

VÉSTEINN ÓLASON

THE FANTASTIC ELEMENT IN
FOURTEENTH CENTURY *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*
A SURVEY¹

MUCH has been written about the concept of the fantastic in literature (Todorov 1970/1975, Hume 1984, Jackson 1986). I shall use the word in a broad and – for me – conveniently vague sense in this attempt to survey a section of this field. Fantasy is indeed a necessary precondition for the creation and enjoyment of fiction, but it is also an intrinsic feature of all historical narrative and its interpretation. Nevertheless we tend to make a distinction between narratives characterized by fantasy and those supposed to be a ‘true’ imitation of the ‘real’ world. Obviously, images created by fantasy bear some relation to reality, that is to say, to experience, but they exaggerate, reverse and transform experience to such a degree that it may be hard to recognize for other people than their creators. However, since the basic conditions of human life and the workings of the human mind seem to be very deeply rooted in our culture, fantastic images are similar in different cultures, and within each culture certain conventions are formed that help people to express their own fantasies and interpret the ones of others. Thus a certain kind of belief is created, belief in phenomena that cannot be experienced in the same concrete way as everyday experiences: belief in ghosts or revenants, giants or magicians, dwarves and elves, in the ability of certain parts or aspects of the individual to leave the body and travel long distances, etc. For the present generation (most of its academics, anyway) such phenomena are easy to distinguish from our own experiences because we have not had them and do not believe in them, we consider them to be creations of the mind, fantasies or fantastic. It is or was more complicated to identify the fantastic in times when most people believed

¹ Based on a lecture given at the XIIIth International Saga Conference, Durham 6th-12th August 2006, which had the themes: “The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature” and “Sagas and the British Isles”. This article can be seen as supplementing my attempt at a general description of the genre of *Íslendingasögur* in my book from 1998, as well as an article of mine from 2007.

in supernatural beings, in miracles and in an afterlife. Although all this may seem trivial or obvious, it may be useful to be reminded of it when taking part in discussions of the element of the fantastic in literature created many hundred years ago by people who had widely different beliefs from ours.

In a previous study I have looked at the appearances of revenants in a few sagas in connection with medieval Icelanders' ideas about the dead (Vésteinn Ólason 2003). The examples I discussed demonstrate, I believe, that although people believed such fantastic phenomena as revenants to be real in a concrete and physical sense, they feared them or marvelled at them, thinking that they did not properly belong in their world; they felt that such beings should be avoided and got rid of, especially if they were becoming aggressive or disturbing. Therefore they were a different category than human beings, belonging to the category of the Other, even at that time. It was a different experience to hear and see your father or your neighbour recite a verse or wander around while he was alive than doing so when he was dead and buried. Such occurrences can be placed in the realm of the fantastic. The same would apply to black magic of swift and immediate effect, of shape-changing and certain kinds of visions. The category is not easy to define, however, and I shall, for instance, make no attempt to draw a line between the supernatural and the imaginary.

There are also in narrative literature works that use such exaggeration in the description of human characters and their actions that they may well be called fantastic. In that case it is even more difficult to define what is fantastic and what not. We know that some men are stronger and better fighters than others, but how great does the difference have to be to put tales about them in the category of the fantastic? That a hero conquers three of his peers in a fight is possible and can be made plausible, but what about eleven as Egill Skallagrímsson did according to his saga, or several hundreds as may occur in a romance? Saga heroes sometimes defeat great champions, notorious vikings, berserks and *blámenn*, ghosts and giants, and great numbers of them at that; some of them also wrestle with bears or other fierce animals and kill them with their bare hands. I shall look upon such motifs as fantastic, although my feeling is that moderate exaggeration is part and parcel of narrative art and cannot qualify as a fantastic element; the line goes somewhere between unlikely and impossible.

Exaggerations may be entertaining and even plausible if stories are well told, and many in an audience may believe that such stories are true, that things were indeed of greater dimensions in the past or in places far away, etc.;

however, exaggerations may also be of a comic nature and even turn into parody; in such cases 'fantastic' is hardly an appropriate term. This distinction is relevant with regard to some late sagas. Without making any further distinctions I shall say only that I will take into account both the supernatural category and the category of fantastic exaggeration when I discuss the fantastic element in the sagas. I shall also point out related characteristics in individual sagas, which in my opinion are likely to be parody and where the supernatural and the exaggerated consequently have a different function from the one they have in fantastic tales, but in these cases it may be controversial whether a narrative is a parody or not.

