymous runestones. Whilst details of Ingvar’s ancestry are disputed, three separate Icelandic annals report the death of a Viking warrior with the name Ingvar: Annales regii – Konungsannáll (‘King’s Annal’), 1041 (Goodwin 1906); Lögmannsannáll (‘Lawyer’s Annal’), 1041 (Jónsson 1948); and Flateyjarbók (‘Book of Flatey’), 1040 (Unger and Vigfússon 1862). Although annals often act as contemporary records of historical facts, entries were not always made contemporaneously and could have been added by any number of anonymous clerics, and not necessarily in the same monastery (Haug 1997: 264). Such caveats aside, three separate notations for Ingvar’s death around 1040–1041 suggest the entries can be relied on. The saga tells us that Ingvar died at the age of 25, making 1016 his presumed year of birth.

There are several theories regarding Ingvar’s origin. We can deduce from the saga that he was the great-grandson of King Eiríkr inn sigrsæli (c.945–995), one of the first Swedish kings to be baptised, reigning from circa 970–995. However, an alternative theory posits that
Ingvar’s father was King Æmundær gamlaæ (r. c.1050–1060), son of King Olof skötkonung (r. 995–1022) of Sweden, whose parents were Eiríkr inn sigsæli and Sigrid storráđa (Braun 1910; Melnikova 1976). Braun speculates that Æmundær gamlaæ had two wives: Tóla, mother of Haraldr, and Ragnhildr, mother of Ingvar. Unfortunately, few genealogical records from this period exist and it is impossible to confirm or disprove this theory. However, given that Swedish lists of succession traditionally start with Eiríkr inn sigsæli, followed by King Olof skötkonung, it is perhaps telling that no substantive connection to Ingvar has yet been established.

The inscriptions on the runestones that commemorate those who died with Ingvar are laconic, often ambiguous, and reveal scant historical detail that enables us to flesh out the chronology of his expedition with any degree of confidence. Perhaps not surprisingly, much of what has been written is speculative. For example, Hjardar and Vike (2016: 367), in their somewhat inflated account of Ingvar’s journey, claim that he ‘led a fleet of 30 ships and between 500 and 1,000 men [...] to enter the service of Prince Jaroslav of Kiev’, but there is no convincing evidence of this (other than mention of thirty ships) either in the saga, on the runestones, or other historical sources. Far from fighting on Jarisleif’s (‘Jaroslav’s’) behalf, the saga tells us:

[...] Yngvar put out to sea with his thirty ships and sailed from Sweden without lowering a sail till he came to Russia. King Jarisleif [Jaroslav] gave him a great welcome and Yngvar stayed there for three years, learning to speak a number of languages (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 50).

The Russian Primary Chronicle (Nestor: 124–135) confirms that Varangians were active militarily in Russia, probably as mercenaries, and in the service of King Jarisleif between 1015–1024, but Ingvar is not explicitly named and in any event was only born in 1016. In fact, it is more likely that Ingvar was in service to King Jolf of Heliopolis, whom he encountered on the voyage:

The king asked Yngvar to help him fight his brother, who was the more powerful of the two and had given Jolf a hard time. Yngvar promised that, when he came back from the East, he would help (Pálsson and Edwards 1989: 54).

There has been some speculation that King Jolf and King Bagrat IV of Georgia are the same person (Peterson 2016: 230), but no substantive evidence of this can be found in the literature.
other than a now archived web page published some years ago by the Riksantikvarieämbetet (‘Swedish National Heritage Board’) (2013) concerning runestone U661, which links Bagrat and Jolf hypothetically. This is far from a ringing endorsement of the claim that King Jolf and Bagrat IV are the same person. Moreover, the names are so phonetically different that it is hard to understand how they could have been associated. To complicate matters further, the Chronicle of Kartli, which does not mention Ingvar, suggests that the Varangians were not in service to Bagrat IV but his brother Liparit and fought for the latter in the Battle of Sasireti, one of the most important battles to be fought during the Georgian civil war in the 1040s:

The Varangians came, three thousand men in all. Lip’arit’ (?) stationed them at Bashi. He brought with him seven hundred more men. Bagrat’ came with troops from the interior of the kingdom. Failing to wait for the Meskhians, the Varangians came and engaged Bagrat’s men at the entrance to Sasireti forest. The interior troops fled (Anon: 157).

