

Króka-Refs saga as science fiction: Technology, magic and the materialist hero

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In *Króka-Refs saga*, the supernatural is conspicuous in its absence. In lieu of supernatural intrusions, the text presents a series of episodes featuring technological accomplishments which would probably have struck the original audience as less plausible than many of the legend-like supernatural occurrences found in other Sagas of Icelanders (cf. Lindow 1986). Mythological and folkloric motifs are recast as having rational explanations which are beyond the technology of the time but which are presented as elaborations on known techniques. This emphasis on the power of reasoning and technology, shading from the realm of possibility into an imagined one, prefigures modern science fiction and the tendency to rationalize supernatural experience by couching it in the language of science. While twentieth-century science fiction derives its futuristic vision from the experience of rapid technological change, the exaggerated feats in *Króka-Refs saga* may reflect shades of parody or tall tale.

This late saga contains numerous markers of novelistic self-consciousness (cf. e.g. Halldór Guðmundsson 1990) and the saga has been called an 'imitation' (Amory 1988: 16) or 'parody' (Arnold 2003: 183) of other sagas, individually or as a genre. *Króka-Refr* is a trickster hero and anti-hero with a James Bond-like mastery of technology. While *Grettis saga* famously describes the tragic fate of a hero born in an unheroic age (cf. e.g. Hume 1974; Viðar Hreinsson 1992: 97), the comic *Króka-Refs saga* describes the anti-hero equipped to prevail in 'modern' society (cf. Lindow 1977 on the less sympathetic trickster Ófeigr in *Bandamanna saga*).

Örnólfur Thorsson, quoting and expanding on Sverrir Tómasson's introduction to the saga in *Sigildar sögur* (n.v.), notes that Refr's magic is technological:

Enn má nefna smíðar Refs sem leiða hugann að handlögnum refum í útlendum dýrasögum og virki hans á Grænlandi 'kann að vera hluti af þeirri táknaðnu mynd sem tengist refnum og hátterni hans. Það gæti með öðrum orðum átt að vera "urðargreni". Og það má kannski kalla tæknigreni. (Örnólfur Thorsson 1991: 103)

Note the transformation from the mythological to the technological in the equivalence Örnólfur draws between *urðargreni* (lair of fate, the nom *Urðr*) and *tæknigreni* (lair of technology).

Frederic Amory describes the tension between realism and fantasy in the saga: If it is a *skróksaga*, a 'false' family saga, it is clearly a *skróksaga* with a difference, for it does not entertain its readers with mountains and marvels on the scale of *Þjalar-Jóns saga* [...], but, on the contrary, fosters an illusion of realistic sobriety and verisimilitude. And yet it also communes with the fantasies and fairy tales of the *fornaldarsögur* which fabled of wheeled ships and the generous King Gautrekr and the gifted and lucky Refr, the namesake of Refr Steinsson. Similar more or less artistic mixtures of family saga and *fornaldarsaga* were concocted in the fourteenth century, but *Króka-Refs saga* is the most imaginative and the most realistic of the genre. It was conceived after the *Gautreks saga* as

the success story of a *kolbíttr*, a trickster myth, unreal or surreal in outline, which was then colored in realistically in the family-saga style. (Amory 1988: 22)

This realistic portrayal of the unrealistic is akin to what I am describing as 'science fiction.'

The only potential references to supernatural abilities in the saga can also be interpreted as referring to natural perception, intelligence and insight, traits valued in the saga. (Something similar might be argued for the characterization of Njáll Þorgeirsson, *vittr var hann ok forspár* (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 57).) Early on in the saga, the dwarf Barði (whose slaying precipitates Refr's transformation from late-blooming *kolbíttr* to hero) is referred to as 'skyggn ok glöggþekkin' (121), terms which can denote second sight but which here may simply mean 'sharp-sighted and perceptive.' Later in the narrative another character (an antagonist to Refr) is described as *skyggn: Bárðr var manna skyggnastr.* (140) This statement appears in the context of navigation, and it seems that non-supernatural sight is meant.