The second part of my title, 'fourteenth century *Íslendingasögur*', is not altogether unproblematic either. I have chosen to deal with sagas that are commonly thought to have been composed after 1300 in the form in which they are preserved. I shall rely mainly upon *Íslensk fornrit* for the datings, not because I think they are necessarily always right, but I think they are sufficiently exact for my practical purpose. I have also decided to include only what is named *saga* in these editions, although several *þættir* could be called sagas, and some (or at least one) of these sagas could be called a *þáttr*. Let me say also that the year 1300, the turn of a century, is obviously chosen for practical reasons. There are fantastic elements present in the sagas all through the thirteenth century, and in all fourteenth century sagas there are 'realistic' or 'historical' elements – I am here referring to a historical mode of writing rather than to 'historical' in the sense of 'what really happened'. I shall maintain, however, that in the years, say, 1270-1310, changes were taking place in saga writing which had as a result that as a whole the fourteenth century sagas are different from the thirteenth century sagas. There is continuation but there is also change.²

There is no doubt that one cause of these changes in literature is changes in society; on the surface of the texts this is revealed by deviance from the standard image of the functioning of the judicial system, in references to commonwealth law, in the use of terms like 'lögmaðr' instead of 'lögsoðgumaðr',

² My ideas about the development of the writing of *Íslendingasögur* in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are presented and argued in my *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, see esp. pp. 211-20. In *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol II, p. 42, I have attempted a grouping according to date, although with considerable overlappings between the groups. More precise datings of twelfth and thirteenth century saga writing is attempted in Theodore M. Andersson's *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*.

etc. On a deeper level it can be seen in the reduced importance of feud and power politics. Apart from *Fljótsdæla saga* and *Svarfdæla saga*, that are based on older sagas, most of the sagas listed here are in a biographical mode; these two can be characterized as regional. *Hávarðar saga* is closer to a feud saga since it begins when the protagonist is already past his prime and describes one killing and its consequences. The biographical saga was indeed not a novelty in the fourteenth century. Many of the sagas that can make claims to being early, such as the skald-sagas (including *Egils saga*), can be classified as biographical, but the regional and feud sagas are the most characteristic thirteenth century *Íslendingasögur*, and it is significant that the biographical dominates saga writing so strongly again in the last phase of the genre.³ The explanation is, I believe, that the mechanism of feud and the issues at stake in feud were no longer an important and highly relevant issue for the saga writers and audiences in the fourteenth century when social and political conditions were more stable than they were in the thirteenth century. The heroes in our sagas usually face one adversary after the other, and the thread that connects them is the person of the hero and his almost unconquerable strength; their composition is therefore usually episodic.

The main subject of this article, the fantastic in late sagas, is very closely connected to another subject, namely the interplay of modes and genres in narrative literature. It must also be emphasized that fantastic elements are present in many thirteenth century sagas, both early and late ones. *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* are obvious examples. These sagas are so well known that there is no reason to enumerate fantastic elements appearing in them, although the question will be raised whether they are different from fantastic elements in later sagas or have a different function. There are, however, many early sagas where the fantastic plays only a modest role and appears mainly in a few legendary or folkloric motifs, if at all. Here we could mention *Bandamanna saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, *Valla-Ljóts saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Vopnfirðinga saga*. The boundaries are unclear, and I agree with those like Margaret Clunies Ross (1997) who have said that the saga is modally mixed in this respect.

The importance of fantastic elements is very different from one saga to another within the group under discussion. First a few fourteenth century

³ These terms are used by Theodore M. Andersson 2006.

sagas will be discussed that make little or limited use of fantastic elements and then those where such elements play a significant role.

