

## The Fantastic Fourteenth Century

Helgi Þorláksson  
(University of Iceland)

### Introduction

The fourteenth century is par excellence the century of the fantastic legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and the family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) become more fantastic, according to the general opinion. 'Giants' become common and we are not sure if the narrators and their contemporaries found them incredible or not. One explanation is that these are 'lygisögur' with old roots, which were popular among the common people in the twelfth century but did not find favour among the elite until the thirteenth century, to a certain extent, and only became generally accepted in the fourteenth century. We can ask: is this a matter of social influence from the bottom up, i.e. is it connected with newcomers of the late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century, rich upstarts of lower lineage in Iceland who had made it as the king's representatives? Or was it of different origins? Was the taste for and interest in fantastic tales a top-down phenomenon, a part of foreign learning, adopted by the Icelanders? I find the second view plausible, while not rejecting the other. I intend to substantiate the view that foreign learning was influential in this respect.

### Exceedingly old men and very tall

*Þiðreks saga af Bern* is one of the most fantastic sagas concerning huge men of incredible age. The saga was composed in Old Norse or Icelandic perhaps as late as 1250-51, although a Low German version may have existed as early as the late twelfth century. Its oldest manuscript dates from the late thirteenth century (Tulinius, 1993, 212-14. Finch, 1993, 662-3). Some of the huge men in the saga are even called giants (*risar*), or their ancestors were giants or looked like giants even though they were humans (49, 246, 265). To indicate the size and strength of the heroes, their muscular bodies and enormous physical proportions are described: for instance, the distance between the eyes of Samson was a *spönn* (16-19 cm?) and King Þiðrekr's shoulders (*herðar*) were two ells across (31). The heroes lived to a great age: some Germans, according to the saga, said that Hildibrandr, Þiðrekr's foster-father, achieved an age of 150 or 180 years; it also claims that some German poems reported that he even lived to be two hundred years old (which could mean 240 years [560]). The greatest hero of them all, King Þiðrekr himself, lived to a great age: he was 25 years younger than Hildibrandr but lived longer (33, 534). At this advanced age the achievements of Þiðrekr were still noteworthy: he single-handedly killed a dragon and thereafter married a widowed queen.

The hero Örvar-Oddr, according to his saga, lived for three hundred years, which probably means 360. He was a towering man (his height was twelve ells, or six metres, as indicated by the inside measurement of his stone coffin, apparently some kind of sarcophagus - *Örvar-Odds saga* 208, 362). It is deemed possible that this saga already existed in a similar form at the end of the thirteenth century, although its oldest

manuscript is dated to the early fourteenth century (Tulinius, 1993, 233. Kroesen, 1993, 744).

There are more examples of strong men and great age. According to *Norna-Gests þátr* (found in Flateyjarbók), Gestr came to the court of King Ólafr Tryggvason. He seemed to be a strong man and it turned out that he was three hundred years of age, which most likely means 360 years. He told stories of heroes of ancient times. The *þátr* was probably written in the fourteenth century and is reminiscent of *Tóka þátr Tókasonar* (also found in Flateyjarbók). Tóki came to the court of King (later Saint) Ólafr Haraldsson. He was exceedingly tall and handsome and turned out to be twice as old as was usual. He told stories of times past.

*Samons saga fagra* expresses great interest in giants (*risar*) and informs the reader that in Svalbarör people live to be 200 years of age (380). The saga is preserved in fifteenth-century manuscripts and is believed to have been composed late in the fourteenth century or early in the fifteenth (Simek, 1993, 565-6).

*Þiðreks saga* is classified either with the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) or the romances (*riddarasögur*) and *Samons saga fagra* falls into two parts, the first resembling the romances, the second the *fornaldarsögur*. The classification of genres is not of importance here; what is of interest is the idea of men of immense age and height, and when and why it would have been introduced and generally accepted.

#### Where do such ideas come from?

The connection or intermingling with *risar* like Dofri or Bárör and their families is of interest (*Kjalnesinga saga*, *Bárðar saga*, *Þátr Hálfðanar svarta* and *Haralds hárfagra* cf. *hálfrisar*, *jötnar*, *tröll*) and seems indigenous enough. However, of more interest are entries in the Icelandic annals which give accounts and evidence from abroad for huge men and/or men of many times the average age of humans, and these will now be investigated for comparison with the sagas. More corresponding examples are to be found in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sources on the Continent. Human remains, inscriptions, objects and graves referred to by foreign authorities seemed to corroborate the accounts of huge people of immense physical strength and prowess in former times, and the Bible was used as evidence. I will try to sort out some of the evidence known to me, and evaluate the impact of these ideas and their significance for the sagas and their audience.