Króka-Refs saga contains a few examples of prophetic statements, but these need not be construed as supernatural. On his deathbed, Steinn urges his wife to move away from the troublemaker Þorbjörn:

'Segir mér svá hugr um, at Þorbjörn muni ekki rór í byggðinni við þik, þó at vel hafi fallit á með okkr; varir mik, at honum þykki nú dælla land þitt til beitingar en þá er ek var við.' (121)

Later, the mentor figure with the Odinic name Gestr tells Refr,

'Ek sé á þér, at þú ert inn mesti íþróttamaðr at nökkurum hlut, en þat mun ek sjá brátt, hvat þat er.' (127)

These insights self-consciously reflect the saga trope of prophetic statements, but the first can be interpreted as reflecting a reasonable inference from preceding events and the second as proceeding from a natural judgement of character, as well as familiarity with Refr as an individual and as an instance of the *kolbíttr* type.

One form of advanced technology (and word-smithing) is the self-conscious anachronism of Gestr asking Refr to write up his Greenlandic adventures for posterity:

Ef þér verðr eigi útkvámu auðit, þá vil ek, at þú látir skrifa frásögn um ferð þína, því at hún mun nökkurum merkileg þykkja, því at ek hygg, at þú sér annarr spekingr mestr í várri ætt. Mun ok nökkut gott af þér verða. Mæli ek nú ok svá fyrir, at sá inn sami, er sólina hefir skapat, efli þik til góðra hluta. (131)

The noble-heathenish circumlocution *sá inn sami, er sólina hefir skapat* is the only reference in the saga to religion, either Christian or pagan, which is otherwise conspicuously absent.

The saga presents numerous instances of amazing triumphs of reasoning and technology. The first of these, developed in detail as Refr's test of worth, is the building of the seal-hunting boat. Gestr infers from observation that Refr has the makings of a major-league carpenter:

'Nú veit ek íþrótt þína; þú ert þjóðsmiðr, ef þú villt. Ek hefi at hugat, er þú hefir upp tekir reimunarkefli, ok hefir þú þat hvártki telgt vint né skakkt ok eigi óslétt; ok það hefir fimligast verit, sem þú hefir við leitat.' (127)

Refr accepts the hypothesis that this represents innate talent, citing his lack of experience as corroborating evidence:

'Vera má þat,' segir Refr, 'því at ek hefi aldri smíðat.' (127)

Gestr contrives a test situation, in which Refr is to construct a seal-boat (*selabátr*) in isolation and without help.

Once Refr has successfully performed this impossible task, proving himself *mannvitull* (129), the narrator conspiratorially explains how the miracle was accomplished: Refr had used a toy boat as a model.

Sá atburður hafði orðit, at með fðður hans hafði verit á vist norrænn maðr ok son hans. Váru þeir jafngamlir, Austmanns son ok Refr. Austmanns son hafði sér at leiku skip þat, er verit hafði í Nóregi sem líkast haffæröndum byrðingum; en áðr Austmanns son færi á brutt, gaf hann Ref skip þetta, ok þat hafði Refr haft til skemmtanar sér í eldaskálanum at smíða þar eptir. (129)

While this explanation is hardly adequate to account for Refr's accomplishment, the narrator presents it as though it were.

In other episodes, the role of 'Sherlock Holmes' in the text is embodied by the person of King Haraldr Sigurðarson, whose exaggerated acuity might be perceived as a parody of the trope of the wise king.