Looking at the sagas from the fourteenth century we find the same mixture of modes as in the earlier sagas, but with some important differences: *Þórðar saga hreðu* has no fantastic elements to speak of; it tells tales of a great champion, many of whose victories are unlikely but hardly fantastic. He is a great and brave fighter and often victorious against odds; and he also has other qualifications, as a craftsman, but neither he nor his adversaries fall in the category of the fantastic. The bulk of *Finnboga saga* is of a similar kind, but its first part has many folktale elements. His bare-handed fight with a bull, whose head he rips off, while he is still a youth, and shortly after that the killing of a bear that seems to understand human language, are definitely fantastic. Typically, such deeds are done in youth while the hero is proving himself, while the feuds and conflicts Finnbogi gets involved in as a grown up farmer in Iceland are more of a kind well known from thirteenth century sagas. Similarly, *Fljótsdæla saga* begins with a folktale about how the hero frees his future wife, an earl's daughter, from a giant living in a cave – an obvious folktale motif – but the continuation in Iceland is in no significant way different from older *Íslendingasögur* and contains no fantastic elements. At the very end of the text – the end of the saga is missing, if it ever was finished – there is a scene of a legendary kind where the protagonist breaks images of heathen gods blaming them for doing him harm, but where the story breaks off nothing has yet happened that qualifies as a fantastic element.

In *Harðar saga* the protagonist is an outstanding fighter, but the only really fantastic accounts of his feats are limited to the introductory section taking place abroad; he enters a grave, wrestles with a ghost, wins over him and takes his treasures. However, after inconclusive skirmishes and a life as an outlaw Hǫrðr's last defence is heroic and exaggerated: he jumps over a three-fold circle of men, and when he is beaten a *herfjotr* has fallen on him, that is, he is paralysed, probably by magic. In the end his great valour cannot save his life, and this gives the saga a tragic tone. The saga of Hǫrðr's family with its many internal conflicts contains material for a great tragic drama, but the author does not succeed in exploiting its potentialities. It is as if the episodic folktale-like narrative structure of the saga does not allow the development of its interesting psychological aspects.

Króka-Refs saga and *Víglundar saga* differ each in its own way from other fourteenth century sagas. *Víglundar saga* is a pure romance about lovers marked out for each other whose union is opposed with dirty means and black

magic by bad people until the idealised lovers are in the end united with the help of the good people. The hero always wins every fight although the odds are against him, and characterization is highly exaggerated; the whole atmosphere is romantic while the style is a successful mixture of *Íslendingasaga* style and that of translated romances. Although totally incredible and anachronistic *Víglundar saga* is in a historical mode and strives to keep the outward appearance of an *Íslendingasaga*. There are several stanzas in skaldic metre, but the style is more related to the skaldic verse of the fifteenth century than that of earlier times.

Króka-Refs saga is also told in traditional saga style, although what happens is equally incredible. In the beginning it is pinned down in time through a reference to King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, in place by names of farms, and in genealogy by connecting the hero with the well-known Gestr Oddleifsson. Later the author disregards chronology in order to stage a confrontation between Refr and Haraldr Sigurðarson harðráði. The hero, although certainly a brave and good fighter, solves all his problems with his outstanding intelligence and cleverness with words as well as his great engineering talents. The saga is unique for its pseudo-rationalism. Króka-Refr is a great trickster but his tricks all have a rational explanation, however incredible. There is a recent and excellent analysis of this saga in Martin Arnold's book about the post-classical saga. Its essence is well described by Arnold: „*Króka-Refs saga* is less concerned with the ethicality of heroic fortitude than with establishing a superhero whose pedigree owes more to the fantastic hero of *Märchen* than to the *drengskapr* of the classical *Íslendingasögur*.“ (Arnold 2003:196). This statement applies to many of the fourteenth century heroes, although Króka-Refr is, with Hávarðr Ísfirðingr, the one most likely to be a figure of parody or at least exaggeration created to evoke laughter rather than naive admiration in the audience.

In *Hávarðar saga* a young hero has repeated fights with a very physical ghost in the first part of the saga. When the young hero has been killed his mother demonstrates both fantastic foresight and probably some command of magic, but the really fantastic element in the saga is the incredible revival of the old and for a long time infirm protagonist, Hávarðr, who rises to prove himself an unconquerable champion having lain in bed for three years overcome by grief and, according to his own words, without sleep (although his wife says that that must be a great lie, *allmikil lygi*). It might be said that this saga includes a very unusual version of the male cinderella motif, since Hávarðr is elderly and has a past as a warrior when he rises up from the ashes

and shows his true nature. Everything in this saga is exaggerated and incredible, but apart from the introduction supernatural motifs are not important. *Hávarðar saga* shows a marvellous sense of humour, and it is not unlikely that it is intended as a parody or at least a tongue-in-cheek comedy (Halldór Guðmundsson 1990).

