

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly:
Bárðar saga and Its Giants

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How to Recognize an Ogre

Hann var kominn af risakyni í fõðurætt sína, ok er þat vænna fólk ok stærra en aðrir menn, en móðir hans var komin af tröllættum, ok brá því Dumbi í hvárutveggja ætt sína, því at hann var bæði sterkr ok vænn ok góðr viðskiptis, ok kunni því at eiga allt sambland við mennska menn. En um þat brá honum í sitt móðurkyn, at hann var bæði sterkr ok stórvirkr ok umskiptasamr ok illskiptinn, ef honum eigi líkaði nokkut; vildi hann einn ráða við þá, er norðr þar váru, enda gáfu þeir honum konungs nafn, því at þeim þótti mikil forstoð í honum vera fyrir risum ok trøllum ok óvættum; var ok hann inn mesti bjargvætrr øllum þeim, er til hans kølluðu (*Bárðar saga*, pp. 101–2).

This passage, at the very beginning of the late-fourteenth century *Bárðar saga*, is fascinating in its apparent contradictions, which also make it an interesting starting point for a study of giants. However, the most important ambiguity is not present in the passage itself, which is a straightforward depiction of two groups of supernatural beings called *risi* (giant) and *trøll* (troll) and revolves around their antithetical characteristics. However, *risi* and *trøll* are often used as synonyms in late mediaeval literature, and so are *jætunn* and *þurs*, all of which are frequently translated into English as 'giant' (see e.g. Pulsiano and Skaftason, pp. 2–5). And in the late mediaeval legendary sagas, *risi*, *jætunn* and *trøll* seem almost interchangeable.¹

On the other hand, in the passage above, the author of *Bárðar saga* not only claims that *risi* and *trøll* are two distinctive races, but that they are at the opposite ends of the binary divide of good and evil. While nothing is said about the size of *trøll*, *risar* are supposedly bigger and more handsome than other men – they are, in fact, referred to as 'menn' (humans) in the saga. King Dumbr also inherits from his father's side, the *risar*, a gentle disposition which makes him easy to deal with. On the other hand, *trøll* are perhaps not quite so huge but strong, vigorous, unbalanced and nasty, as these character flaws of Dumbr are blamed on the generic makeup inherited from the *trøll* of his mother's side. The confusion between giants and trolls in other sources is replaced here by a simple dualism. Giants are big but good, trolls may or may not be big (at least they are strong) but they are bad. And later on in the saga the word *trølldómr* is used for superhuman knowledge (p. 155).

However, while giants and trolls are distinguishable, they nevertheless intermarry and produce offspring that inherit both of their characteristics. Dumbr is both good and bad, and it is precisely this dual nature which makes him a good king of Dumbshaf, since his set of different qualities makes him the best defender against

¹ To take just one example, in the fifteenth-century *Hjálmþers saga ok Ólvis*, one of the leading character spots a *risi* but two sentences later, this creature speaks and is now a *jætunn*. The next two times, he is *risinn* again, but then he is *jætuninn* (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* III, pp. 486–88).

giants, trolls and ogres, *risum ok tröllum ok óvættum*, although it is not specified why the people of Dumbshaf (which, according to the saga, lies just south of *Risaland*, the land of the giants) should need a defender against the big, handsome and agreeable giants.

It is possible that their enormous size alone might make people afraid of giants, and although the saga distinguishes between giants and trolls, the people of Dumbshaf might not necessarily have done the same. They, like modern translators of the saga and the authors of the *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, may have tended to confuse giants and trolls, and *jǫtnar* and *þursar*, *flǫgð* and *óvættir*. And even if we accepted the sharp distinction made by *Bárðar saga*, they would do so with some justification, since the case of Dumbr indicates that the giants and trolls intermarry and produce beings which are both giants and trolls – a mixture which is potentially extremely nasty but in the case of Dumbr produces an able defender against the Otherworld creatures.

