

**Historicizing Plausibility: The Anticipation of Disbelief in Oddr Snorrason's
*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar***

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A reader of the abstracts of papers to be given at this conference will soon realise that critics of Old Norse literature operate with a number of different understandings of 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic'. However, most such understandings rely at some point on a sense of what is implausible or impossible, and it is this sense of implausibility that I wish to examine in more detail in this paper. My aim is to exemplify an approach to the fantastic in Old Norse literature that is sensitive to historical difference. There are certainly occasions when it is appropriate and productive to read medieval texts with a modern rather than a medieval sense of what is plausible: we must do so, for example, when reading sagas as sources for reconstructing medieval history. An attempt to understand the meanings Old Norse-Icelandic texts may have had for their medieval readers must, however, try to appreciate where the limits of plausibility were felt to lie in the Middle Ages.

Given the variety of understandings of 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic' to which I have referred, it is necessary to say a little about what I mean by the words. The most widely influential modern theory of 'the fantastic', that of Tzvetan Todorov (1975), has had some currency in studies of Old Norse literature but seems to me to be problematic in a number of ways. Building on the work of earlier theorists, Todorov defines 'the fantastic' as 'that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event' (1975, 25); the fantastic in this sense depends for its effect on the appearance of an initially inexplicable phenomenon in an otherwise realistic context, but the fantastic lasts only as long as uncertainty about that phenomenon: once we have decided that it is an illusion or that it has taken place despite the laws of nature 'we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous' (1975, 25). This definition is narrower than, and somewhat at odds with, the everyday sense of the term: Todorov's fantastic is not simply the improbable or impossible: that would be 'the marvellous' in his terms. Moreover, Todorov is not concerned with what is usually thought of as the genre of 'fantasy' and never mentions several major texts usually so labelled. Todorov's 'fantastic' is more a mode than a genre: 'It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre' (1975, 41; cf. the distinction between genre and mode made in Clunies Ross 2002, 448).

This kind of terminology can lead to some confusion (the last thing a useful critical idiom should produce) when people using the term in Todorov's sense, or something like it, are led astray by the everyday sense of the word. Margaret Clunies Ross's stimulating article on 'Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas' (2002) follows Todorov in maintaining that the fantastic characteristically places the inexplicable in a realistic context:

The hallmark of the fantastic as a literary mode is that it juxtaposes elements of both the realistic and the marvelous or improbable, often without comment, and thereby problematizes both (2002, 448).

However, at the end of her article Clunies Ross claims that the episodes she has analysed

show how the literary modes of the realistic and the fantastic are often juxtaposed in the medieval Icelandic textual representation of human experience (2002, 453).

If 'the fantastic' in the second of these quotations means what 'the fantastic' is said to mean in the first, then what is being claimed is that the sagas juxtapose the realistic with the juxtaposition of elements of the realistic and the marvellous. This may be what is meant, but given the difficulty of juxtaposing something with elements of itself, I suspect that in the second quotation 'the fantastic' is being used in a 'commonsense' way as equivalent to 'the marvellous or improbable' of the first quotation, and no longer in the special sense inspired by Todorov.

Todorov rejects the idea of the fantastic that he says 'comes to mind straight off', namely that in the fantastic 'the author describes events which are not likely to occur in everyday life' (1975, 34). His rejection of this commonsense dictionary definition is made on the grounds that 'We might indeed characterize such [unlikely] events as supernatural' (1975, 34), but 'the supernatural' is too broad a concept to be useful. Such an equation of the improbable with the supernatural is nonsense to anyone who actually believes in the supernatural, and at this point Todorov reveals his position's post-Enlightenment historical limitations. It is because it takes for granted that the supernatural is improbable that Todorov's approach seems to me ill-suited to the discussion of medieval texts which take for granted the reality of the supernatural. Most of his examples of 'the fantastic' are from the eighteenth- to twentieth-centuries and it is notable that it is almost exclusively in his discussion of what he calls 'the marvellous' that he refers to pre-modern texts (1975, 54–57).

