

The Dual World of the *Fornaldarsögur*

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The universe in which the scene of the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (FAS) is laid is not homogeneous: rather, the stories present us with two realities, complementary, but clearly separate and very different from each other. One of these can easily be defined as the 'Scandinavian world', and reflects the world in which the authors and the audience of the sagas lived. The other is the 'Magic world' of the FAS. The border between the two worlds is indistinct, and the usage of the fuzzy set theory is required in order to analyze them (on its application to historical studies see (Belova, 141–144). The worlds can be viewed as two poles on a conventional scale on which it is possible to arrange all the phenomena described in the FAS – e.g. characters, countries, events, inanimate objects. (Figure 1).

Figure 1:



However, each world has an autonomous, clearly traceable nucleus, which I will attempt to describe using four of the FAS: *Örvar-Odds saga*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* and *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. This set of texts provides a representative sampling of the FAS in both intraspecific classification and recording date (Chart 1). In the first case, two out of three main categories of standard FAS classification (Schier, 86–89) are covered, i.e. Viking and Adventure sagas. The third group, Heroic sagas, is too specific and requires a separate study. In the second case, the date frame of the selected sagas covers the most fruitful period for the recording of FAS, when their main corpus was put onto parchment.

Chart 1:

Saga	Date	Classification
Örvar-Odds saga (Ö.O.)	Late 13 th cent.	Viking
Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar (Þorst. Vík.)	Circa 1300	adventure
Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar (Hfd. Ey.)	Early 14 th cent.	adventure
Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana (Eg. Ásm.)	14 th cent.	adventure

The many elements of the FAS universe create a complex hierarchy. At the heart of this hierarchy are the ethics of these texts, on which the conflict of the story depends. The conflict, in turn, defines the rest of the elements – physical laws, geography, ethnical and racial structure of the FAS universe, etc.

The ethical code of the Scandinavian world of FAS mirrors the ethical directives of the real world. The code of the Magic world, on the other hand, reverses all the positive directives into negatives. The most important thing in the Scandinavian world is moderation, or the ability to contain one's egotistical impulses within the limits of the ethical code accepted in society. Upon suggesting blood-brotherhood to Örvar-Oddr, Hjalmarr specifies the rules he follows during his viking travels – effectively the rules of war (Ö.O. 1:310), which Oddr himself accepts (Ö.O. 1:315). Hálfdan Eysteinnsson is looking to avenge himself on his father's murderer, but at a crucial juncture chooses to abstain from vengeance, because he owes his own life to the same man who killed his father (Hfd. Ey. 3:296–297 and 3:312). The son of King Njörfi has been slain, but the King does not try to avenge himself on the murderer's father – who is also Njörfi's blood brother – although he is expected to do so (Þorst. Vík. 2:206–207). In the Magic world, however, egotism is legalized: a person's own desires and whims become his or her main motivation, and one may break any law and regulation of society for one's own ends. Ögmundur flóki usurps the power in Hólmgarðr (Novgorod) (Ö.O. 1:384–387), and the kings Úlfr, Úlfkell and Hárekr act in a like manner (Hfd. Ey. 3:302–304). The brother of the giantess Árinnefja, who sees her wearing a precious golden ring, immediately tries to take it by force (Eg. Ásm. 3:180). The idea of moderation in the Scandinavian world is also actualised through the virtues of wisdom, beauty and honour. However, these virtues are not favoured in the Magic world. Its inhabitants often happen to be stupid – the giant Hildir has never seen a boat sail and considers it black magic (Ö.O. 1:341–342). Most of the inhabitants of the Magic world are remarkably ugly (Þorst. Vík. 2:190–191, Eg. Ásm. 3:161) and do not feel inclined to perform noble and honourable deeds (Þorst. Vík. 2:193–195, Ö.O. 1:322).