Since every translation is also an interpretation, the position of a translator of *Bárðar saga* who runs into trouble distinguishing between a *risi* and a *tröll* may be compared to that of people of the *Bárðar saga* world who discover themselves to be the neighbours of an Otherworld which includes the said beings. They, too, wrestle with a difficult problem of interpretation, which is: What do you do if you meet an Otherworld being? Is it nice or is it nasty? Is it a giant or a troll? How do you identify the ogre? And this may be said to be a major theme in *Bárðar saga*, which depicts several journeys to the Otherworld, and which also elaborates on the special status of beings who are somehow of two worlds and who may thus be useful intermediaries when fighting ogres. These are King Dumbr, Bárðr himself and his son Gestr.

A Plethora of Monsters

Not only in *Bárðar saga* is there difficulty in discerning who and what the giants are and how to tell *risar*, *jǫtnar* and *þursar* apart. In the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson, there seems to be no clear distinction between giants and various other beings, including humans. There is confusion about where the giants live, what their size is, and the terminology used is vague, to say the least.² What stands out is the giants' strangeness. They are different and therefore hard to fathom, and it is very hard to find any source that, like *Bárðar saga*, is able to confidently divide the giants into groups and elaborate on their differences. As we have seen, that does not mean that there is no confusion about the categorisation and the nature of the giant family in the saga.

The royal hero Vilhjálmr sjóðr is at one time able to kill ninety trolls by naming them all, reciting the so-called *Allra flagða þula* (*Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, pp. 66–68). Apparently, knowing the names of ogres means victory over them — perhaps an ogre that is no longer strange and unknown is no longer an ogre. That may be the reason why giants remain obscure and fuzzy and why those who encounter them never seem to have any alternative but to stare at them in amazement. That may also be why Snorri Sturluson cannot be sure where the giants live, and why sources tend to confuse us by using different terms freely and calling the same creature *tröll*, *þurs*, *jǫtunn* and *risi*, as

² I will discuss this in more detail in a longer version of this article.

if those names are synonymous, while others wish to distinguish between them, usually unsuccessfully (see Schulz, pp. 41–52).³

Collecting evidence may lead to more confusion, not less. The sources do not agree on anything, and some have two or three different versions of the truth. Therefore it seems to be worth the effort to look at every text and try to understand what its version of the giants are, rather than to try to analyse evidence collected *en masse* from various kinds of sources, as has been the approach of several scholars, among whom Lotte Motz is perhaps the most accomplished (see e.g. Motz 1982, Motz 1984, Motz 1996). Neither will I attempt to postulate an ancient clearer demarcation of the various types of giants.⁴ I will begin with a further analysis of *Bárðar saga* and its depiction of giants. It may not be the whole picture of the giant but perhaps, as Cohen has suggested (p. 11), the giant is too gigantic for such a picture to be made: 'the giant is a body that is always in pieces, since within a human frame, he can be perceived only synecdochically, never as a totality'. Thus it makes sense to study the giant in parts.

Near the end of *Bárðar saga*, Gestr, the son of Bárðr, triumphs over the macabre ghost Raknarr with the aid of the spirit of King Óláfr, even though Raknarr has five hundred undead companions in his ship. Gestr probably owes some of his success as a defender against the Otherworld creatures to his heritage, since his father and his grandfather also played this role. And yet it is King Óláfr's aid, less ambiguous in that it is wholly Christian, which makes the difference. Gestr turns to Christianity as the most powerful force in the world. Soon after, he meets his end at the hand of another and more unexpected foe. After he has agreed to be baptised, his father Bárðr comes to him in his dream, calls him a traitor to the faith of his ancestors and places his hands on his eyes. Gestr awakens with a horrible eye pain and dies soon after, in his baptismal clothes (p. 170). The mainly benevolent guardian spirit Bárðr demonstrates thus in his last appearance how dangerous he can also be.

The episode indeed demonstrates the otherworldly powers of Bárðr Dumbsson, established as a counterpoint to those of the human King Óláfr. But while King Óláfr's powers hail from God alone, Bárðr's are ambivalent. He is able to appear and kill people in dreams but he is not a ghost, although he has been alive for a long time. His father is Dumbr and his mother is Mjöll Snæsdóttir, whose origins are uncertain, but who is presented as one of a family of nature spirits in *Flateyjarbók (Hversu Nóregr byggðisk)* and who is said to be the largest of all women who were considered human

³ Some distinction between the giant types have lasted to this day, see the entry *rísi* in the Cleasby/Vigfússon dictionary: 'In popular Icelandic usage *rísi* denotes size, *jötunn* strength, *burs* lack of intelligence; thus *hár sem rísi*, *sterkr sem jötunn*, *heimskr sem burs*' (Cleasby and Vigfússon, p. 498).