These stories of the late thirteenth-, fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century bring to mind two entries in the Icelandic annals: one for 1259, connected with Sturla Þórðarson, the other for 1405, referring to a later bishop of Skálholt, Árni Ólafsson. The 1259 entry goes like this in the Skálholt annals:

Svo sagði herra Fólki, son Jóns engils, erkidják: að Uppsölum [later archbishop according to another annal] Sturlu Þórðarsyni að prédikarar sögðu honum að á þessu ári sá þeir í Bryggju í Flandur mann þann er kominn var langt utan úr löndum og sagði svo að hann hafði þjónað forðum Karlamagnúsi keisara og kvað þá dóttur sína hafa átt staðinn í Bryggju er hann fór af Frans. Hann vísaði þar til fjár í múrinum og þar

fannst það. Og það sagði herra Fólki sér sagt helst að hann hefði andast litlu síðar í Kolni (*Íslandske Annaler*, 192; also 134).<sup>1</sup>

As we know, Charlemagne died in 814, 445 years earlier, which makes his servant rather old. *Bryggja* must be the great seaport Brügge or Bruges in modern Belgium, and Cologne is also mentioned. The other entry, for 1405, is found in *Nýi annáll* and goes like this:

Aflát mikið í Táknum [probably Aachen] af syndum sínum bróðir Árni Ólafsson [later bishop of Skálholt]. Var þar þá með hústrú Sigríði Erlendsdóttur og var settur penitentiarius öllum norrænum mönnum. Þar sá hann serk vorrar frú, sankti Mariae, og reifa vors herra og belti og dúk Jóhannes baptistae í þeim stað er Afríka heitir [probably distorted]. Sá hann hjaltið af sverði Sigurðar Fáfnisbana og mæltist honum það x fóta langt en klótinn með kopar tók cinnar spannar aftur af. Þar var og tönn er sögð var úr Starkaði gamla. Var hún þverrar handar á lengd og breidd, fyrir utan þat er í holdinu hafði staðið (*Íslandske Annaler* 288).

Gestr of *Norna-Gests þáttir* could also tell of a tooth, a molar, of Starkaðr which weighed around 200 grammes (seven *aurar*) and was used as a part of a bell-cord in Denmark (324). Furthermore, Gestr brought with him hair from the tail of Grani, the famous stallion of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. It proved to be seven ells long (324).

According to this, people could be exceedingly old, and heroes of former times could also be huge. These are most likely not the inventions of Icelandic story-tellers, but rather common ideas among men of learning on the continent which found their way into Icelandic texts. As Panzer pointed out, twelfth- and thirteenth-century continental chronicles record the death, usually in 1139, of Johannes à Temporibus, who had been sword-bearer (*armiger*) to Charlemagne and lived for some 361 years. This tale was repeated in the *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais. There are other similar stories from thirteenth-century Italy; Panzer refers to stories of men who were said to have claimed to have been sword bearers to Oliver or Roland, and one of them even claimed to be Ogier le Danois himself. One proved his claim in Ravenna in 1231 by predicting the inscriptions on some long-hidden tombs and leading the Emperor Friedrich II to an outsized pair of spurs left by one of the gigantic warriors of Charlemagne (Panzer, 1925, 27-34, esp. 28-31). We are familiar with all of this: great age (300 or 400 years), and men proving their claims by means of old relics.

### The Bible and the world of learning

Harris and Hill make use of the findings of Panzer and conclude that they probably constitute evidence of an oral legend which may have influenced the author of *Norna-Gests þáttir* (1989, 118). I would like to point out the connection with *Þiðriks saga*. In its preface we can read the following:

Það segja flestir menn að fyrst eftir Nóaflóð voru menn svo stórir og sterkir sem risar og lifðu marga mannsaldra. En síðan fram liðu stundir

<sup>1</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson points out the interest in the legendary *þættir*, *Norna-Gests þáttir* and *Toka þáttir* in exceedingly old men, and makes comparison with the story told by Sturla (Sverrir Jakobsson (2005), 209-210). Some of Sverrir's references to scholarly works have been of great help to me.

urðu nokkrir menn litlir og ósterkir sem nú eru. Og svo langt er leið frá Nóaflóði þá urðu þess fleiri ósterkari en hinir sterkur menn gerðust þá fáir í hundraðsflokki, þá voru þeir hálfu færri er atgervi höfðu eða frækleik eftir sínum foreldrum (5).

This was meant to explain why it was that among the people of usual size we find huge men, more like giants, and of exceedingly great age. Arngrímur Jónsson in his *Crymogæa* (ed. 1609) refers to Pliny for ideas of this kind, that humans were gradually getting physically smaller (114). Arngrímur proposes the theory that the first settlers of Scandinavia were human giants, descendants of the Canaanites (110). His ideas were based on the Bible and the teachings of some men of learning, among others Saxo Grammaticus, who was of the opinion that in former times Denmark was inhabited by giants (121-2).