The perception of paganism also plays an important role here. The authors of the FAS, being Christians themselves, could not deny the existence of paganism even in the Scandinavian world. However, they treat it in a way best described by the concept of 'The Noble Heathen' suggested by Lars Lönnroth (*Lönnroth*). The inhabitants of the Scandinavian world are not Christian – the sole exception is Örvar-Oddr, whose baptism (Ö.O. 1:334–336) plays little part in the saga and seems to be a late addition – but they do not show signs of following any other religion either. Lack of religious preferences, of course, could mean that the characters were considered Christians by default, but in any case, their main feature was their absence of religiousness. It could be both implicit and explicit, and in the latter case also caused an active dislike for paganism – Örvar-Oddr fought a heathen priestess, destroying her 'idols' and temple (Ö.O. 1:381–384).

Story

The difference in ethical code defines the main storylines of the FAS. Their plots usually describe a hero from the Scandinavian world establishing contact with the Magic world, so that their ethical codes collide. However, the main trial is not external: a hero has to confront and overcome the ethics of the Magic world inside his own soul.

In *Örvar-Odds saga* the main hero is such a strong and able man that he does not want to admit that anyone or anything is superior to him, and challenges even fate itself (he denies a prophecy about his own fate). However, as the story unfolds, Oddr faces situations where even his heroic deeds and reputation as an invincible Viking cannot avail him. Because of his stubbornness and inflexibility he consequently loses a number of blood-brothers (Ö.O. 1:312, 1:322, 1:330) and tries in vain to take vengeance on his arch enemy, the monstrous Ögmundr flóki, disregarding numerous warnings that it is impossible to kill Ögmundr (Ö.O. 1:347, 1:352). Eventually, Oddr realises the necessity of humility, accepting that there are things over which he has no power. Only then does he achieve inner peace, become reconciled with Ögmundr and accept his death after a life span of three hundred years (Ö.O. 1:388–390).

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar consists of two interconnected parts. The first one tells the story of the main character's father, a man by the name of Viking. A king's daughter asks him to defend her against an evil villain who has challenged her father to a duel (Þorst. Vík. 2:187–189). Viking defeats and kills his opponent (Þorst. Vík. 2:192–193), but that gets him into a confrontation with the villain's siblings. These are warlocks and strong warriors, and Viking is able to save his life and achieve victory only because he manages to get on his side the mighty and noble Njörfi and Hálfðan (Þorst. Vík. 2:194–201). The first part, however, is introductory: the main story tells of a long struggle between the sons of Njörfi and Viking. On both side, the confrontation is started by people who are unable to control their temper and over-sensitive about their social status (Þorst. Vík. 2:203–205). The sons of Njörfi, led by Jökull, hunt Þorsteinn Víkingsson and his brother Þórir, often employing means unworthy of a warrior (Þorst. Vík. 2:207–208, 2:226–227). Þorsteinn seeks to resolve the conflict peacefully, but his hot-tempered brother ruins all his attempts. Finally, Þórir loses his life, but Jökull, having suffered much harm and humiliation from Þorsteinn (who never attacks first), understands that his urge for vengeance is leading nowhere and that moderation is the only way to solve the conflict. In the end, he makes peace with Þorsteinn (Þorst. Vík. 2:245–246).

In *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* Eysteinn, the father of the eponymous hero, goes on a ravaging raid and conquers the lands of jarl Skúli (Hfd.Ey. 3:286–288). Later he gets slain by two strangers and Hálfðan sets out to find them and punish them (3:296–297). During his travels a certain man saves his life, and later Hálfðan finds out that this is the same person who murdered his father, namely jarl Skúli, to whom Eysteinn did so much harm (Hfd. Ey. 3:300–301, 3:305). Therefore, the hero must decide what he is to do – either to avenge his father or to make peace with jarl. The second decision is much more fair – Skúli had the moral right to take vengeance on Eysteinn, and besides, he has redeemed himself once already by saving Hálfðan's life. The choice is still difficult, since Hálfðan, in fact, has to abandon the main principle of vengeance – blood for blood. He is in doubt and hides his decision for a long time, but in a crucial situation saves Skúli's life and then marries his daughter (Hfd. Ey. 3:310–313)

Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana intertwines the fates of the three main characters – Egill, Ásmundr and the giantess Árinnefja. Young Egill gets kidnapped by a giant, thus being deprived of human society (Eg. Ásm. 3:170–173). After escaping from the giant, he becomes a Viking and robs peaceful people.