⁴ Lotte Motz makes a valiant attempt to do just that (1987). She argues that the mediaeval giant may have been a mixture of four distinguishable categories of supernatural Others and this is reflected in the various names used for the giant family. These four classes of beings, each with its own role, were lords and guardians of nature (*iotvnn*), mythical magicians (*troll*), hostile and monstrous beings (*burs*) and 'heroic and courtly beings' (*rísi*) – the last group being a recent class and Motz thinks that the word *rísi* 'did not denote a truly ancient spirit' (p. 235). This is highly speculative and while interesting, unsupported by any convincing evidence. Her approach is, in fact, curiously similar to that of the author of *Bárðar saga* trying to explain Bárðr's ambiguous status.

(*kvenna stærst, þeira sem mennskar váru*, p. 102). Later Mjöll marries Rauðfeldr, a son of a *jǫtunn*, so she seems more at ease with giants than humans and is perhaps more Other than human, although very hard to categorise.⁵ But then, of course, the categories often do not seem mutually exclusive.

His parentage results in Bárðr himself: big, good-looking and incredibly white of skin. As the son of Dumbr and Mjöll, he is superhuman but vaguely so, part giant and part troll on his father's side, while his mother is said to be human and yet she and her family must also be classified as nature spirits. But Bárðr gains a further superhuman heritage while King Dumbr is at war with some beings called *þursar* who later kill him: he is sent to Dofri at Dofri's mountains (Dovre fjell in Norway). Dofri is a *bergbúi*, which, if we take the use of a different word seriously, is something different from a *rísi* or a *troll*. How different is not clear, but the saga suggests that Dofri instructed Bárðr in magic: *eigi var traust, at hann næmi eigi galdra ok forneskju, svá at bæði var hann forspár ok margvís, því at Dofri var við þetta slunginn*.

The opaque tone of the saga (*eigi var traust*) suggests that the lessons of Dofri are clouded in the necessary mystique that all these types of mountain dwellers are veiled in. Since *menn* are mentioned, this passage also indicates that Bárðr should be regarded as human — but as we see below, the word unfortunately turns out to be ambiguous. Dofri is possibly classified as a human as well, in spite of his knowledge of sorcery and his abode in the mountains. Bárðr is at least able to marry Flaumgerðr Dofradóttir who, like Mjöll, is *kvenna stærst* but not particularly pretty. The saga states then that Flaumgerðr was *mennsk í móðurætt sína* and the trouble with classifying giants resurfaces again. Dofri turns out to be not quite human, and indeed, still later in the chapter, he is not termed a mountain dweller but a giant: *kom þar Haraldr Hálfðanarson ok fæddist þar upp með Dofra jǫtni* (p. 104).

Confusing? There seems to be no distinction between humans, giants or mountain dwellers in the Mountain of Dofri, and Bárðr certainly can be classified as both human, giant and a troll, not just by birth but also by upbringing. Perhaps it is the mysterious Dofri who instructs him in how to kill traitors in their dreams. *Bárðar saga* indeed explains his later disappearance into the mountains with reference to his upbringing by Dofri.

While Bárðr is studying with Dofri, King Dumbr is killed by the leader of the *þursar*, called Harðverkr. Having previously moved from Dofri and lost Flaumgerðr, Bárðr avenges his father by killing Harðverkr and thirty *þursar*. Then he seems to live mainly among ordinary humans until he leaves for Iceland when Dofri's other star pupil King Haraldr lúfa becomes too dominating and Bárðr settles in Iceland. The settlement narrative resembles others of the kind, apart from the fact that Bárðr is perhaps no ordinary settler in that many of his followers appear to be super- or subhuman (the hierarchy is far from unambiguous). Among them is his second cousin Þorkell skinnvefja who is described as having high cheekbones, large and protruding teeth, being pop-eyed and wide-mouthed, long-necked and bulb-headed, and so on. Also on the ship are Svalr and Þúfa who are described as *trylld mjök* (p. 108). And yet Bárðr seems at this juncture to be comfortable in the human world, even helping to rid

⁵ According to Ciklamini (1971), the hero Starkaðr was similarly ambiguous. She sees in him a giant humanised by Saxo in his *Gesta Danorum*, less so in *Gautreks saga*.

the region of Svalr and Þúfa when they have metamorphosed completely into trolls (p. 113–14).