The first humans were giants, according to *Genesis* ch. 6. And men became quite old. The sons of Noah were Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem was six hundred years of age when he died, and many of his descendants of the next few generations lived to be three or four hundred years old. Among the descendants of Ham were the people of Canaan, who were giants. Well-known giants included Goliath, who was more than six ells in height, and King Og of Basan, whose stone coffin was more than nine ells long (Deut. 3), which is reminiscent of Örvar-Oddr's coffin. Arngrímur also refers to Augustine's *De civitate Dei* (XV,9) for a molar which was a hundred times bigger than the usual ones (114). Considering the existence of evidence of this kind, it is no wonder that men like Fólki, later archbishop of Uppsala, and Árni, later bishop of Skálholt, told stories of exceedingly old and huge men.

Some of Noah's descendants built the Tower of Babel, which they intended should reach up to the sky. According to Arno Borst, the sixth-century author Malalas points out that all of the masons of the Babel tower were giants, and they were the ancestors of the human race (267). This idea became influential, and occurs among learned men in Germany, according to Borst. Alexander von Roes in Cologne wrote in 1281 that the Germans traced their ancestry back to the giant Theutona: his stout daughters and some soldiers of Priamus begot children, whose offspring were the Germans. The so-called Eisenacher Dominikaner, writing in 1327, has the story that the Germans were the offspring of Nimrod. *Genesis*, as we know, recounts that Nimrod was a descendant of Ham and the ruler of Babel, in other words the leading giant. By 1421 these notions had all been combined into one. The learned Johan Rothe writes that Nimrod, who was twelve ells high, had a grandchild, Treberta, who left Babel for Trier 784 years after the Flood. Rothe refers to Alexander von Roes, and relates that later Priam won Trier and married the giantess Theotonica, descendant of Treberta, and begot Siegfried and other giants (1022-3).

It seems to have been a general understanding in learned circles in Iceland around 1300 that Nimrod and his men were giants (*Elucidarius* xx; *Hauksbók* 153, 170, 498), and Ólafur Ormsson in AM 194 8vo (from 1387) even tells us that Nimrod was thirty ells tall (*Alfræði* I, 48).

### Human giants a reality in Germany?

We have reason to believe that the notion of human giants was common among German men of learning in the thirteenth century. *Þiðreks saga af Bern* is of German origin, even though it is composed in Icelandic or Old Norse. One of its heroes was Heimir who was physically very sturdy and broad, and a great warrior. As Hermann Reichert has pointed out, Albert von Stade, writing in the vicinity of Bremen around 1250, included in his chronicle a tale relating to Innsbruck in Austria:

Enspruc: Prope locum illum est claustrum, ubi iuxta altare ad laevam sepultus est Heymo. Cuius sepulcrum habet longitudinem 13 pedum, quorum duo porrigunt subtus murum, 11 sunt extra murum (Reichert, 1994, 506-7).

As Reichert points out, Albert refers to Heimo as a well known person. In *Þiðreks saga* we are told that Heimir joined a monastery, which must be Wilten at Innsbruck according to Reichert, who refers to old traditions in the Tyrol about the giant Heimo. Albert von Stade reports exact information about Heimir's grave, which is thirteen feet long, two inside the wall, eleven outside. Albert was probably in no doubt that Heimir was a huge man, and tall.

### The fantastic fourteenth century

It would be interesting to know if men of learning in the fourteenth century really believed what they wrote about the immense physical dimensions of heroes of the past and their incredibly great age. First of all, they would want to avoid contradicting the Bible and foreign authorities, men of great erudition and high esteem. Secondly, there was great interest in 'wonders' of all kinds, not only abroad but also at home. We can take an example from *Hauksbók* (around 1300):

... á sjálfu Indíalandi eru fjöll þau er gull er svo auðgætt sem grjót í öðrum fjöllum. En þar er torsótt til fyrir því að þar gæta drekar stórir og dýr þau er girfes heita og þjóðir þær er 12 álna eru langar og eru þeir mannskæðir. (*Hauksbók*, 153).

In AM 194 8vo (from 1387) there are also tales of giants, some of whom seem to be human (*Alfræði* I, 34-6). Some of the annals report in their entry for 1338 that a man called Halldór and his comrades defeated a giant in northern Norway who turned out to be fifteen ells in height (*Íslandske Annaler*, IV-VI, VIII, IX). This seems to have been believed, and as Sverrir Jakobsson points out, *Þiðreks saga af Bern* voices the following opinion:

Svo þykkir og heimskum manni undarligt er frá er sagt því er hann hefir eigi heyrt. En sá maðr er vitr er og mörg dæmi veit, honum þykkir ekki undarligt er skilning hefir til hversu verða má en fáir munu svo fróðir er því einu skal trúa er hann hefir séð (7)

Sverrir compares this with the conclusions of the son in *Konungs skuggsjá*:

En ekki tókum vér mikið af að mistrúa þá bók er gjör var á Indíalandi þó að þar sé margt undarligt í sagt því að margir hlutir eru þeir hér með oss er þar mundu undarligir þykkja vera en oss þykkja ekki undarligir er vor ræða mætti langt fljúga að hún kæmi þangað sem þess er engi von (132).