When Bárðr and his men attempt to set fire to Refr's wooden fort, they find themselves foiled when the fort begins to spout water, extinguishing the flames:

En er umhverfum var kominn viðrinn, slá þeir í eldi; kyndist þá skjótt viðrinn, ok því næst sjá þeir, at eldrinn slokknar. Þeir draga at við af nýju í annat sinn at virkinu. Þeir sá þá, at vatnfall mikit fór af virkinu, ok slokknar allr eldrinn. Þeir leita umhverfum virkit ok finna hvergi vatn. Þeir báru þá at eldinn uppi at virkinu, ok kom þar eigi síðr vatn ór fellingum en niðri. (141)

Bárðr accuses Refr of *fjöllkynngi* (141), which he does not deny. However, when Bárðr describes this experience to the king, the king explains in detail how Refr's sprinkler system was constructed, though with a dissembling abundance of markers of evidentiality:

'Þess get ek þá,' sagði konungr, 'at í þeim litla dal, er þar gengr upp at jöklinum, muni vatn vera; mun Refr hafa veitt vatnit, ok mun hann hafa felldan stökk í stökk, þar til at vatnit kemr at virkishorninu neðsta. Þar ætla ek gerva tvá stokka, ok mun ór einum renna í hina báða stokkana ok fylla svá hvámtveggja hlut virkisins. En virkit allt mun gert stokkum holum, ok mun hverr stokkr lúta eptir öðrum ok hverr mun upp frá öðrum, ok mun svá fylla virkit uppi ok niðri af vatninu. Á þá leið hygg ek þar umbúð veitta. En þar sem yðr þóttu ekki verða mót á viðinum, er vatn fell út alls staðar umhverfis virkit, þar hygg ek hann munu borat hafa langar borur, svá mjóvar, at ekki mátti koma nema því tré, er þynnst verðr telgt, ok ætla ek hann þau tré hafa sett alls staðar í virkissokkana; en í þeim blegðum ætla ek vera skaup, ok mun hann þeim þá munat hafa líttat, er hann vildi, at vatnit rynni ór virkinu. Alla þessa blegða mun hann sett hafa af smíði, ok mun eins konar tré verit hafa í blegðunum ok í stokkunum.' (144-145)

Bárðr's description of his experience with the fort does not provide sufficient information for the king to infer all of this, but, once again, the narrative presents the explanation as satisfactory. The king's statement, '*Alla þessa blegða mun hann sett hafa af smíði*' (145), emphasizes that this is a feat of technology rather than magic.

When Bárðr follows the king's advice and sabotages the sprinkler system, Refr recognizes that he must have had help from someone smarter:

'Ek veit ok,' segir hann, 'at engi yðar mundi þetta ráð fundit hafa, nema þér nýtið yðr hyggjarni manna við.' (147)

As Amory points out (1988: 16n), *Harðar saga* includes a description of a similar system involving a hidden source of water for fire retention (77-78). In that instance, the technological solution is suggested by Hörðr's sister Þorbjörg, as an addendum to her description of a prophetic dream.

Þá nótt ina sömu, er Hörðr fór ór Hólmi, dreymdi Þorbjörgu á Indriðastöðum, at átta tigur varga rynni þar at bænum ok brynni eldar ór munni þeim ok væri einn í hvítabjörn, ok þótti hann heldr dapr, ok dvöldust nökkura stund á bænum ok runnu síðan vestr ór garði á hól nökkurn ok lögðust þar niðr. En Indriði sagði þat vera hugi Hólmerja til sín. Þorbjörg kveðst ætla, at þeir mundu vera sjálfir ok koma þar brátt. Hon bað Indriða veita heim brunnlæk ok þekja yfir, því at hon kveðst vera berdreym. Svá var nú gert. (77)

The description of the water-supply system in *Harðar saga* is less elaborate and gives less of an impression of a technological wonder than that in *Króka-Refs saga*, and although the attackers cut off the water supply they find that the reserve is sufficient to prevent them from setting fire to the fort.