After his daughter Helga disappears, Bárðr takes a sudden turn away from the company of humans. The disappearance of his beloved daughter first makes him so enraged that he kills his own nephews, who are only eleven and twelve. Then he wounds his half-brother. He consequently becomes silent and difficult and shortly after disappears with all his possessions. This is explained by the saga not only by his sorrow but also by his upbringing and his parentage: *þat var meir ætt hans at vera í stórum hellum en húsum, því at hann fæddist upp með Dofra í Dofrafrjöllum; var hann tröllum ok líkari at afli ok vexti en mennskum mǫnnum* (p. 119).

Within the framework of the saga, the explanation seems plausible enough. The very need for it suggests, though, that Bárðr is an ambiguous figure, at the same time human and not quite human — and the difference is at least partly defined by his dwellings. Whereas giants and trolls may live in mountains, Bárðr had hitherto been a part of the human world, so that people had perhaps forgotten his fostering. The ambiguity of Bárðr is perhaps the main theme of the first six chapters of *Bárðar saga*, and reflected in his ambiguous parentage, his constant moving between the world of men and the world of ogres. It is perhaps also reflected in his role after his disappearance: he becomes a guardian spirit and defender of the region, whom ordinary humans may summon in their hour of need. This is similar to the role that his father, also of mixed parentage, played as king and oppressor of ogres.

It is not just Bárðr who is ambiguous. As we have seen, the same applies to his father and his mother. His daughter Helga is also *tröll kǫlluð af sumum mǫnnum* (p. 115). And after Bárðr has moved away from the human world, he inhabits a world full of a variety of ogres that are called by a multitude of names and whom it seems hard to categorise. There is a *tröllkona* called Hetta, an *óvættir* or *tröll* called Torfár-Kolla or Skinnhúfa, a *tröllkona* called Hít, and a *þurs*, *tröll* or *dólgr* called Kolbjörn. The last is described in this manner:

Þessi maðr var mikill vexti ok mjök stórskorinn; bjúgr var hans hryggr, ok boginn í knjám; ásjónu hafði hann ljóta ok leiðiliga, svá at hann þóttist ǫnga slíka sét hafa, nef hans brotit í þrim stöðum, ok váru á því stórir knútar; sýndist þat af því þrìbogit sem horn á gornlum hrútum (p. 148).

This primitive and ugly being seems far removed from the big, handsome giants that Bárðr is descended from. And indeed, in the original text of *Bárðar saga*, Kolbjörn is not a *risi* or a *ǫtunn* but a *tröll* or a *þurs*. Like Grendel, he has an ancient mother who is *it mesta tröll*,⁶ whereas his companions are usually referred to as *þursar* or *flögð*. Even more disturbingly, here and on other occasions, Kolbjörn is even referred to as *maðr* although that is qualified by the phrase *ef svá skal kalla*. Thus *Bárðar saga* conveys some of the confusion of ordinary humans who find themselves suddenly faced with an unidentified foreign ogre. And in spite of the aforementioned qualification, the use of the word *maðr* also suggests a somewhat disturbing kinship between humans and ogres.

It is precisely this confusion which Óláfr Tryggvason's appearance in the mound of Raknarr dispels. He, as a Christian missionary king, owes his power to God

⁶ On the Bear's Son Pattern which is reflected in the Kolbjörn episode, see McKinnell (2005, pp. 126–46, cf. pp. 172–80).

and God alone. And even though God may be three characters in one, the power source is one. Evil, on the other hand, is chaotic, manifold and diverse.⁷ That certainly applies to that group of supernatural beings that includes *risar*, *jǫtnar*, *tröll* and *þursar*, which sometimes are referred to as men, and yet they are not men. While *Bárðar saga* starts by distinguishing between good and bad members of this family, somehow they all end up as a single flock, especially in the yuletide party of Hít in Hundadalur (ch. 13) where Bárðr and Gestr meet with all kinds of undefined beings, some of which are *þursar* (including Kolbjörn) but some are not.