Flóamanna saga has this in common with *Hávarðar saga*, but not much else, that the protagonist Þorgils Þorrabeinsstjúpr retains his valour into old age, and like Króka-Refr in his saga Þorgils has exciting adventures in Greenland. He is introduced into the saga after a long and learned introduction about his forefathers and their dealings with other chieftains in Flói (in the south lowlands of Iceland), and he is strikingly similar to Egill Skallagrímsson in some ways; for instance, he kills one of his step-father's horses when he is five years old to prove that he is worthy of playing with other boys. At nine and ten he is already behaving like a teenager, outdoing and bullying grown-ups, and at sixteen he embarks upon his first voyage abroad, and soon wrestles with two ghosts, one after the other, and subdues them, cutting off the head of one and burning the other. There follows a series of victories over viking champions, and back home Þorgils continues to be unbeatable although the adversaries now seem much less formidable. Contrary to his character, as it seems, although this is common in fourteenth century sagas, Þorgils receives Christianity eagerly and subsequently disregards both threats and offerings of help from the god Þórr. Þorgils decides to move to Greenland, and the voyage involves him in severe hardship where various strange and fantastic events occur. After a period with many conflicts in Greenland and an episode in Ireland, where he once again proves his valour, he resumes farming in Iceland and becomes an extremely grumpy but quite vital old man. Dying in old age like Egill he is equally unbeatable and has faced more hardship and more formidable adversaries than most heroes. He is a memorable character, and there is great variation in his adventures. The fantastic element adds colour to his saga, but apart from the section about Þorgils' youth the realistic and fantastic modes are evenly mixed.

Svarfdæla saga cannot be described by concentrating on a protagonist because it deals with several generations, and it is difficult to say about one of the main characters, Klaufi, whether he is a hero or an adversary. In the first part of the saga Þorsteinn svørfuðr is the hero, and he kills formidable vikings and gets an earl's daughter as wife. In the second generation his nephew Klaufi, who has a monstrous appearance and immense strength, proves his might at fighting and killing, but after he has been killed himself, he becomes

a terrible revenant who speaks and kills and behaves even worse than he did when he was alive. There are many other incredible and fantastic events and phenomena in this saga, such as the long lasting sex appeal of the much-tormented Yngvildr fǫgurkinn. The lacunas in the text make it difficult to analyse.

Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls is indeed of similar length as many *þættir* and shares some motifs with them. Gunnar is a strong and resourceful fighter in his youth in Iceland, and his enemies try without success to use magic against him. When abroad he fights giants and a great champion, a *blámaðr*, that the evil Hákon Jarl sets him up against. Back in Iceland he kills an enemy and is then reconciled with this man's sister, who is a witch. This is a somewhat tame ending for a narrative that has strayed into the area of the fantastic for a while.

The four remaining sagas are the ones where the fantastic elements are best integrated and of greatest significance in the overall structure.

Grettis saga is best known of all fourteenth century sagas. Grettir is a typical hero in many ways, fighting and conquering a mound-dweller, twelve berserks, and a bear in his youth. Although he is one of the most human of saga heroes, his fate later in life is to fight against a terrible ghost and against monsters that seem related to Grendel and his mother.⁴ For a while he is befriended by a giant, Hallmundr, and in the end conquered when an evil witch has weakened him with her magic tricks. The implication is that no human might could have killed him if he had been in good health. Grettir's story is a tragic one, and he is defeated by his enemies. His dealings with the ghost Glámr are the most effective and genuinely fantastic scenes in all sagaliterature. *Grettis saga* is certainly the most truly fantastic of the sagas in a modern sense, because it makes the reader hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of events, as required by Todorov in his much quoted study (Todorov 1973:33). Obviously, the supernatural is real in the saga, Glámr and other supernatural beings are real, and Þuríðr, Þorbjörn öngull's fostermother is a real witch, but the reader is invited to interpret Grettir's faults of character as the primary cause of his misfortunes, although the supernatural is also offered as a credible alternative appearing almost at every crossroad in

⁴ This relationship was pointed out long ago and has often been discussed. I want to emphasize, however, that I do not think there needs to be any *direct* relationship between the two narratives, although the same or similar folkloric and legendary motifs occur, v. Magnús Fjalldal 1998; cf. Marijane Osborne 2007.