Síðan drógu þeir viðköst at durum ok lögðu eld í bæinn, en þeir vörðu með vatni, sem fyrir váru; þeim sóttist illa. Þat undraðist Geirr. Hörðr mælti: 'Þess get ek, at systir mín hafi ráð til gefit um vatnrás þessa.' Þeir fóru at leita ok fundu lækinn ok veittu af, en þó var nóg vatnit í bænum, svá hafði mikit inn hlaupit áðr. (78)

This description is less fantastic than that found in *Króka-Refs saga*, and yet supernatural intervention is invoked to account for it.

When Bárðr succeeds in burning down the fort, Refr and his family escape on a ship on wheels which bursts forth through the collapsing wall of the fort. While the ship on wheels is a variant on a widespread motif (cf. e.g. Classen 2004: 475; Harvey 1961: 259-296) found in a more wondrous guise, e.g., in *Þjalar-Jóns saga*, Amory notes that *Króka-Refs saga*'s 'down-to-earth pragmatism is quite foreign to the fabulousness of the ship-building in *Þjalar-Jóns saga*' (1988: 16).

King Haraldr also unravels at length Refr's elaborate, riddling account of how he slew Grani, after hearing it once in the middle of his own speech. While this incident does not rely on technology but on a verbal *lþrótt* (that of the word-smith), it likewise presents a comic ruse on the part of the fox and an exaggerated picture of the monarch's acuity.

Konungur mælti þá: 'Verri efni munu í vera. Maðr þessi tók svá til orðs: 'Vít Sverðhúss-Grani urðum saupsáttir í dag. Hann vildi fjallskerða konu mína.' Þess get ek,' sagði konungur, 'at hann muni átt hafa við hirðmann minn, Skálp-Grana, því at skálpinn er hús sverðsins. Mun hann hafa farit

um herbergi at leita sér kvenna; má vera, at þá hafi fyrir orðit kona Narfa þessa. Sá er drykkur á Íslandi, er misa heitir; er þat allt eitt: misa ok saup ok drykkur. Nú munu þeir hafa orðit missáttir. Hann sagði hann hafa viljat fjallskerða konu sína. Þar hefir hann viljat hvíla með henni, því at þá er kallat, at konur sé giljaðar, en gilin eru fjallskörð. Þá kveðst hann stórkeralda hann í gegnum strábeygisauga. Þat er rétt atkvæði. Sáir eru þau keröld stór. Þá viti þér, at vindr heitir strábeygir, en vindauga á húsum, ok hefir hann sét hann um glugginn á herberginu, er þau hafa saman átt. 'Þá langhúsaði ek, konungr,' sagði hann, 'ok þá langhúsaði hann.' Rann heitir langt hús, ok hefir þá hvárrtveggi þeira runnit. Mun hann hafa hlaupit með skemmuveggnum hart, er hann hefir sét sameignina. Þat mun Grani heyrta hafa. Má vera, at þá hafi hann staðar látit nema athöfn þá, er hann hafði; mun hann þá hafa forðat sér. 'Þá hreiðrballaða ek hann,' kvað hann. Þá mun hann hafa eggjat hann at bíða, því at egg er hreiðrböllur. 'En hann marghrossaði við,' en stóð hross heita ok eru mörg saman jafnan. Mun hann þá hafa staðar numit. Þá kveðst hann fagrörögga hann, -- 'en hann skipskeggjaði við.' Skikkjur eru þær á Íslandi, er feldir heita. Er þat ýmist kallat á feldinum röggur eða lagör. Nú mun hann hafa vikit svá til málinu at kalla lagö; mun hann þá hafa lagt í gegnum hann, er hann kveðst fagrörögga hann. 'En hann skipskeggjaði við.' Barð heitir á skipi. Þá mun hann barizt hafa, er hann var í fjörbrotunum. 'Þá lynghnappaða ek hann undir skiógarð einn,' sagði hann, 'skammt í braut.' Byrðr heitir lynghnappur, ok hefir hann þá borit hann undir skiógarðinn. Þá kveðst hann hafa váðvirkt yfir hann síðan; er þat málshátr á Íslandi, at konur lúka vef. Mun hann þá hafa hulit hann. Nú vil ek,' sagði konungr, 'at þér leitid at þessum mönnum, bæði at inum vegna ok svá vegandanum.' (154-156)