The distinction between giants and trolls seems outdated when Hít throws her party in Iceland. Bárðr himself is good and bad in turns, defending people against ogres and heathen gods, but when faced with the true faith of Óláfr Tryggvason he becomes just as evil as the ogres he has previously defended his region against. All heathen things must be swept aside, even those previously considered good.⁸

Four Ideas About the Giant Family

Bárðar saga introduces an important distinction between giants and trolls. Then it confuses the issue by intermarrying the polar opposites, the union producing the ambiguous figure King Dumbur, Bárðr's father. Bárðr himself is even more mysterious since the precise nature of his mother is vague and he becomes the foster-son of a mountain-dweller. In spite of being descended from giants and trolls and raised and instructed by the mountain-dweller, Bárðr is clearly at least part human. However, even though his mother is human, she and her family have an unusually close relationship with nature and are larger than other humans. Thus Bárðr's human side is also somewhat monstrous, and in the end he leaves the human world and goes into the mountains, his ambiguous heritage making him a good defender against the dark arts of the *þursar* and other ogres. However, these monsters are nevertheless his extended family, with whom he feasts at yuletide (see Símeck).

The first clear idea about giants that emerges from *Bárðar saga* is variation. There are many kinds of monsters that have a family relationship with giants, may marry them, make war against them and feast with them at yule. *Bárðar saga* emphasises that some of these ogres are good but others are bad. And yet they at least in the end become a single unit, if heterogeneous. The *risar* that Bárðr is descended from are handsome, while Kolbjörn the *þurs* is extraordinarily ugly. Most members of the family are very large, but so are the humans that Bárðr is descended from. In fact, while every kind of giant is likely to seem different from regular humans, the exact nature of that difference is hard to pin down.

The second idea is a close relationship with nature. When Bárðr enters the mountains, the saga provides the explanation that he must be heeding the call of his upbringing with Dofri. The phrase *þat var meir ætt hans* may also indicate that his genealogical makeup contributes to his preference for mountains, since the word *ætt* can mean 'family', although it may also mean 'direction' (as the word used to describe North, South, East and West), 'inclination' or 'nature' (Fritzner, p. 1092). Scholars

⁷ On giants as representatives of chaos, see e.g. Clunies Ross, pp. 197–98, 262–63; Kroesen, p. 59.

⁸ This is also a theme in Flateyjarbók, see Ármann Jakobsson 2003.

have frequently noted the relationship between giants and nature (see esp. Motz 1984), and mountains seem to figure strongly, especially in kennings (Meissner, pp. 255–59), although giants also may be found in forests and on the shore. Living in mountains is, of course, a somewhat general attribute of the Other, whether it is supernatural or not.⁹ The Other is not a part of civilisation and must thus be located outside it, and in Iceland, mountains would seem to be ideal for that purpose. When Bárðr leaves the human world for the Other World of the mountains, he becomes wild. Only partly wild, though, since he has also lived in the civilised world and is thus uniquely qualified to become an intermediary. This half-wildness of his life is in tune with his ancestry, which is half-human, quarter-giant and quarter-troll.

The third important idea in *Bárðar saga* is the ambiguous nature of the giants. *Snorra-Edda* casts *jǫtnar*, *hrimþursar* and *bergrisar* as the perpetual enemies of gods. If the gods were simply good, then the giants must simply be evil.¹⁰ Of course the situation in *Snorra-Edda* is far from being straightforward. The giants are not only the matter of the World and the ancestors of the gods, they also provide them with wives such as Gerðr and Skaði (see e.g. Motz 1982, Steinsland 1991). Ancestral links can be found between giants and royal families, and many of the notable protagonists of the sagas of the Icelanders have giant ancestors as well (Schulz, pp. 256–86; Ciklamini 1966, 136–55). *Bárðar saga* wrestles with this ambiguity. In the giant family, there are bad attributes which the words *tröll* and *þursar* encapsulate. The former of these words, as seen in the phrase *trölldómr* (troll's insight) refers to the superhuman powers that the ogres may possess and make them very dangerous indeed. The latter word refers more to the uncouth, uncivilised and barbaric aspect of the giants which make them slightly sub-human and unacceptable companions to civilised men (cf. Schulz, pp. 29–52). Unfortunately, the meanings of the two words are far from fixed, and while this may be the case in *Bárðar saga* and in several other sources, there is also the case of the extremely wise Mímir who lives with the frost-giants (*tíll hrimþvrsa*) and while Snorri Sturluson does not explicitly state that he is a *hrimþurs* (*Edda*, p. 22) it certainly seems implied. Consequently, the word *þurs* does not always refer to something that is inferior to humans, but it often does, and in *Bárðar saga* it probably always does.¹¹