Grettir's life.⁵ Fate is frequently mentioned; it has a different character from the sense of fate or predestination created by Njáll's prophecies in his saga. It is in fact interesting to compare *Grettis saga* and *Njáls saga*. Although *Njáls saga* describes many supernatural occurrences they do not play a crucial role in the action of the saga. Divine or daemonic powers do not directly influence the course of events. The revenant Gunnarr does not himself attack his enemies as Glámr or Klaufi do. Njáll's death is caused by a series of events that have psychological and social explanations, but are in no way seen as caused by divine intervention. The saga of Grettir is more tightly focussed on the personal fate of the protagonist than most earlier sagas; he repeatedly has direct, physical encounters with supernatural beings and is, in the end, conquered with the help of magic. In *Njáls saga* we are rather distant witnesses to the strange vision of Gunnarr reciting his stanza in his mound or the norns weaving and singing *Darraðarljóð*, while it is an insensitive reader who is not deeply affected by the awe that for a while paralyzes Grettir while facing Glámr in the moonlight and listening to his curse.

A different tragic fate is suffered by the hero of *Kjalnesinga saga*, Búi Andriðarson, who in the end is quite unexpectedly killed by the son he has conceived with a giantess, after he has seemed to be invincible in numerous confrontations. Although his saga has a regional name, and its setting within Iceland is narrow, it is a strictly biographical saga. Búi „soon stood out from other young men, bigger and stronger than the others and more handsome to look at.“ He is fostered and protected with magic by his fostermother Esja. She has the name of the mountain they live by and has access to hidden caves in this mountain; it seems uncertain whether she is a normal human being, albeit a magician, or some kind of a mountain-giant. Búi shows an aversion to heathen practices and refuses to make sacrifices. When he has been outlawed for this he reacts by killing the son of the *goði* of Kjalarnes and burning the temple. His fostermother manages to protect him from revenge and other dangers, and on his way to the ship that is to take him abroad he is attacked by twelve men, kills six of them and gets away. In Norway he undertakes a mission for the king and enters a mountain to visit the giant Dofri. Búi leaves this place with the treasure he was sent to retrieve, but Dofri's daughter, who

⁵ Kathryn Hume (1984:184-85) points out the possibility of a psychological interpretation of Grettir's dealings with Glámr, whom she sees as 'really a projection of Grettir's own inner being, a kind of shadow', which helps to explain the fascination of the incident, although the interpretation is given in modern terms.

has been his helper, is pregnant by him. There follows a victorious duel with a *blámaðr* of immense strength, and back in Iceland Búi repeats the victory over twelve men. When he has been reconciled with his enemies he meets his fate in the son he has had with Dofri's daughter. Búi refuses to recognize the son, who is only twelve years old, and demands that they wrestle. With the help of his mother, who on this occasion is invisible, the son kills Búi and then leaves Iceland again. Búi's strength is great, but he is repeatedly saved from danger by the protective magic of his fostermother and the help of his giantess lover, and in the end his former lover interferes in his wrestling with their son and causes his death. Thus the borders of the world of magic and giants are frequently crossed in this saga, and the fate of the protagonist is decided by his dealings with female supernatural beings, as is common in fairy tales.

Like the other late sagas *Kjalnesinga saga* has the surface characteristics of an *Íslendingasaga* with tales about *landnám* and connection with known historical figures such as Helgi bjóla son of Ketill Flatnose, and King Haraldr Finehair; also, the fights between farmers on *Kjalarnes* are precisely located in real landscape with known placenames. However, Búi is no usual saga hero. He is fostered by a woman knowledgeable of magic who is somehow mysteriously connected with a mountain. Although not a Christian for good historical reasons, Búi shows strong aversion to paganism in his youth and burns a pagan temple, and in Norway he actually 'goes into the mountains', lives there and begets a child. The duel between father and son is of course a well known motif from heroic legend, and in the same way as Búi crosses borders, the saga crosses or wipes out the borderline between heroic *fornaldarsaga* and *Íslendingasaga*.