A sagacious man tries to understand, and his learning tells him not to doubt or contradict 'wonders' in far off countries, since equally incredible wonders closer at hand, even in his own vicinity, often turn out to be true. As we have seen, Arngrímur Jónsson, who took on himself the task of correcting the tall stories told abroad about Iceland in the sixteenth century, was very earnest and serious when he proposed his theory about giant ancestors. It is therefore not beyond comprehension that in the fourteenth century such ideas found favour among men of learning, fantastic as they may seem to us today.

### Conclusions

It seems that the idea of exceedingly old and tall men was introduced into Iceland in the thirteenth century. It is quite possible that the idea was not very familiar in the country (or in Norway) when *Þiðreks saga af Bern* seems to have been composed or translated, i.e. in 1250-51. The justification in the preface of the saga provides grounds for believing this. Ideas of this kind were probably quite common among learned men in Germany and soon became influential in Iceland, as indicated by the entry for 1259 in the annals and by *Örvar-Odds saga*. In the fourteenth century ideas of this kind were probably generally accepted, or at least not seriously contradicted. While many people may have felt that Oddr's stature was exaggerated, it must have been difficult for them to reject learned theories about the human race gradually becoming physically smaller. It probably seemed quite possible that ancestors in ancient times could have been very tall, huge men of immense physical strength and prowess, despite being several hundred years old. Why not, if the Bible substantiated such ideas?

### Bibliography

- Alfræði islenzk. Íslandsk encyclopædisk litteratur. I. COD.MBR. AM 194, 8vo.* (Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, 37). Ed. Kr. Kålund (Copenhagen, 1908).
- Arngrímur Jónsson, *Crymogæa. Þættir úr sögu Íslands.* (Safn Sögufélags 2, Reykjavík, 1985).
- Borst, Arno, *Der Turmbau von Babel.I-IV* (München, 1995).
- Elucidarius in Old Norse Translation.* (Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 36). Eds. Evelyn Scherabon Firchow and Kaaren Grimstad (Reykjavík, 1989).
- Finch, R.G., 'Þiðreks saga af Bern', in *Medieval Scandinavia, an Encyclopedia*, ed. Philip Pulsiano (New York and London, 1993), 662-3.
- Harris, Joseph, and Thomas D. Hill, 'Gestr's "Prime Sign": Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttur*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989), 103-22.
- Hauksbók udgiven efter de arnamagnæanske håndskrifter no. 371, 544 og 675 4o samt forskellige papirhåndskrifter.* [Ed. Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson]. (Copenhagen, 1892-6).
- Íslandske Annaler indtil 1588.* Ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania, 1888).
- Konungs skuggsjá. Speculum Regale.* Ed. Magnús Már Lárusson (Reykjavík, 1955).

- Kroesen, Riti, 'Örvar-Odds saga', in *Medieval Scandinavia, an Encyclopedia* (see Finch above), 744.
- Norna-Gests þáttir. *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda I*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1950).
- Panzer, Friedrich, 'Zur Erzählung von Nornagest'. In *Vom Werden des deutschen Geistes. Festgabe Gustav Ehrismann*. Ed. Paul Merker and Wolfgang Stammier (Berlin & Leipzig 1925), 27-34.
- Reichert, Hermann, 'Heime in Wilten und in der Thidrekssaga'. *Studien zum Altgermanischen. Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*. Ed. Heiko Uecker (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 11. Berlin, New York 1994), 503-12.
- Samons saga fagra. *Riddarasögur III*. Ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (Reykjavík, 1953).
- Simek, Rudolf, 'Samsons saga fagra', in *Medieval Scandinavia, an Encyclopedia* (see Finch above), 565-6.
- Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin. Heimsmýnd Íslendinga 1100-1400* (Reykjavík, 2005).
- Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Draumurinn um Indland og heimsmýnd Íslendinga á miðöldum'. (Forthcoming)
- Tóka þáttir Tókasonar. *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda II*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1950).
- Tulinius, Torfi H., Kynjasögur úr fortið og framandi löndum. *Íslensk bókmenntasaga II* (Reykjavík, 1993), 165-246.
- Þiðreks saga af Bern. I-II. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1951).
- Örvar-Odds saga. *Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda II*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík 1950).