Ásmundr defeats him, but treats him mercifully. The contrast of this magnanimity with Egill's own behaviour helps Egill to realise his mistakes and become a member of society once again, not its enemy (Eg. Ásm. 3:158–160). Árinnefja's help is crucial for the quest upon which Egill and Ásmundr set out afterwards – to save the kidnapped daughters of a certain king (Eg. Ásm. 3:160). During their travels it comes out that Egill, whose cognomen means 'one-handed', lost his hand defending Árinnefja, whom he chanced to meet during his travels. (Eg. Ásm. 3:180–181). After learning this, the giantess agrees to help the young men, and they accomplish their mission.

Physical laws and magic

The presence of magic in one of the worlds means that even the universal laws in them are different. The description of magic in the FAS is full of understatements in typical saga fashion, and the principles of magic can therefore only be deduced or guessed at. However, while magic was real for the FAS universe in general, the Scandinavian world had no sorcery on its own – only artifacts brought from the Magic world (Ö. O. 1:293, Hfd. Ey. 3:306, Þorst. Vík. 2:191–192) or people who learned some sort of witchcraft in the Magic world (Ö. O. 1:359). At the same time, such attributes as power and sometimes wisdom, could be exaggerated (power: Hfd. Ey. 3:308–309, Eg. Ásm. 3:184–185, Ö. O. 1:354–355; Þorst. Vík. 2:202–203; wisdom – Ö. O. 1:352, Þorst. Vík. 2:211–212). However, it was not treated as sorcery, just as an increase of real characteristics that were present in the whole FAS universe, including both the Scandinavian and the Magic world (power – Þorst. Vík. 2:187, Hfd. Ey. 3:308, wisdom – Ö. O. 1:347, 1:353). Also, the Scandinavian world imposed strict limitations on the use of magic. A character was allowed to invoke it on himself and his allies – to increase his abilities (enchanted weapons – Þorst. Vík. 2:191–193, armour – Ö. O. 1:316–317), conceal himself (Eg. Ásm. 3:182), travel (Hfd. Ey. 3:306, Ö. O. 1:290), heal (Hfd. Ey. 3:301–302). But the ethical code of the Scandinavian world prohibited the direct use of magic on the opponent.

On the other hand, sorcery remained a fundamental attribute of the Magic world, making the physical laws of the real world no longer unbreakable. A good example appears in a character-description in *Örvar-Odds saga*: *Svá eru þau fjölkunnug, at þau festa saman stóð ok stjörnur* ('They are so well skilled in the black arts that they fix together steeds and stars') (Ö. O. 1:378). The inhabitants of the Magic world could turn into different beings (Hfd. Ey. 3:310–311, Þorst. Vík. 2:190), pass through earth (Þorst. Vík. 2:215, Ö. O. 1:358), control the weather (Þorst. Vík. 2:207–208). The ethical code of their world allowed them free usage of their magic. The characters apply sorcery to kidnap women (Eg. Ásm. 3:155–156), murder their opponents – both on the battlefield (Hfd. Ey. 3:310, Ö. O. 1:381) and away from it (Þorst. Vík. 2:226–227) (Oddr could control weather as well, but did not use it against his enemies). In *Örvar-Odds saga* the Bjarmians use magic to create Ögmundr flóki, who must take vengeance on their enemy (Ö. O. 1:345–346), and Ögmundr himself uses magic to flee from the battle he is losing (Ö. O. 1:358). Kolr defends the lives of his offspring by magic (Þorst. Vík. 2:191).

