

**On the Road to Paradise:  
'Austrvegr' in the Icelandic Imagination**

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Fascination with distant lands, strange toponyms and wondrous peoples yet to be discovered is an integral part of the human experience. It also has consequences for the way in which groups of humans negotiate their identities. The relationship to this distant and exotic 'Other' constitutes a part of one's identity. From the point of view of Old Norse culture, no part of the known world was more distant than the Far East. What follows is a discussion of how the East was represented in legendary narratives set in the past where the protagonists are well-born Scandinavian travellers who ventured to visit lands that were unknown to most people within their culture.

Was the East mainly a region of the fantastic, a place where one might easily run into giants and ferocious beasts? Or was it rather imagined as a place of wealthy, civilized and cultured lands where a traveller might acquire a great honour by mingling with noble people? Both strains of thought can be seen in narratives about the East, but the aim of this paper is to analyze which of these visions had more influence on scholarly attitudes towards the East.

There are several Medieval Icelandic narrative sources, as well as more strictly geographic texts, that include descriptions of lands in the distant East. Most of these narratives are derivative and have been studied as examples of book-learning rather than as important sources in their own right. In this paper I will argue that they are of value as vehicles for an analysis of the Icelandic world-view in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The focus will be on attitudes towards the East prevalent among the Icelandic literary elite.

In Old Norse texts the lands of the Scandinavians were known by the collective term *Norðrlǫnd*. The were part of a quadripolar system that also included *Vestrǫnd* (The British Isles), *Suðrriki* (Germany/Saxony) and the lands interchangeably known as *Austrvegr*, *Austrriki* and *Austrǫnd*. The use of these terms reflects a geographical division between peoples. The term *Norðrlǫnd* was quite often used in a specific historical discourse in connection with a particular language, *ðönsk tunga*. That discourse revolved around historical events, fame and comparisons between the rulers of the three kingdoms, or *þjóðlǫnd*. The other three poles inherent in the system were something other than *Norðrlǫnd* and through their Otherness they were important for the definition of Nordic identity. It is thus of interest to discover what their respective defining characteristics were. The East was one of those poles, and what follows is a discussion of the role of *Austrvegr/Austrriki/Austrǫnd* in the Medieval Icelandic imagination.

### The sources

Although *Austrvegr* is mentioned in many Old Norse texts, narrative time and space devoted to it is usually rather brief and matter-of-fact. There are some exceptions in particular sagas that deal partly or entirely with voyages to the East. Among the texts

that will be included in the analysis are 'tales of the widely-travelled', *Eiríks saga víðfjarla*, *Yngvars saga víðfjarla*, *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjarli*, *Orvar-Odds saga*. A common characteristic of the persons called by the byname *víðfjarli* is that their journeys took them partly or exclusively to the East.

The relationship between these texts is of some interest. Parts of *Yngvars saga* are to be found in two fifteenth-century manuscripts, AM 343a 4to and GKS 2845 4to. In the second of these manuscripts it is followed by *Eiríks saga víðfjarla*, whereas the first also contains *Orvar-Odds saga*. One of the main manuscripts of *Eiríks saga* is GKS 1005 fol. (*Flateyjarbók*), which is also one of the two most important fourteenth-century manuscripts of *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjarli*. This demonstrates that a medieval redactor's interest in one of these sagas could easily fit in with interest in one of the others. None of these sagas are preserved in manuscripts written before the fourteenth century.

Other sagas that deal partly with events in the East may have provided inspiration for the *víðfjarla*-narratives. Of particular interest is *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason, who was a monk at Þingeyrar. This mixture of hagiography and royal biography stems from the last quarter of the twelfth century and has been preserved in manuscripts dating back to the thirteenth century. In some ways, it can be viewed as a prototype for later sagas in its treatment of the Christianization of Russia and the relationship between the Norse and Eastern worlds. There is also a more direct relationship in that Þorvaldr víðfjarli appears as a character in later versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and *Yngvars saga* was purportedly composed by 'Oddr munkr', the author of *Óláfs saga* (cf. Hofmann (1981), pp. 211-20; Hofmann (1984)). I shall not delve deeper into the historiography of Óláfr Tryggvason, but refer to my earlier work on this subject (see in particular Sverrir Jakobsson (2005a)).

