

The Fantastic in the Kings' Sagas

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Since I understand 'the fantastic' as something created by imagination, not existing in reality, I maintain that this term should be applied, amongst other things, to the introduction of non-realistic details in the sagas that aimed to present the historical past, namely the Kings' Sagas. Just one method among those used by saga authors is studied in detail, namely the utilization of anachronism, which sometimes turns into deliberate mystification.

The story discussed here is that of the conversion of Denmark. On the huge runic monument he had erected at Jelling in memory of his parents, the Danish King Haraldr Gormsson (ca. 940–986) proclaimed that he had 'made the Danes Christian' (DR, I, 42). The sources that cast light on this event differ in origin, genre and age.

The earliest and the most reliable sources are those that come from Germany. The very first mention that has been preserved belongs to Ruotger who, in his *Vita Brunonis archiepiscopi Coloniensis* written in 966–969, relates how Archbishop Bruno (953–965), the younger brother of the German Emperor Otto I (936–973), had helped the northern barbarians out of a state of barbarity and cruelty (Ruotger, 42–43). A contemporary of these events, the Saxon chronicler Widukind (Widukindus Corbeiensis), in the 970s, i.e. some years later than Ruotger, mentions in his *Gesta Saxonum* the conversion to Christianity of the Danes under the auspices of Otto I and through the assistance of Poppo, the future bishop of Schleswig (ca. 995–1000) (Widukind, lib. III, cap. 65). Lauritz Weibull finds here a textual borrowing from Ruotger, but he emphasizes that Widukind adds extra details (as compared to Ruotger), in particular the description of Haraldr testing Poppo with red-hot iron (Weibull, 1911, 37–38). With good reason, Weibull dates this event to the period between 953 (Bruno's election as Archbishop of Cologne) and 965 (the year of his death). He also stresses that the time of the creation of the *Vita Brunonis*, 966–969, enables us to reject the assumption of some historians that the conversion of the Danes to Christianity could have been the outcome of military campaigns on the part of Otto II (973–983) in 974 (Weibull, 1911, 43).

Continental sources unanimously ascribe the adoption of Christianity in Denmark to Haraldr (or at least, as Ruotger does, to his time). We are aware of Haraldr's personal initiative in this matter. According to Widukind and Thietmar of Merseburg (Thietmarus Merseburgensis, *Chronicon*, 1012–1018), Haraldr, on hearing Poppo preach Christianity, asked if the latter wished to prove what he had said with red-hot iron. Poppo replied that he would be happy to do this, the result being his uninjured hand (Widukind, lib. III, cap. 65; Thietmar, lib. II, cap. 14). As we learn from Adam of Bremen (Adamus Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, ca. 1070) and Helmold (Helmoldus Bozoviensis, *Cronica Slavorum*, before 1177), Haraldr lost a battle to Otte, submitted to him and, on getting back his

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kingdom from him, promised to receive Christianity into Denmark (Adam, lib. II, cap. 3; Helmold, cap. 9).

The decisive role of Otto I is stressed by Adam and Helmold: the conversion of Haraldr is depicted by both authors as a consequence of Otto's attack on Denmark. This attack in its turn is presented as Otto's revenge for the fact that the Danes had murdered his legates and the margrave at Haddeby and had utterly wiped out the whole colony of Saxons: 'To avenge this deed the king at once invaded Denmark with an army'. The result of his victory has been described above. Widukind asserts that the conversion of Haraldr is deservedly ascribed to Emperor Otto's valour, since it was only due to his incessant activity that the Church and the clerics became prosperous in those regions. Thietmar tells how, after Haraldr's baptism, the Emperor summoned the venerable man Poppo and made him a bishop.

The details of Haraldr's conversion to the faith differ. According to Ruotger, he was baptized by Archbishop Bruno; according to Widukind and (dependent on the latter) Thietmar, it was by Poppo. Adam, unlike Widukind and Thietmar, does not mention Poppo in this particular narration (he appears only in the early thirteenth century *scholion*), but he stresses his role in the conversion of the Swedish King Eric the Victorious (Adam, lib. II, cap. 35). As we learn from Adam and consequently from Helmold, who borrowed from Adam, Haraldr was baptized by the Emperor: 'Harold himself was baptized together with his wife, Gunnhild, and his little son, whom our king raised up from the sacred font and named Svein Otto'.

If we look at the same event from, so to speak, the 'inside', through the eyes of medieval Danish chroniclers and historiographers, we obtain a very similar picture. All these authors are unanimous in ascribing the adoption of Christianity in Denmark to Haraldr Gormsson, the only exception being the anonymous *Series ac brevior historia regum Danie* (thirteenth century) where it is told that the Danish kings had already been Christians from the time of Gorm, Haraldr's father. However, this information is in contradiction with the words of the next chapter that tell of the baptism of Haraldr by Otto (Series, 163).