Porskfirðinga saga or *Gull-Þóris saga* is incomplete because parts of it have been erased from the only vellum manuscript (all the others are copies of this ms. of a much later date). This saga is extremely rich in personal names – some of them from *Landnáma*, some fictional – as well as placenames which are interpreted as drawn from personal names. Thus the saga is given an historical appearance, although several of the names arouse suspicion that the saga is not to be taken seriously as history. The protagonist fights dragons in his youth and thereby lays his hands on a gold-treasure which he guards jealously. Back in Iceland he takes up farming and kills many people in the conflicts he gets involved in. All his victories do little to strengthen his position, however, but in his old age he disappears and is thought to have turned into a dragon watching his gold in a waterfall named *Gullfoss*. An older version of this saga that *Sturla Þórðarson* refers to in his *Landnáma*-version

also contained the treasure, and Þórhallur Vilmundarson has pointed out (1991:cxxxi), that an early (oral) version of the saga may well have contained fantastic elements. *Þorskfirðinga saga* has several things in common with *Egils saga*, but in my opinion the two sagas lie on either side of a boundary with regard to the function of the fantastic. Egill is a fantastically good fighter, and there is an archaic semi-mythical trait in the personalities of Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr and Egill, a trait that however disappears entirely from the family with Þorsteinn Egilsson. Both Skalla-Grímr and Egill possess treasures like Gull-Þórir, but the silver-chests of *Egils saga* have their origin in human dealings, acquired as compensation for his brother, whereas Þórir's hoard is acquired in a truly mythical way from dragons residing under a waterfall. Skalla-Grímr and Egill hide their treasures before they die, but their death is normal and they are buried according to custom. Egill's bones even end up in a churchyard, whereas Gull-Þórir disappears with his hoard, and the saga says that it is believed that he turned into a dragon lying on his gold-chests. The saga has crossed the boundaries to heroic myth and fairy tale while retaining significant generic indicators that pin it down as an *Íslendingasaga*. It is closer to folktale and myth than *Grettis saga*, although its fantastic elements are not as effectively integrated in the narrative.

I have put *Bárðar saga* last of my examples because of all the sagas classified as *Íslendingasögur* it is the only one whose protagonist is not entirely human; Bárðr's father Dumbr is of the race of giants and trolls while his mother, Mjöll daughter of Snær the old of Kvenland, is "a pretty woman and nearly the largest of all women who were human." Bárðr is brought up with Dofri in Dofrafjöll (also appearing in *Kjalnesinga saga*, as well as *Ágrip* and later kings' sagas) and later goes to Iceland. When his daughter Helga has been thrown into the sea by her cousins (and in seven days drifts on ice to Greenland) Bárðr falls out with his brother and soon leaves human society for the mountains, preferring to live in a cave in a glacier rather than continue life as a farmer. From this point onwards Bárðr seems to be roaming around in the wilderness, able to appear swiftly out of nowhere to assist those who summon him. Bárðr and his children constantly cross the borders between the world of men and giants or trolls. In fact Bárðr, much like Esja in *Kjalnesinga saga*, is mysteriously identified with the land, and the name Snæfellsáss marks him out as a *landvætr* rather than a human hero. *Bárðar saga* has no signs of being a parody or a tongue-in cheek comedy. Its tone is in fact rather melancholy as if the attitude to Bárðr and his children in this saga is a mixture of compassion and admiration.

This very brief and incomplete survey of fantastic elements in fourteen sagas usually dated in the fourteenth century ought to have given some impression of the variety of elements we find in them, some fantastic in nature, others more realistic or mimetic. As stated earlier, fantastic elements appear in sagas from early on. We need only to think of the tale of Snjófríðr in *Ágrip*, to see that there are fantastic elements in one of the earliest king's saga texts. Exaggeration of strength and fighting skills is an inheritance from heroic tales and poems; we find it in early sagas of Ólaf Tryggvason and in *Egils saga*, but in the fourteenth century sagas they are such a fixed characteristic of the heroes that there is seldom any doubt about the outcome of their fights.