I intend to use the terms 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic' in precisely the commonsense way rejected by Todorov, and to regard the two terms as related to one another in the way that the modal term 'tragic' is related to the generic term 'tragedy'. Whereas the distinction in a narrative between history and fiction depends primarily on whether something did or did not happen, not whether it could happen, it is possible to make a further distinction *within* fiction (that which has not happened) between realism (that which could happen) and fantasy (that which could not happen or is extremely improbable). In order to judge whether a given text or episode is fantastic in this sense, one needs to assess its plausibility.

We find in some critical discussions of Old Norse literature – including some of the abstracts of papers for this conference – a tendency to categorise as fantastic those things which a reader today (more specifically, a certain sort of reader today) is likely to find implausible, rather than those things which a medieval reader might have thought improbable. It is, of course, difficult to determine what a medieval Icelander would have found plausible, but it is the kinds of evidence that might enable us to do so that I wish to focus on here. This paper considers what the vernacular versions of Oddr Snorrason's life of Óláfr Tryggvason can reveal about medieval Icelandic perceptions of plausibility. Oddr's saga offers a particularly interesting case study because of its early date, its connections with multiple literary traditions (Latin and Norse, history and hagiography, narrative prose and skaldic verse), and the manuscript

attribution to the same author of *Yngvars saga víðfjara*, a text arguably best categorised as a *fornaldarsaga*.

A number of strategies are employed in Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason to anticipate and forestall disbelief, and insofar as these indicate what the writer thought his audience might have had difficulty in believing they provide evidence on which we may build a sense of the plausible, and so of the implausible or fantastic, in medieval Iceland. The strategies employed are of different kinds. At the highest, or least specific, level there are strategies designed to validate the narrative as a whole, to make clear that this is history. At a more specific level there are a few notable points in the narrative where the narrator goes out of his way to anticipate objections to the veracity or plausibility of his narrative. There is also 'negative' evidence provided by episodes in which disbelief is apparently not anticipated by the narrator.

The text I follow convention in calling Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is not, of course, Oddr's own text, but a translation into Norse made c.1200 of the life he composed in Latin perhaps a decade or so earlier. For an analysis of the strategies employed to forestall the audience's disbelief this is quite an important point, as it means the surviving vernacular versions of the text are able to claim the authority of the (now lost) Latin source. Oddr is named as the author of the source text in the main and most complete saga manuscript (AM 310 4to) and in the fragmentary Uppsala manuscript (De la Gardie 4–7 fol.); Stockholm MS 18 4to provides in addition an account of Oddr's vision of King Óláfr: this claims (whether justifiably or not) to add the authority of authorial supernatural vision to that of Latin biography. (For the sake of convenience, quotations in this paper are from the normalised text by Guðni Jónsson (1957), and discussion is primarily of the Arnarnagnæan text supplemented, where material is missing, by the Stockholm manuscript; for a critical edition of both texts see Finnur Jónsson (1932)).

Our attention is also drawn to the status of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* as translation at three other places in the text, points where remnants of the Latin text survive. The Latin phrase *Pro sustentacione racio assumunt* appears in chapter 30. In Chapter 53 the Latin name (actually two alternatives) of Óláfr's ship is preserved alongside its Norse equivalent (*Ormr inn langi, en á látinutungu heitir hann Longus draco eða serpens*). In Chapter 65 a verse is quoted in Latin and then in Norse, though there has been debate as to whether the Latin is a composition by Oddr or a translation by him of the following Norse stanza attributed in the Stockholm manuscript to an Icelander called Stefnir (see Andersson 2003, 147). Although the reasons for these remnants surviving in the vernacular context are not always clear, they might have the effect of conferring a certain learned authority on the vernacular versions.