However, much hinges on the translation of the Georgian text, which is equivocal. The second sentence of the extract above omits the subject in the original Georgian and begins with the predicate. The identity of the person who ‘stationed them at Bashi’ is believed to be Liparit but could also be interpreted to mean Bagrat.24 The Battle of Sasireti is also problematic date-wise as Javakhishvili (2010: 149) dates it to 1046, five years after Ingvar’s presumed death.

Discussion

Following detailed examination of all the runestones that bear the name Ingvar and those thought to be Ingvar stones for inferential reasons, we can conclude with reasonable confidence that the expedition described in the saga is attested by nineteen probable and five possible runestones in Sweden. Indeed, no other event or expedition of the scale depicted in Yngvars saga víðförla has been recorded on so many runestones. Whilst this is not proof in itself, the Icelandic annalistic evidence discussed above adds credence to the supposition, although Zilmer (2005: 120) wisely cautions against jumping to conclusions.

According to the saga, Ingvar died in 1041. The year 1040/41 also marks the death of someone with an identical name in three Icelandic annals. Although no other biographical information is provided, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that the two Ingvars are the same person given the congruence of dates. Sadly, verifiable genealogical evidence is non-existent,
and Ingvar’s ancestry remains contested, although it is possible that he may have been the great-grandson of King Eiríkr in sigraði. Frustratingly, the Ingvar runestones are unhelpful as a biographical resource.

From a historical perspective, verifiable information other than runestones that confirms Ingvar’s expedition took place is conspicuously absent. Although the Russian Primary Chronicle and Chronicle of Kartli tell us that Varangians were active militarily in Russia and Georgia, neither mentions Ingvar or tallies date-wise. At best the evidence is circumstantial. As a source of geographical evidence, Yngvars saga vîðförla’s value is marginal at best: few place names are mentioned, many of those that are named are ambiguous, and topographic details make little geographic sense. The saga reports that Ingvar first sailed from Sweden to Russia and thereafter east in search of the source of an unnamed river. However, the exact route he followed is highly contested. The Ingvar runestones confirm that austr ‘east’ was the direction taken and a small number of stones suggest that Serkland, land of the Saracens in what is probably the Middle East or Central Asia, was the end destination. Problematically, the saga mentions a number of exotic locations in North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean that position Ingvar c. 850–1,500 miles west of the Black and Caspian Seas. Attempts to reconcile the discrepancy have not proved successful and result in unconvincing theories that neither the saga, runestones nor other historical sources are able to resolve. The conundrum is further exacerbated by the fact that east may actually be southeast given what we now know about the Viking compass’s mis-rotation from true, geographical North.

Of course, mention of place names in the saga should not lead to the conclusion that Ingvar actually visited them or even followed the route implied (Taylor 2014: 327). What they do tell us is that the place names were known to the author. The same can be said of Serkland which is mentioned on a handful of runestones – the name must have been known to those who carved or commissioned the runestones. Given that there was already regular traffic between Scandinavia, Russia and Byzantium by the time Ingvar embarked on his journey (Shepard 1984), it is likely that place names such as Serkland were already embedded in the public consciousness, but that does not mean people knew where they were. Indeed, Lönnroth contends that most of the people who erected the Ingvar runestones did not have a clear idea of where their loved ones died except that it was far away – the deceased, including Ingvar, were ‘great heroes who went on a mission or quest somewhere in the east and never came back’ (Lönnroth 2014: 103). Destinations such as Serkland were indefinable
places far beyond the limits of the physical world they knew. The same can be said of austr which was as much an imagined, literary concept as it was a direction or destination. Far-travel was a narrative device (Shafer 2010: 2) which allowed medieval writers to populate their sagas with exotic place names and improbable deeds.