Ethno-geography

There is no sense in talking about a world that has no distinct territory and population. This is true for the two worlds of FAS, whose whole ethno-geographical content is quite different. The inhabitants of the Scandinavian world come from Norway (Ö. O. 1:283, Hfd. Ey. 3:285, Eg. Ásm. 3:163) or the western regions of Sweden (Porst. Vík. 2:186). The nations, races and events in this part of the world are described in a realistic manner like that of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Konungasögur*, although much more schematically. The Magic world of the FAS, however, is usually set in imaginary lands, such as Jótunheimr (Eg. Ásm. 3:160), Geirrððargarðr (Ö. O. 1:355) or Bjálkaland (Ö. O. 1:377), simply nameless forests (Hfd. Ey. 3:305), or at least, in real foreign territories about which the Icelanders of that time often did not know much – Finnish lands (Kirjálabotnar – Hfd. Ey. 3:303), Indíaland ('India', Porst. Vík. 2:190), Tattarría ('Tartary', Eg. Ásm. 3:163) and the river Jordan (Ö. O. 1:337). These regions were inhabited not only by humans, but also by supernatural beings (Ö. O. 1:347–350) and various animals with magic abilities (Hfd. Ey. 3:306, 3:309), as well as by whole imaginary races – usually giants, but dwarfs and trolls as well (giants – Ö. O. 1:338–344, Eg. Ásm. 3:180–185; dwarves – Eg. Ásm. 3:174–175, Porst. Vík. 2:195; trolls – Ö. O. 1:302). There the dead could arise (Hfd. Ey. 3:307). The human inhabitants of this world differed from Scandinavians, possessing magic abilities, e.g. the Bjarmians of Bjarmaland (Ö. O. 1:298–299, 1:345–346) and the Finns (Hfd. Ey. 3:303). Finally, while the authors showed great restraint in describing the Scandinavian world, the stories about the Magic world are filled with great events, such as battles where thousands of men take part, or conquests of lands, sometimes whole kingdoms, by heroes or unknown usurpers (Ö. O. 1:356, 1:384–386, Porst. Vík. 2:190, 2:223–224).

The ethno-geographical map of FAS reflects the difference in ethical codes between the two saga worlds, although in an indirect way. The Magic world is a world without moderation, and this shows in its territorial (1), racial (2) and social (3) features. (1) Territorially – while the authors has a clear picture of the real Scandinavia's geography and topography, the outer world (i.e. the Magic world) was for them more of a *terra incognita*, whose structure they hardly envisaged and whose size they were liable to overestimate. (2) Racially – the Magic world was inhabited not just by humans, but also by a separate race of giants, as well as by exotic nations and various queer beings. They all exceeded humans in power, ferocity and magic abilities. (3) Socially – the descriptions of social relations in the Magic world are scarce, but their specific nature is obvious. That is well demonstrated by attitudes to power – in the Magic world power was distributed according to sword-law, not the pretender's virtues or heritage. In *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* the throne of the realm of giants goes to the one that kidnaps the most noble and skilful woman (Eg. Ásm. 3:179), and in *Örvar-Odds saga* the same title is received by the one who owns the fiercest dog and kills the biggest animal (Ö. O. 1:339).

The two-world division affects many other aspects of the FAS. However, the analysis supplied here hopefully gives enough proof for the idea that these texts follow a common scheme: the conflict of ethical codes → the storyline → the FAS universe. The ethical code of the Scandinavian world of FAS required psychological moderation

from a character, i.e. limitations on one's desires and emotions according to the rules of society. As a reward, integration into human society was offered. In the Magic world there was no such requirement; its inhabitants were allowed to follow their egotistical ambitions with no exterior control. At the same time, this position brings the character into a world of chaos that is fundamentally alien to human beings. A visual demonstration of these two models of ethics and world order constitutes the content of FAS, and the hero's choice between them supplies the main plot of these texts.

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