In *Bárðar saga*, the author tries to explain the uncertainty of the nature of the giants in a genealogical manner. There are various types of perhaps large, sometimes ugly but always exotic races that have been living together for a while somewhere in the wilderness, in Dofrafjall, in Dumbshaf and in Snæfellsjökull. These *risar*, *tröll*, *þursar*, *jǫtnar* and *óvættir* have intermarried and produced offspring who may have the vicious, sly and underhanded nature of a troll, or they may be large, handsome and good-natured like a giant. Some of them may be barbaric *þursar* who bear hardly any

⁹ On the relationship between giants and ethnic Others, see Schulz, *Riesen*, pp. 231–52; Sverrir Jakobsson, pp. 246–76.

¹⁰ On this binary divide, see esp. Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*. This is best paraphrased in *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, p. 120: *kent er ok við iotna heiti, ok er þat flest hað e(ða) lastmæli*.

¹¹ As Schulz has shown (p. 39), the word *þurs* is used more often in *Bárðar saga* (10 times) than in all other sagas of Icelanders and legendary sagas put together (9 instances all in all). This may reflect the *Bárðar saga* author's willingness to distinguish between various sorts of giants.

resemblance to civilised men. And even though they may have different names, they have merged to such a degree that they are hard to tell apart. Some are absolutely evil, some only partly so, but they can all be dangerous. And yet they can also be helpful, since their very affinity with evil make them effective helpers against ogres.

And that is the role of Bárðr Dumbsson, his father and his son Gestr in *Bárðar saga*. When the *trölldómr* of Svalr and Þúfa starts inconveniencing the people of Snæfellsness, Bárðr kills them and this is considered a cleansing (p. 113). He later defends Ingjaldr of Hváll against Hetta the *tröllkona* and Þórr himself, and Þórir at Öxnakelda against an *óvættir* called Torfár-Kolla (p. 124–29). Against such monsters, ordinary human powers are not enough. The people of the region need someone who lives among them and is not yet totally of them, an intermediary such as Bárðr. The very ambiguity of his nature is what makes him an effective supernatural helper. In the end, however, he has been replaced by a new and better defender against the creatures of evil, God himself, aided by his saints and missionaries.

The fourth and perhaps the most important aspect of giants in *Bárðar saga* is that they are old and declining. Schulz has remarked that one of the most important functions of giants is not being here any more (pp. 208–9 and 256–60). They may perhaps exist as ancestors of the living – of Egill Skalla-Grímsson and his family, for example. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, most of the second part of the saga concerns Bárðr's futile attempts to further his line (see Ármann Jakobsson 1998). His anger against Gestr is reasonable, since by turning into a Christian, Gestr has taken part in the introduction of a new age where there is no place for giants, trolls and ogres.

Bárðr himself had lived among humans but in the end he chose to become an Other. Gestr makes a different choice, thus terminating Bárðr's link with the human world. When the saga ends, Bárðr has been around for at least 150 years, so that he is very ancient, perhaps the only living settler from the day of King Harold Fairhair. By going to the Other World, he has been able to continue living, but on the other hand he is lost to the civilised world of humans. His place is no longer in the history of Iceland but in the mountains. And he has no grandchildren, no legacy. His giant role provides him with a continued existence for himself but no existence for the offspring he might have had. This is the tragedy of many supernatural Others: they may be immortal or close to immortal but they are not able to multiply themselves in the human fashion and thus provide a lasting legacy. Even while still being around somewhere in the mountains, they essentially belong to the past.

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