

**Rationalizing the Fantastic  
(Abstract)**

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Tales of the unheard-of, the wondrous or the fantastic as found e.g. in oral reports, the sagas, or Old Norse scientific literature were a challenge to their medieval recipients: what attitude towards them should they take? Reject them as purely fictional, consider them to be at least possibly true or let the decision whether to believe or reject them depend on the witness of authorities?

This paper deals with the reflection of the question in Old Norse literature, particularly in the Old Norwegian *Kings' Mirror*. This knowledge-imparting text covers a wide range of subjects, amongst them descriptions of the miracles and natural wonders of Norway, Ireland, Iceland, and Greenland such as the extreme climate, the midnight sun, and marvels of the North Atlantic. In the dialogue, narrations of the fantastic and wondrous serve the purpose of entertaining the son. At the same time, they are embedded in a rationalistic discourse on the reliability of reports and statements in general. In this discussion, the *Kings' Mirror* refers to the so called *Letter of Prester John* and the marvels of India described in it, explicitly naming flying dragons that could be tamed and ridden. The *Letter* was widely known in the Christian Middle Ages, and additions of an encyclopaedic nature were made to it several times.

I shall discuss the rational approach to the fantastic which is to be observed in the *Kings' Mirror*, in the light of the concept of shrewdness. That concept is the foundation pillar within the theory of the acquisition of knowledge, manners, and courtly bearing.