**Conclusion**

To conclude this paper, let us return to the central questions underpinning this study: do the Ingvar runestones bear witness to the expedition described in *Yngvars saga víðförla* and do they shed light on the route followed by Ingvar? There can be little doubt that the eponymous runestones commemorate an important event in Viking history, but do they provide evidence of the voyage recounted in the saga? The answer is a cautious yes, but not without reservation. The laconic inscriptions provide scant geographical or historical detail and the evidence is circumstantial at best. All that the runestones tell us is that Ingvar headed east and possibly to Serkland. This is the limit of the geographical or historical evidence offered by the runestones.
Notes

1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and helpful suggestions to improve this paper. Any final errors are mine alone. I would also like to thank Christer Hamp for generously allowing me to make use of images from his extensive collection of runestone photos at his website: http://www.christerhamp.se/runor/gamla/index.html.

2 Modern English spelling of Old Norse proper nouns will be used in this paper, for example Ingvar rather than Yngvarr except when quoting verbatim from other sources. In other instances, the spelling of proper nouns used by Pálsson and Edwards (1989) in their English translation of the saga will be used. If no English or modern Scandinavian form is available, the Old Norse form will be used instead. Both normalised Old Norse text and English translations of runic inscriptions have been taken from the Samnordisk runtextdatabas (2014). However, for consistency, Ingvar is used instead of Ingvarr.

3 A runestone is a raised stone that bears a runic inscription. Many runestones are typically erected as memorials and commemorate someone who died. Customarily, the inscriptions follow a simple, repetitive formula, namely 'X (and Y) raised this stone in memory of Z, their relative' (Williams 2008: 283).

4 See Phelpstead (2009) and Antonsson (2012) for a summary of the debate concerning authorship.

5 For the purposes of this study, the Viking Age is defined as a period of approximately 250 years that extended from the late eighth to mid-eleventh centuries (Barrett 2008:671; Brink 2008:4; Tvauri 2012:18).

6 Although Lindkvist (1999: 49) states that Ingvar’s expedition is mentioned on twenty-five runestones, he lists only twenty-three in his footnote.

7 Two runestones on Sawyer’s (2000: 119) list have unexplained question marks against them.

8 Jesch’s (2001: 103) list is made up of twenty-one likely and five possible runestones (shown in italics).

9 Despite the different identification codes, U (Arlanda), N 32 and U Fv1992:157 all refer to the same runestone, i.e. the Arlanda runestone, which is currently on display in Terminal 2 at Stockholm’s Arlanda Airport.

10 The runestone identification codes refer to Swedish provinces: Ög = Östergötland; Sö = Södermanland; U = Uppland; Vs = Västmanland.


12 Ög 145, Sö 96, Sö 279, U 837.


14 M 4, Sö 179, Sö 277, Sö 279, U 1143.


16 In terms of the place of articulation, the /k/ in askalat is velar, as is the /k/ in Serklandi, whereas the /t/ in Eistaland is alveolar (Rogers 2013: 336).

17 For the purposes of this discussion, only one variant reading is shown above.

18 For a summary of the debate regarding the two routes, see Logan (1991: 182-183).

19 Serkland is mentioned several times by Snorri Sturluson in Heimskringla, but most modern translations translate it as Saracen Land (see for example Hollander 1964 and 2009: 6).

20 Mikligarðr is better known as Constantinople today.
Measured using Google Maps.

The Dnieper Rapids ceased to exist when ninety kilometres of the river were flooded in 1932 when the Dnieper Hydroelectric Station was built (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2001).

For a summary of the debate concerning translation of the ambiguous text, the reader is referred to endnote 110 of the Chronicle of Kartli (Anon: 168).
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