Much previous study of Oddr's saga has been devoted to the identification of his sources and the relation of his work to traditions about Óláfr's saintly namesake, Óláfr Haraldsson (e.g. Lönnroth 1963, Zernach 1998). Here I am concerned with the narratorial strategies that seem designed to authenticate the narrative or to forestall the audience's disbelief, and whether what is said in order to try to do this is accurate is not at issue. Thus it is much more important for the present enquiry to note that Oddr refers to the historians Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson, and invokes their authority, than to try to ascertain whether or not he did actually use their texts as sources. My concern is with what the text can tell us about where the lines were drawn

between history and realistic fiction on the one hand and fantasy on the other. Whether the text is *actually* (in our terms) history, realistic fiction, or fantasy is a different issue.

Oddr's saga frequently invokes sources for its narrative, and this is an important strategy at the general level of encouraging belief in the narrative and its historicity. However, such invocations usually take the form of vague references to what 'people say' (though what people are said to say is then usually reported as if it were straightforwardly what actually happened). Phrases such as *þat segja menn...* or *þat er sagt...* occur in the following chapters: 1, 5, 9, 14, 17, 19, 20, 24, 30, 32, 39, 40, 45, 49, 71, 73, 74. It is notable that many of these references to what 'people say' or what 'we are told' occur at the beginnings of chapters, as though such assertions fulfilled a structural function as well as authenticating the narrative. Some uses of these phrases deserve further comment. Doubts are expressed about what 'people say,' or alternative versions are mentioned, in chapters 1, 5, 39, 49, 73: while they may cast some doubt on the accuracy of the narrative, such comments also suggest that the writer is a careful and discriminating historian. In chapter 9 the people whose authority is invoked are specified as *vítrir menn ok fróðir*. In chapter 32 the authority of general report is invoked to support an assertion about King Eiríkr of Sweden that many today would find implausible:

En svá segja menn, at mikill djöfulskrafr fylgdi, at tvá hluti liðs hans felldi Eiríkr konungr með fjölkynngi, en at lyktum fell allt lið hans ok svá sjálfir Styrbjörn' (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 90).

Modern scholarship has shown that whereas Oddr frequently refers to what people say he actually made use of a number of written sources that he never mentions by name – for the very understandable reason that they were about other kings and saints, not Óláfr Tryggvason: such texts include St Gregory's *Dialogues* and Pseudo-Turpin's *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi* (cf. e.g. Lönnroth 1963). What matters for the present investigation, however, is that the narrative claims authenticity by invoking general report, not that it is misleading or disingenuous when it does so.

Apart from Hjalti Skeggjason's famously blasphemous lines (ch. 41), skaldic verse becomes a prominent feature of the narrative only in the account of the end of Óláfr's reign, with verses quoted in chapters 65, 66, 68, 71, 73, and 74. Oddr also refers to the prose histories of Ari and Sæmundr. In chapter 25 Oddr cites Ari and anonymous 'others' on Óláfr's age when he began to rule in Norway. He goes on, however, to explain an alternative view that *sumir menn fróðir* maintain. Later in the chapter both Ari and Sæmundr, *er hvárstveggja sögn er trúlig*, are enlisted in support of the calculation that Jarl Hákon ruled for thirty-three years after Haraldr gráfeldr. Chapter 36 includes what appears to be a quotation from Sæmundr.

The Arnarnagnæan manuscript of the saga appends a passage at the end of the text apparently describing Oddr's informants and claiming that the text was submitted to Gizurr Hallsson for approval (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 247; Guðni Jónsson 1957, 199). This has generally been thought to have belonged originally to the life of Óláfr by Oddr's fellow monk at Þingeyrar, Gunnlaugr Leifsson, but Andersson has recently pointed out that 'It is inherently plausible that two monks in the same monastery at Þingeyrar, writing on the same historical figure, would have used more or less the same informants' (2003, 2). Whatever the source of the passage, and whether or not it

is historically true, it functions in the Arnarnagnæan version as further authority for the veracity of the text's account of Óláfr's life.