Folktales of various kinds, some historical and local in nature others fantastic, were no doubt among the sources of *Íslendingasögur*, as well as *fornaldarsögur*. Although most *fornaldarsögur* may not have been written before the fourteenth century, there can be no doubt that their most popular motifs were known and widely used in oral tales referring back to the viking age. A fight with a notorious viking, often fought by the coast of an island or a promontory, is quite a common motif in *fornaldarsögur*. It is sometimes found in *Íslendingasögur*; in *Njáls saga*, for instance, both Hrótr and Gunnar are involved in such fights and win glorious victories. Duels with famous champions, berserks or blámenn, often on behalf of a king, is another *fornaldarsaga*-motif frequently found in the late *Íslendingasögur*, but also in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, a saga that is usually considered to be rather early (Theodore M. Andersson 2006 and others; Bjarni Guðnason considers it to be late, around 1300 or even later, 1994:84). Not only does Björn win all Russia (*Garðaríki*) for the king in Kiev in a duel but later kills a *flugdreki*, 'flying dragon'. Such a dragon appears again in *Þorskfirðinga saga*. Both in thirteenth century and fourteenth century sagas such adventures most commonly occur in episodes that take place outside Iceland, and they become increasingly frequent. Although events taking place in Iceland are for the most part also less exaggerated in the fourteenth century sagas, they are marked out by the concentration on the excellence and survival abilities of the hero, which are demonstrated in loosely connected scenes. The difficulties the protagonist is up against are created by evil enemies rather than any social bonds.

The difference between fantastic elements of exaggeration in the thirteenth and fourteenth century sagas is mostly one of degree; that is, fantastic elements occur more frequently and exaggerations are usually greater in fourteenth century sagas. More importantly, fantastic elements of a supernatural kind play a significantly different function in a few of the late sagas from any

of the earlier sagas. I have already pointed out that the fantastic elements in *Njáls saga* do not have the same function as the ones in *Grettis saga*. In *Njáls saga* it seems to me that such elements are primarily symbolic and have the function of enhancing the pathos of the narrative while the course of events is not changed by them. Högni and Skarphéðinn would no doubt have conducted the vengeance for Gunnar although he had not appeared to them and urged them to be relentless against their enemies. *Brjánsbardagi* would have taken place without the visions occurring ahead of it. Njáll may have atoned for his sins before he was burnt but there is no divine interference to save his life.

Eyrbyggja saga, to take a saga with a strong fantastic element, is primarily about social and political conditions and conflicts in the old society. The revenants appearing affect the lives of human beings, but their world is mostly clearly distinguished from the world of the living, and the supremacy of human society in this world is confirmed when the revenants obey the verdict of a human court and disappear (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 55).⁶ The fantastic elements in the saga are a mixture of popular motifs of pre-Christian or at least non-Christian origins and influences from religious literature, quite obvious in the whole Fróðá-episode.

In spite of their proximity to the fornaldarsögur, the *Íslendingasögur* from the fourteenth century all have important generic indicators showing that they are intended to be of the same kind as the ones from the thirteenth century: they all pretend to be history. However, generic boundaries are less clear in the fourteenth century sagas than they were, say, in the second half of the thirteenth century, and this is one of the reasons why fantastic elements are more prominent in the late *Íslendingasögur*. There must be other reasons for this than an increased influence of folktale and fornaldarsaga. Why were such matters more appealing and interesting in the fourteenth century than they were in the thirteenth? Two possibilities, not mutually exclusive, come to mind:

- 1) Historical legends, local traditions about events in the near and distant past, were used as material for literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but this source was drying up in the fourteenth while there was an abundance of more fantastic lore that could be used as material and inspiration for saga writers. This would in my opinion apply to the sagas with the

⁶ This episode and its social context has most recently been discussed by Torfi H. Tulinius 2007.

most fantastic elements of a supernatural kind. Such material was also used to enrich and embellish older sagas that were being rewritten like *Svarfdæla saga*. Jokingly, we could say, that human settlers were first to arrive in the country and to find place in literature. Gradually the country was settled also by all kinds of supernatural beings, often closely connected with particular places, mountains, waterfalls etc. As time passed they also found their place in literature.