Haraldr's personal initiative in the matter of conversion is quite evident. Thus, the first Danish chronicle, *Chronicon Roskildense* (ca. 1140), tells about the 'Christian friends' that he used to have 'against his father's will', and to whom he gave his support 'at the times of persecution' (CR, cap. V). The *Annales Lundenses* (thirteenth century) depict (very much like Adam and Helmold) the defeat of Haraldr, his baptism and his promise to receive Christianity into Denmark; it is also stressed here that Haraldr 'had gladly accepted Christianity in his realm' (AL, s.a. 936). Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* (after 1216) never mentions Haraldr's defeat at the hands of Otto, but only tells of their agreement, so that Haraldr's baptism looks like an act of free will: 'Haraldus came to an agreement with Caesar, embraced the fellowship of the Catholic religion and gave his kingdom peace by means of a spiritual and a secular concord' (Saxo, lib. X, cap. 4).

Without giving any details of Haraldr's conversion, the *Chronicon Roskildense* asserts that after his father's death he became a Christian and a friend to Otto: 'they became so intimate that Otto even raised up the baby from the sacred font and named him Sven Otto' (CR, cap. V). Following Adam and Helmold, the *Series ac brevior historia regum Danie*, *Annales Lundenses* and *Annales Ripenses* (thirteenth century)

tell of Otto's incursion into Denmark in response to the murder of his legates, which resulted in the baptism of Haraldr and the Danes (Series, 163; AL, *s.a.* 936; ARip, *s.a.* 936); Saxo does not explain the reasons for this invasion.

As far as the details of Haraldr's conversion to Christianity are concerned, the *Annales Ryenses* (thirteenth century) and *Annales Ripenses* mention Poppo (very much like Widukind and Thietmar), whom they refer to as a 'papal chaplain' (AR, 89; ARip, *s.a.* 936). Saxo (lib. 10, cap. 2), as well as the *Annales Lundenses* and *Annales Ryenses*, tells (like Adam and Helmold) of Otto's attack on Denmark and the hostilities that followed. However, only the *Annales Lundenses* point out that Haraldr (together with his wife and baby son) was baptized by the Emperor Otto himself; this baptism is also mentioned in the *Series ac brevior historia regum Danie*.

Now we turn to the description of the same events in the Old Norse / Icelandic sources.

The monk Theodricus of Niðarhólmr monastery presents the conversion of Denmark in his *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (late twelfth century) as a result of the active Christian policy carried out by the Emperor Otto and as something imposed on the Danish King Haraldr. The story that Theodricus relates deals with the Norwegian Jarl Hákon (975–995) and his relations with both Haraldr and Otto. Theodricus notes that this Otto, nicknamed Rufus ('the Red'), was the son of another Otto who was called Pius ('the Pious'). The epithet *pius* was first applied to Otto I by Bruno of Querfurt, d. 1009 (cf. Hanssen, 1949, 114, note 1). According to Theodricus:

'King Haraldr of Denmark greatly feared the most Christian Emperor Otto, whose plan it was to place on him the gentle yoke of Christ – which in fact he did';

'the most Christian Emperor Otto was exerting strong pressure on the King of the Danes to make him and his entire country submit to Christ – an objective which, with the help of that same Saviour, he fully achieved' (Theodricus, 8–9).

The Icelandic Kings' Sagas of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries provide a more or less detailed description of the events in question. They are:

- 1) the redaction A (AM 310, 4^o) of the Old Icelandic translation (ca. 1200) of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* written by Oddr Snorrason ca. 1190 (ÓI0310, chs. 15–18);
- 2) the redaction AM 291, 4^o of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, ca. 1200 (Jvs291, ch. 7);
- 3–4) the two great compendia of the Norwegian kings, *Fagrskinna*, ca. 1220 (Fask, ch. 16) and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, ca. 1230 (Hkr, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, chs. 23–28);
- 5) *Knytilinga saga*, a compendium of Danish history written in the middle of the thirteenth century (Knytl, chs. 1–4);
- 6) *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, a compilation of ca. 1300 (ÓITr, chs. 66–71).