Before we turn to passages in which Oddr's anxiety about the possibility of disbelief is most clearly evident we should consider those episodes in the saga which modern readers – or more accurately certain modern readers – would regard as implausible, or even impossible, and so fantastic, but which are recounted matter-of-factly as if there were no reason to doubt their veracity. These are episodes in which the narrator makes no attempt to anticipate or forestall disbelief, even though many modern readers would regard the events as inherently unlikely. A list of these episodes would include the following (I postpone accounts of prophetic dreams and similar phenomena for separate consideration below):

Ch. 3: Gunnhildr knows through sorcery where Ástríðr is (but this is told in reported speech and the opening of Ch. 4 perhaps implies that Gunnhildr did not use magic, although her later words *nú sé ek* do suggest the use of sorcery then).

Ch. 12: Óláfr and his men hide and miraculously become invisible.

Ch. 16: Description of the unusual abilities of the dog Vígi.

Ch. 28: The discovery of a holy head from Selja.

Ch. 29: A similar story of Selja relics, featuring bones of sweet fragrance.

Ch. 30: Miracles at Selja.

Ch. 32: Eiríkr of Sweden's magic powers.

Ch. 35: Óláfr's eloquence is said to be a gift of St Martin.

Ch. 36: Óláfr's conflict with sorcerers, featuring a matter-of-fact acceptance of magic, as in Eyvindr's escape *með vélum djöfulligrar íþróttir*.

Ch. 37: 'Gods' (i.e. the devil) respond to a man's sacrifices. Óláfr and his bishop are victorious through prayer and divine assistance.

Ch. 43: The devil is referred to matter-of-factly as a participant in Norwegian history. He appears to Óláfr as a one-eyed man, reveals information about the past, and then supernaturally provides 'better' meat for the king, which Óláfr orders thrown into the sea as it is poisonous.

Ch. 44: Eyvindr and other sorcerers are blinded when they see a church.

Ch. 50: Óláfr's superhuman abilities are described.

Ch. 52: Further description of Óláfr's superhuman abilities.

Ch. 55: Hróaldr is said to be a great sorcerer and his sorcery is seen to be effective.

Ch. 59: Óláfr meets Þórr, who can tell much about the distant past. Óláfr says later that it was the devil.

Ch. 60: Óláfr's retainers encounter several demons.

Ch. 73: A heavenly light envelops Óláfr when all is lost. He disappears.

Ch. 77: The dog Vígi understands speech and starves himself on hearing of Óláfr's death (fulfilling a prophecy recorded in ch. 64).

From this extensive list of episodes that are recounted matter-of-factly, it appears that for the writer or narrator and for his implied audience there was nothing inherently implausible, and so nothing necessarily fantastic, about such things as: the (successful) practice of sorcery, miraculous invisibility, miracles associated with the saints, supernaturally inspired eloquence, devils responding to a man's sacrifices, the devil's

taking on the appearance of a one-eyed man/Óðinn or of the god Þórr, the appearance of a heavenly light, or a dog that understands human speech. It is, however, notable that many of the occurrences in the above list are explained as the work of the devil or of demons. What might otherwise seem if not implausible at least inexplicable is made sense of by attributing it to diabolical agency (which for many modern readers would in itself be implausible, of course).

It is worth pointing out that although all these incidents will appear fantastic to a certain kind of modern reader, other modern readers may be prepared to accept the possibility that at least some of them could happen. Scholarship on Old Norse-Icelandic literature is often implicitly (more rarely explicitly) informed by a secular rationalist worldview that discounts the very possibility of the magical, the supernatural, or the miraculous. Even one or two of the abstracts of papers for this conference simply assume that the miraculous or the supernatural is by definition 'fantastic', whereas for the vast majority of the human race, in the past and still today, this is simply not the case: from such a perspective, categorising all accounts of the supernatural or the miraculous as by definition 'fantastic' is historically very much a minority viewpoint, and moreover one arrived at on grounds that have little or nothing to do with literary criticism.