- 2) It has often been argued that there is a close connection between the qualities of the sagas of the thirteenth century and the fundamental changes that were taking place in Icelandic society and in values governing people's conduct at the time. Therefore social and individual concerns are increasingly integrated in many of these sagas, and in a late thirteenth century saga, *Njáls saga*, we find an author who is torn between a recognition of the destructive shortcomings of the old society and a deep feeling of loss. Fourteenth century writers have put all this behind them, and the old society is primarily a formal frame in their sagas; they admire heroism for heroism's sake and are fascinated by the mysterious and uncontrollable forces interfering in human life, forces that our age interprets in psychological terms while in the fourteenth century they found their expression in images of supernatural beings or other forces beyond the control of man.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Íslenzk fornrit* II-XIV. 1933-1991. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík.
- Andersson, Theodore M. 2006. *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Arnold, Martin. 2003. *The Post-Classical Icelandic Family Saga*. (Scandinavian Studies 9). The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston.
- Bjarni Guðnason. 1994. Aldur og einkenni Bjarnar sögu Hítðælakappa. *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 24. apríl 1994*:69-85. Ed. Gísli Sigurðsson et al. Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík.
- Clunies Ross, Margaret. 1997. The Intellectual Complexion of the Icelandic Middle Ages. Toward a New Profile of Old Icelandic Saga Literature. *SS* (69):443-453.
- Halldór Guðmundsson. 1990. Skáldsöguvitund í Íslendingasögum. *Skáldskaparmál* 1: 62-72.
- Hume, Kathryn. 1984. *Fantasy and Mimesis*. Responses to Reality in Western Literature. Methuen, New York.
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1986. *Fantasy*. The Literature of Subversion. New Accents, London.
- Magnús Fjalldal. 1998. *The Long Arm of Coincidence*. The Frustrated Connection between Beowulf and Grettis saga. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Osborne, Marijane. 2007. Manipulating Waterfalls. Mystic Places in Beowulf and Grettissaga, Lawrence and Purnell. *Myth in Early Northwest Europe*:197-224. Ed. S. Glosecki et al. Brepols, Turnhout.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. *The Fantastic*. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre. Trans. Richard Howard. Cornell University Press, Ithaca. (Orig. Fr. title: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. 1970).
- Torfi H. Tulinius. 2007. Political Echoes. Reading *Eyrbyggja saga* in Light of Contemporary Conflicts. *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*. Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross:49-62. Ed. Judy Quinn et al. Brepols, Turnhout.
- Vésteinn Ólason (ed.). 1992-93. *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* I-II. Mál og menning, Reykjavík.
- Vésteinn Ólason. 1998. *Dialogues with the Viking Age*. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders. Mál og menning, Reykjavík.
- Vésteinn Ólason. 2003. The Un/Grateful Dead — From Baldr to Bægifótr. *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*:153-171. Ed. Margaret Clunies Ross. (The Viking Collection 14). Odense University Press, Odense.
- Vésteinn Ólason. 2007. The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representation of Reality. *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*. Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross:27-47. Ed. Judy Quinn et al. Brepols, Turnhout.
- Pórhallur Vilmundarson. 1991. Formáli. Harðar saga. Bárðar saga. Þorskfirðinga saga. Flóamanna saga. *Íslenzk fornrit* XIII:v-ccxxviii. Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík.

SUMMARY

‘The Fantastic Element in Fourteenth Century *Íslendingasögur*. A Survey.’

Keywords: *Íslendingasaga* (Family saga), 14th century, fantasy, supernatural elements, exaggeration.

The article analyses family sagas from the 14th century concluding that modally mixed fantastic elements are more prominent in the 14th c. than in the 13th, where interaction with supernatural beings is sometimes central to the plot.

EFNISÁGRIP

Rætt er um hlutverk hins furðulega eða fjarstæðukennda í bókmenntum, en til þess er talið bæði það sem er yfirnátúrllegt og stórkostlegar ýkjur. Í *Íslendingasögum* frá fjórtándu öld er hlutverk hins furðulega mismikið. Í tveim sögum kemur það alls ekki fyrir, en í flestum sögum er furðum blandað í raunsæja frásögn og ýkjur miklar, einkum í upphafi sagna. Mestu skiptir hið furðulega í fjórum sögum: *Grettis sögu*, *Kjalnesinga sögu*, *Þorskfirðinga sögu* og *Bárðar sögu Snæfellsáss*. Þar eiga aðalpersónur í höggi við yfirnátúrlugar verur, og *Bárður Snæfellsáss* er ekki að öllu mannleg vera. Þótt furður komi fyrir í mörgum *Íslendingasögum* frá þrettándu öld verða áhrif furðunnar meiri í sögum fjórtándu aldar. Ástæðurnar má að líkindum rekja bæði til þess efniviðar sem skáldin höfðu úr að móða og breyttra þjóðfélagsaðstæðna.

Vésteinn Ólason
Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum
Háskóla Íslands
Árnagarði við Sudurgötu
IS-101 Reykjavík, Ísland
vesteinn@hi.is