One has to keep in mind that the parallel passages in ÓI0310, Jvs291 and ÓITr are all derived from one and the same source. This source had for a long time been considered to have been Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (ca. 1200), but Ólafur Halldórsson has recently shown that it was a version of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, a

text older than the one preserved in *Jvs291*, but later than *Gunnlaugr's saga* (Ólafur Halldórsson, 2000, 13–17, 65–74, 91). *ÓlTr* is also greatly dependent on *Hkr* (Ólafur Halldórsson, 2001, 78–82), while *Fask* and *Hkr* borrow from *Jvs291*; *Knýtll*, in its turn, is partially based on *Hkr* (cf. Andersson, 1985, 197–238).

As we learn from the sagas, at the time when Haraldr Gormsson was King of Denmark and Norway was ruled by his jarl Hákon, Otto was the Emperor (*keisari*) in Saxland (Germany). *Fask* and *Hkr* do not mention his nickname (he is called *Otta/Otte* and *Ótta*, correspondingly); *ÓlO310*, *Jvs291* and *Knýtll* call him *Ótta/Ottó hinn rauði* ('Otto the Red'); in *ÓlTr* it is stated that it was Otto the Young (*Ottó keisari er hinn ungi var kallaðr*). The latter, who according to *ÓlTr* ruled for ten years, was the son of Otto the Red (who had ruled for nine years), the son of Otto the Great (who had ruled for thirty-eight years), the son of Henrik (who had ruled for seventeen years).

The German Emperor Otto decided to have the Danes christened. *Oðdr* tells that he promised to do this in no more than three years; in *Jvs291* it is said that he was ready to attack Denmark for three years in a row to force the country to adopt Christianity. In Snorri Sturluson's narration Otto is said to have:

'sent word to King Haraldr of Denmark, demanding that he should let himself be baptized and adopt the true faith, together with the people he ruled, or else he would move against him with his army'.

In *ÓlTr* Otto sends the same message to Haraldr after having taken an oath that he would either christen the Danes or fight them for six years in a row. According to *Knýtll*, 'Otto the Red attacked the King of Denmark and tried to convert the Danes to Christianity'.

Jarl Hákon arrives from Norway with a big army to support King Haraldr (on the King's orders). As we read in *ÓlO310*, *Jvs291*, *Knýtll* and *ÓlTr*, Haraldr and Hákon join their forces against the Emperor; while in *Fask* and *Hkr* (in both cases with a reference to *Vellekla* by Einarr skálaglamm), it is said that Hákon alone is fighting against Otto at the Danevirke. The Emperor loses the first battle and has to retreat, but soon he invades Denmark again.

All of a sudden there enters the story, in *ÓlO310* and *Jvs291*, none other than Óláfr Tryggvason. He arrives with six warships to encounter Otto, who has retreated from the Battle of Slé against Jarl Hákon. Soon Óláfr joins the Emperor's army. Due to Óláfr's advice, and with God's help (fire, wind and rain), their forces seize the Danevirke. Three times, one after another, Otto and Óláfr defeat Haraldr and Hákon. The author of *Fask* must have been familiar with this version of Otto's victory over Haraldr, as he comments on the conquest of the Danevirke by Otto in the following way: 'it was overcome, thanks to God's help'. Snorri Sturluson, who is always finding rational explanations for differing facts, states that Óláfr Tryggvason had been with Otto from the very start of his campaign:

'The Emperor Otto drew together a great army. He had troops from Saxony, Franconia, and Frisia, from Wendland King Búrizlaf had joined him with many troops; and in that force there was, in company with him, Óláfr Tryggvason, his son-in-law'.

Following *Hkr*, the compiler of *ÓlTr* tells that Óláfr himself went looking for Otto, as he knew that his father-in-law, King Búrizlaf from Wendland, was in his army.

Emperor Otto, having defeated Haraldr Gormsson, demands that he and the Danes should accept Christianity. ÓIO310, Jvs291 and Ó!Tr tell of a special assembly on this matter. Bishop Poppo, who has come with the Emperor, preaches Christianity (ÓIO310, Jvs291, Fask, Hkr, Ó!Tr; cf. Widukind, Thietmar, *Annales Ryenses* and *Annales Ripenses*). Haraldr does not agree to be baptized, saying that he wants to stick to the faith of his forefathers (Fask), which he does not want to give up unless it can be proved that the religion offered by the Emperor is better than that which the Danes already have (ÓIO310, Jvs291, Ó!Tr). Then Bishop Poppo comes forward carrying a red-hot iron in his hand and shows the King of the Danes his unburned hand (ÓIO310, Fask, Hkr, Ó!Tr; in Jvs291 he takes nine paces over red-hot iron). At the sight of this miracle King Haraldr accepts baptism and the true faith, together with all his people. Jarl Hákon (975–995) is also forced to accept baptism, though he puts all the priests and clerics ashore on his way north to Norway. Like Adam, Helmold, Saxo, the *Annales Lundenses* and the *Annales Ryenses*, both Hkr and Ó!Tr (with a comment 'it is said'), as well as Knýtí, tell of Emperor Otto becoming godfather to Haraldr's son Svein and bestowing his name upon him, so that he was baptized with the name of Otto Svein.