We should pause at this point to consider the importance of the mode of discourse. Many a modern fantasy novel tells of such things as dragons, sorcery, or magic weapons in a matter-of-fact way that does not anticipate disbelief, and on this basis a (very) naïve reader might assume that the author and his/her implied audience do not regard such things as implausible. But in such cases the question of plausibility has, of course, been 'bracketed off' by expectations of the genre. Knowing we are reading a fantasy novel rather than a history conditions us to suspend disbelief and accept the matter-of-fact account of events whose veracity we would question or deny if presented in an equally matter-of-fact way as history. This raises the question of what kind of meanings we expect from Oddr's saga, and why we expect them: what kind of truth claims does the text make? I shall return to this question when I consider below the passages in which Oddr engages most explicitly with the issue. For the moment it may be pointed out that it is precisely because Oddr does engage elsewhere in the text with the question of plausibility that his not doing so in relation to the episodes listed above suggests that *their* plausibility was not felt to need special defence, that disbelief was not anticipated there.

Further 'negative' evidence of the limits of plausibility is provided by episodes involving foreseeing the future. There are several occurrences of this in the saga:

Ch. 1: King Tryggvi's wife Ástriðr has a dream foreboding ill; Tryggvi is subsequently killed.

Ch. 8: *Í þenna tíma váru í Garðaríki margir spámenn.*

Ch. 13: Óláfr himself experiences dreams and visions. He goes to Greece as requested in a vision and is converted to Christianity there.

Ch. 14: A 'clairvoyant abbot on the Scilly Isles' (Andersson 2004, 149).

Ch. 19: An account of a prescient Lapp; everything turns out as he predicts.

Ch. 21: The slave hiding with Jarl Hákon has four prophetic dreams.

Ch. 27: Óláfr has a vision of St Martin. Óláfr's opponents are miraculously unable to speak.

Ch. 64: A blind man has a prophetic gift; he foresees Óláfr's passing.

Like the episodes already discussed, these are recounted matter-of-factly, with no attempt to anticipate and forestall disbelief, and this again suggests that these episodes – not just the dreams or prophecies themselves but also the fact that they are always accurate – were not thought to be inherently implausible. I wonder, though, whether it is also possible that the way these prophecies endow the narrative with a certain inevitability might also be regarded as a strategy for forestalling disbelief: a narrative that proceeds inevitably is perhaps more difficult to doubt.

In one further instance of prophecy some anticipation of disbelief may be implied in Oddr's appealing to written authority: in chapter 6 the mother of King Valdimarr in Russia is said to be a prophetess (she correctly prophesies Óláfr's future), and unspecified 'books' are invoked to define or categorise her as a 'Pythian spirit' (*ok er þat kallat í bókum fítonsandi*). The authority for belief in such a phenomenon includes the Bible (Acts 16:16; Andersson 2003, 138).

One may observe that several of these dreams and prophecies occur outside Scandinavia (e.g. Russia, the Scilly Isles) or involve non-Scandinavians (Russians, Lapps). Did prophetic dreams and visions appear more plausible when they took place outside Scandinavia or happened to non-Scandinavians? This is a point we shall return to towards the end of this paper.

Before considering the passages in which Oddr deals explicitly with the issue of plausibility there are a couple of further episodes worth considering briefly. In chapter 51 the authority of Þorkell, *inn sannsöglasta man* is invoked as the source for a story of Óláfr's exceptional powers; there appears to be some anxiety here about the plausibility of the story. A similar anxiety may underlie the statement in chapter 75 that *skal ek segja sem ek veit sannast*.

Oddr's saga is introduced by a Prologue in which he explains his reasons for writing about Óláfr. Among other things, he writes that it is better to hear praise of a good king than to listen to *stjúpmæðrasögur, er hjarðarsveinar segja*, though what is objectionable about such step-mother tales seems to be primarily that they are insufficiently deferential to kings. Oddr continues:

Bið ek góða eigi fyrirlíta þessa frásögn ok gruni eigi framar eða ífi sögnina en hófi gegni, því at vitrir menn hafa oss frá sagt nokkura hluti hans stórvirkja [...] ok oft kann þat at at berast, at fals er blandit sömmu, ok megu vér því eigi mikinn af taka, en ætium þó, at eigi muni rjúfast þessir, en kunna þökk þeim, er um má bæta. (Bjarni Guðnason 1957, 4)

After asking those who know better to suggest improvements (was this what prompted Gunnlaugr Leifsson to pick up his pen?), he attacks those who would criticise without offering a better alternative, *því at vitrum mönnum þykkir hver saga heimsliga ónýtt, ef hann kallar þat lygi, er sagt er, en hann má engar sönnur á finna* (p. 4).