The king's 'disquisition' (Amory 1988: 18) parodies exegesis of skaldic verse and medieval etymology. The punning circumlocutions and hapax compounds in Refr's prose confession are in parodic dialogue with skaldic diction. While skaldic verse is rich in deverbial nouns, this reversal is full of nonce denominal compound verbs. The (deverbal) *strábeygir* 'straw-bender' for 'wind' is a well-formed kenning, as is *sverðhús* 'sword-house' for 'sheath.' Obscene double entendres like the latter and the image of the mountain pass in *fjallskerða* also have parallels in skaldic vocabulary (cf. Clunies Ross 1981: 374n).

In other sagas, deliberately difficult or misleading pronouncements of slayings are generally not discovered without much effort and time. This holds for Gísli Súrsson's skaldic confession to the murder of Þórgrímr and for the various ruses contrived by Víga-Glúmr. Here, by contrast, it appears that the king instantly understands Refr's message, even though the king is himself speaking during Refr's confession. Only the king's lack of interest in pursuing Refr prevents him from responding immediately to the statement; instead, he chooses to wait until pressed by his retainers to explain it, by which time Refr has taken advantage of his verbal smoke-screen to flee.

Refr is at once an anti-hero and a superhero. He flees rather than embracing danger; he does not engage in heroic posturing. Örnólfur Thorsson notes that:

'hann er frábrugðinn hetjum annarra Íslendinga sagna fyrir það helst að hann vinnur sigra sína með brögðum og orðlist fremur en vopnabraki og hamagangi' (Örnólfur Thorsson 1991: 103).

Arnold describes Refr as 'superlative, without restraint, showing no sign of tragic potential, beyond parochial argument and fated only by his self-determination' (2003: 184); he 'succeeds extra-societally through ruthlessness and ingenuity' (2003: 184). Refr appears invincible, as acknowledged by the name *Sigtryggr* 'victory-sure' given to him by King Sveinn at the end of the saga (159-160). (In a reversal of the usual *nafngipt* pattern, the new name is a more usual personal name than the original, perhaps marking Refr's transition from extra-societal fox to member of human society. The role of 'fox' (cf. Örnólfur Thorsson 1991) may be as contrived as the pseudonyms and disguises which Refr dons in the course of the saga.)

Arnold relates the saga's lack of social conscience and moral depth to the social climate of fourteenth-century Iceland and the breakdown of the social ideals which had permeated most earlier sagas.

The absence of effective restraint on the incredible hero is, then, the central aspect of the plot of *Króka-Refs saga*. This, in itself suggests one way in which the saga can be regarded as describing the cultural milieu of post-independence Iceland which, compared to the social idealism that is apparent beneath the dramas of the classical saga, implies an absence of any such collective ideal. (Arnold 2003: 218).

While the cynical *Bandamanna saga* describes the trickster ethics needed to succeed in thirteenth-century Iceland (Lindow 1977), *Króka-Refs saga* represents a lighter, more hilarious satire which sidesteps many of the moral issues. Refr's adversaries are generally unsympathetic, and the networks of kinship and social obligation in this saga are underdeveloped in comparison to most family sagas; Refr's episodic, comic adventures feel almost cartoon-like. The saga focuses on comic exploitation of motifs and patterns drawn from other sagas (*Íslendinga-*, *fornaldar-* and *riddara-*), folklore and medieval romance.

Króka-Refs saga suggests that technology and ingenuity are the source of solutions which enable the unfettered hero to elude his assailants, who naively interpret his technical prowess as magic. The rationalist, materialist world-view and futuristic technology are additional 'modern' traits of *Króka-Refs saga*.

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