Thus the decisive role of Emperor Otto is acknowledged by all the sources of this group. This is nevertheless in contrast to Adam, Helmold, Saxo, the *Series ac brevior historia regum Danie*, the *Annales Lundenses* and the *Annales Ripenses*, where Otto's attack on the Danes is presented as a revenge for the fact that the Danes had murdered his legates: in the sagas it is a crusade for the Christianization of the Danes.

But it is not only the goal of Otto's campaign that has changed in the narration of the Old Norse / Icelandic sources: the Emperor himself is quite a different historical character. Writers from Widukind to Saxo speak of Otto I (936–973). Theodricus tells of Otto the Red, son of Otto the Pious, i.e. Otto II (973–983). Some of the sagas, as has been shown above, also call him Otto the Red but, according to these sagas, Otto the Red owed his victory over Haraldr Gormsson to Óláfr Tryggvason who lived from ca. 965 to ca. 1000, so that it is more likely that Otto III is meant here; it might, of course, have been Otto II, but definitely not Otto I. Fask and Hkr do not mention the Emperor's nickname; however, simple calculations based on the idea that Otto's host included Óláfr Tryggvason, son-in-law of King Búrizlaf from Wendland (which he became, according to the sagas, in ca. 986), cause us to think that Snorri Sturluson meant Otto III (983–1002) when he wrote about *Óta keisari i Saxlandi*. Ó!Tr speaks of Otto the Young, the son of Otto the Red, the son of Otto the Great, i.e., doubtless, of Otto III. Ólafur Halldórsson dates the conversion of Haraldr Gormsson to 974 (cf. above), the time of Otto II, and thus he claims that it was only the compiler of Ó!Tr who 'realised that according to his chronology it was impossible for Óláfr Tryggvason to have been with Otto II at the Danevirke; he therefore departed from his source and replaced Otto the Red with Otto the Young' (Ólafur Halldórsson, 2000, 72).

This substitution of Otto I (963–973) with Otto II (973–983) or Otto III (983–1002) in Old Norse / Icelandic sources needs to be explained.

As has been shown by Lauritz Weibull, the work of Adam of Bremen was of great importance to the Scandinavian version of the conversion of Denmark to Christianity (Weibull, 1911, 40). To show how familiar Adam's work was to saga authors, Ove Moberg quotes a certain passage preserved in AM 415, 4^o and in

Flateyrbók. In the latter it is found in the initial section, among such texts as Einar Skulason's poem *Geisli*, the anonymous prose work called *Hversu Noregr byggdist* and the *ættaral*. At the bottom of the fifth column, after the heading *Capitulum*, the first phrase reads as follows:

Sva segir i Hamborgar ystoria, ok kallaz sa meistari er gert hefir bokina
ok flest hafa ritad eftir fyrirsauñ Sueins konungs Vlfssonar af tidendum
Dana ok Suia' (Flat, I, 17).

It is quite clear that the work of Adam of Bremen is meant here. The text leaves no doubt that this is a synopsis of a corresponding part of Adam's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*.

Above all, it is evident that the compiler of the synopsis was quite certain of which Otto Adam was speaking, and so he wrote in the synopsis that the Otto who had attacked the Danes, defeated Haraldr and forced the Danes to adopt Christianity was *Otto keisari hinn raudi enn fyrsti med þij nafni*. In the synopsis, moreover, in full conformity with Adam's text, we find *Otto keisari hinn þridi med þij nafni i Danmork*, the one who has defeated the Swedish king Eirik and *hafdi sent þangat Poppo byskup af Slesvik at boda Eireki konungi cristni*.

This synopsis presents the events in a different light to Adam: the reasons for Otto's attack on the Danish realm are not mentioned here, and thus the campaign is no longer a revenge for the previous assault (cf. Adam, 55–56: 'bent upon fighting, they had murdered at Haddeby Otto's legates and the margrave, and had utterly wiped out the whole colony of Saxons'), but simply a military enterprise (*þa for hann med her vpp aa Dani a tolfia aari rikis sins*) that leads to Haraldr Gormsson's defeat and that *gaf hann sik i keisara valld ok feck keisarinn honom aptr riki sitt ok het Haraldr at laata skirast ok at cristna alla Danmork* (Flat.).