One of the main concerns of the Prologue, clearly, is to establish the truth claims of the following narrative by setting up expectations about the kind of text that the reader is encountering. Debate about the genre of Oddr's saga has shifted from counting it a King's Saga, to regarding it as hagiography (see especially Sverrir Tómasson 1988, 261–79), to Andersson's attractive recent characterisation of the text as 'a bipolar composition' (2003, 25). In the context of the present discussion the distinction between hagiography and history is not actually very significant.

Regardless of the historicity of particular miracle stories, hagiography depends on a belief in the plausibility of the miraculous, so reading Oddr's text (or any given episode within it) as either history or hagiography depends upon a sense of the possibility of the events having happened, whereas reading it as fantasy does not.

Chapter 45 tells how Eyvindr kinnrifa reveals under torture and just before his death that he is in fact an unclean spirit incarnated by Lappish magicians. A battle then takes place in Hálogaland against another pagan there, Þórir hjörtr. He is shot by an arrow and falls, but then *einn mikill hjörtr*, obviously a metamorphosed Þórir, springs up in his place. The hart is pursued and killed by Óláfr's dog, Vígi, who has to be sent to a Lapp to be magically cured of his wounds. These two episodes are recounted as matter-of-factly as any other in the saga, but at the end of the chapter Oddr reveals an anxiety about their plausibility when he explains the events recounted as the work of the devil:

En þó at þvílfkir hlutir sé sagðir frá slíkum skrímslum ok undrum sem nú var sagt, þá má slíkt víst ótrúligt þykkja. En allir menn vita þat, at fjandinn er jafnan gagnstaðligr almátikum guði ok þeir inir aumu menn, er guði hafna. [...] En þessa hluti, er vér segjum frá slíkum hlutum ok dæmisögum, þá dæmum vér þat eigi sannleik, at svá hafi verit, heldr hyggjum vér, at svá hafi sýnzkt, því at fjandinn er fullr upp flærðar ok illsku (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 118).

As before, this explanation of unlikely stories as the work of the devil removes them from the realm of fantasy for a medieval audience, but does not do so for modern readers for whom the devil is himself fantasy. There is clearly considerable unease about the narrative's plausibility here, despite the involvement of Lapps (and the relatively exotic setting in Hálogaland), which elsewhere makes the possibly marvellous more plausible. Our sense that Oddr is here drawing attention to the limits of plausibility is confirmed when we compare his account with Snorri Sturluson's version in *Heimskringla*: Snorri abbreviates and somewhat tones down Eyvindr's confession, and removes entirely the marvellous elements from the fight with Þórir (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, chs 76, 78).

Snorri also justifies Oddr's anxieties about the plausibility of his account of Óláfr's escape from the battle of Svöldr. Chapter 78 of the Arnamagnæan text of Oddr's saga begins by acknowledging that 'some people' find the story doubtful (*nokkut ifanligr*), and when he has told the story Oddr feels the need to assert that although many doubt it *þó ætla ek at visu, at þetta myndi satt vera* (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 191). This defensiveness seems justified in the light of Snorri's later verdict on stories of Óláfr's survival: *En hvernug sem þat hefir verit, þá kom Óláfr konungr Tryggvason aldri síðan til ríkis í Noregi* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 368). (The Uppsala manuscript of Oddr's saga gives a different, equally unlikely, version of Óláfr's life after Svöldr, but any anxiety about its plausibility is indicated only by the reference to its being told by a *vitr maðr* called Sóti skáld (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 259–61)).

One of the particular attractions of Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason for an investigation of the limits of plausibility in early Iceland is that Oddr is also claimed as the author of (or the source for) another saga, *Yngvars saga víðförla*, which though not without a historical kernel appears almost wholly fantastic to most modern readers,

and might best be regarded as a *fornaldarsaga*. At the end of *Yngvars saga* its narrator claims

En þessu sögu höfum vér heyrt ok ritat eftir forsögn þeirar bækr, at Oddr munk inn fróði hafði gera látit at forsögn fróðra manna, þeira er hann segir sjálfir í bréfi sínu, því er hann sendi Jóni Loftssyni ok Gizuri Hallssyni (Guðni Jónsson 1954, 459).

It was long assumed by scholars that this reference to a book by Oddr must either be a mistake, or else a deliberate deception, perhaps designed to give *Yngvars saga* a spurious authority (Olson, for example, writes that it is 'uppenbart oriktig' (1912, xviii)). But in an article published in 1981 Dietrich Hofmann argues in favour of accepting the statement at face value; he attributes a lost life of Yngvarr to Oddr, and proposes that *Yngvars saga* is a translation of that life made c.1200.

After an initially cool reception (to which he responded in Hofmann 1984) Hofmann's views have more recently been treated as if they were fact. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1989, 2) give a title for Oddr's lost text, **Vita Yngvari*, which Margaret Cormack (2000, 307–08) adopts (without their asterisk). This is not the place to consider this issue in detail, but I have argued elsewhere that even if *Yngvars saga* is based on a Latin life by Oddr, there are good grounds for doubting that Oddr's version can have been the kind of saint's *vita* that Hofmann and his followers have suggested it was (see Phelpstead (forthcoming)).

What is more important in the present context is what the allusion to Oddr in *Yngvars saga* might be saying about the truth claims of that saga and what it might imply about Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason. Like the Arnarnagnæan manuscript of Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, the passage at the end of *Yngvars saga* claims that Oddr submitted his work to Gizurr Hallsson for approval. In both vernacular texts Oddr's name (and Gizurr's) seems to be used, whether justifiably or not, to lend authority to the narrative and to forestall disbelief. Could medieval Icelanders have regarded these two sagas as equally plausible, one no more fantastic than the other? *Yngvars saga* is set mainly in 'Russia', to the east of Scandinavia, and we have seen that many (though admittedly not all) of the (to us) 'fantastic' elements of Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason are also located outside Scandinavia. There are grounds for thinking, therefore, that what a medieval Icelander would find implausible (fantastic) in a Scandinavian context might be much more plausible when located elsewhere. To this extent, plausibility turns out to be contingent on geographical setting, something that is, I think, no longer the case.

It is to this kind of historical difference that the attempt to historicize plausibility ought to sensitize us. It is clear that the limits of plausibility were not the same in medieval Iceland as they are for people like us today. While there are certainly occasions on which it is appropriate to apply our sense of plausibility to medieval texts, an appreciation of what the texts might have meant to a medieval audience depends upon recovering a medieval sense of the (im)possible. By examining those passages of Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason that reveal an anxiety about plausibility and by identifying narrative strategies employed in order to try to forestall disbelief, I have sought to refine awareness of medieval Icelandic perceptions of plausibility and so contribute to historicizing our understanding of fantasy in Old Norse literature. I have also tried to suggest the desirability of reflecting on our own

ideological positioning in order to be sensitive to the alterity of the past when we discuss fantasy and the fantastic in Old Norse-Icelandic literature.

In the Prologue to his saga Oddr Snorrason reflected that it often happens *at fals er blandii sönnu*; I hope that there have not been too many fallacies mixed with the truth in this paper, but before allowing you to suggest improvements, I cannot resist reminding you of Oddr's assertion a little later that *vitrum mönnum þykkir hver saga heimsliga ónýt, ef hann kallar þat lygi, er sagt er, en hann má engar sönnur á finna*.

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