Ove Moberg, reasoning from the opinion that he shares, that most Old Icelandic texts describing the conversion of Denmark go back to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by the monk Gunnlaugr, thought the synopsis to have been made expressly for Gunnlaugr by an Icelander who might have been educated somewhere on the continent. No matter which Icelandic author (Gunnlaugr Leifsson, or his monastic fellow Oddr Snorrason) used this synopsis, the one who did so deviated still more from Adam's text, having presented Otto's campaign as a crusade for the Christianization of the Danes, depicting Haraldr wallowing in heathendom and opposing the new belief, and substituting the main character of this historical event.

Otto I in is replaced Old Norse / Icelandic sources by Otto II or Otto III, the difference between the three Emperors not being of vital importance for the saga authors. The main requirement for the Emperor is that he must be a contemporary of Óláfr Tryggvason (born ca. 965), so that this Otto can defeat the Danes according to Óláfr's advice and with God's help.

Lars Lönnroth put forward a suggestion (Lönnroth, 1963, 93) shared by other scholars (cf. Andersson, 1985, 226), that the celebration of Óláfr Tryggvason by the monks Oddr and Gunnlaugr was mainly caused by an Icelandic national interest in promoting their own missionary king as the equal of the Norwegian missionary king Óláfr Haraldsson. The *fróðir menn* in Iceland were aware of the fact that Iceland had been converted at the time of Óláfr Tryggvason, which is why in the late twelfth century 'a Latin biography was written in which Óláfr was pictured as a holy warrior

and *rex iustus*, empowered by Divine Grace to destroy paganism in the northern countries and establish the Kingdom of God' (Lönnroth, 1965, 17). Oddr Snorrason, in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, creates an image of a king *er at retto ma kallazt postoli Norðmanna* (ÓIOFJ, ch. 78, redaction U).

As far as Óláfr Tryggvason's missionary activity is concerned, a number of sources from the twelfth century depict him as the baptizer of several countries, namely Norway, Iceland and Greenland, and the Shetland, Orkney and Faeroe Islands. The historical accuracy of this statement has been questioned by scholars, although the rigidity of this statement may be mitigated by Oddr's own remark:

'Sua ær at virða sem Olafur konungur hinn fyrri (Óláfr Tryggvason. – T. J.) æfnaði oc setti grunduollinn cristinnar með sinu starfi. En hinn síparri Olafur (Óláfr Haraldsson. – T. J.) reisti ueggi' (ÓIOFJ, 156).

The Role of Óláfr Tryggvason in the conversion of Rus, as presented by Oddr Snorrason (Jackson, 1994), contradicts the material of many reliable historical sources and does not stand up to criticism. However, there is no doubt that Oddr had caused Óláfr to become involved in the baptism of the Russian prince and the people of Old Rus in order to glorify his hero. It is worth noting that the compiler of ÓITr supplemented the story of the conversion of Rus (which he borrowed from ÓIO310) with the following reasoning:

'What has now been said of the Christian preaching of Óláfr Tryggvason in Garðríki is not untrue, as the excellent and true book that is named *Imago mundi* tells distinctly that those peoples that are called *Rusei, Polaii, Vngarij* were baptized in the days of that Otto who was the third emperor with this name. Some books tell that Emperor Otto waged war in the Austrvegr and brought people there far and wide to Christianity, and Óláfr Tryggvason was with him' (ÓITr., I, 158).

In a similar manner, Óláfr Tryggvason is connected in Old Norse / Icelandic sources to the conversion of Denmark. Correspondingly, what happened in reality underwent a number of transformations in the process of fixation, and finally turned into a story with different historical characters at the centre of its plot.

To sum up: in historical fact, Haraldr Gormsson and the Danes were baptized under the influence of the German Emperor Otto I (936–973), according to German, English and Danish chroniclers from Widukind to Saxo Grammaticus, including Adam of Bremen. Furthermore, either Gunnlaugr Leifsson or Oddr Snorrason must have been familiar with a synopsis of Adam's description of the event. In spite of this, the saga authors permit a certain anachronism, since in the sagas Otto has Óláfr Tryggvason to thank for his victory over the Danes. Since Óláfr lived from ca. 965 to ca. 1000, it is obvious that the Old Norse / Icelandic sources have replaced Otto I with Otto II (973–983) or Otto III (983–1002). The main requirement for the Emperor is that he must be a contemporary of Óláfr Tryggvason, so that this Otto can defeat the Danes according to Óláfr's advice and with God's help. This deliberate mystification helps to create an image of a holy warrior, *rex iustus*, and the apostle of the North.

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