Another narrative in *Flateyjarbók* that deals with Eastern matters is *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar*, which deals with the internal struggle of Russian kings in the early eleventh century (cf. Cook; Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, 'Introduction', p. 12-13). The protagonist of this *þáttur* serves King Jaroslav of Novgorod, who ultimately emerges victorious from these struggles. Eymundr goes no further than Russia, and is not known by the epithet *víðfjarli*.

If one examines these texts thoroughly, an interesting chronological pattern can be noted. Most of the narratives that have an Eastern setting take place in the period 980-1050. The main exceptions are *Eiríks saga víðfjarla* and the somewhat atypical *Orvar-Odds saga*, both of which take place in a prehistoric past. The Christianization of Russia and Scandinavia constitutes an important strand in several narratives, perhaps due to the influence of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. Another important theme in most of these sagas is that the protagonists serve at the court of a great Eastern monarch, either the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) emperor or a Russian high king, the most popular being the great kings Vladimir (Grand Duke of Kiev 978-1015) and Jaroslav (Grand Duke 1019-1054). That theme had also been introduced by *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and other king's sagas. Both of these themes will be explored in this article.

## The Christian Kingdoms of the East

According to the legends of the widely-travelled men there were two main gateways to the East. The road travelled by Eiríkr víðförli and Þorvaldr víðförli had Constantinople as its first destination of any note. Their relationship with the Emperor is extremely important for both of these travellers. In *Eiríks saga*, which is set in the remote prehistoric past, Eiríkr from Trondheim travels East to seek Paradise or the Pagan *Óðdinsakr*. It was widely believed that this place was situated in the Far East (*i austri heimsins* or *i austrhálfu*, cf. *Hauksbók*, p. 152, *Stjórn*, p. 68). He, along with his Danish companions, is reported to be the first of the Northmen (*Norðmanna*) to gain honour *út i Miklagarði* in the service of the emperor (*Grikkja konungr*). The emperor instructs Eiríkr in the fundamentals of the Christian world-view, which was known to the Icelanders from books such as *Imago mundi* by Honorius of Autun. He also gives thorough answers to Eiríkr's questions in relation to

yfirbragði þjóða ok grein landa, frá höfum ok útlöndum ok frá allri Austrhálfu heimsins ok Suðrhálfu, frá konungum stórum ok frá ýmissum eyjum, frá auðn landa ok frá þeim stöðum er þeir áttu ferð yfir, frá mönnum undarligum ok búningi þeirra ok síðum margra þjóða, frá höggormum ok flugdrekum ok alls kyns dýrum ok fuglum, frá gnótt gulls ok gimsteina (*Flateyjarbók*, I, p. 32).

In short, the Emperor seems to excel not only in power, but also in book-learning and spiritual strength. This of course contradicts any notion that the Icelanders were much concerned with the so-called 'Eastern schism', a view which to my mind can be entirely discarded (cf. Sverrir Jakobsson (2005a), pp. 93-94, 107-8).

In the longer version of *Þorvalds þáttur víðfærla* found in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*, Þorvaldr travels *út i heim ok allt til Jórjala at kanna helga staði*. *Hann fór um allt Grikkja ríki ok kom til Miklagarðs*. Here he is received by the Emperor (*stólkonungrinn, Miklagarðs keisari*). He is proclaimed a saint, a confessor (*játari*) by the Emperor and all his chieftains (*höfðingjum*): *ok eigi síðr af öllum biskupum ok ábótum um allt Grikkland ok Sýrland*. It is further told that:

[a]llra mest var hann tignaðr um Austrveg, þangat sendr af keisaranum svá sem foringi eðr valdsmaðr skipaðr yfir alla konunga á Ruzlandi ok í öllu Garðaríki' (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p. 300).

The story is told in less detail in the *Flateyjarbók* version of the *þáttur*. There it is simply stated that Þorvaldr went *út i Miklagarð ok fekk stórar sæmdir af stólkonunginum* (*Flateyjarbók* I, p. 273).

Although Greece (or more correctly the Eastern Roman Empire) is seen as the main gateway to the East, the term *Austrvegr* is used to distinguish Russia in *Þorvalds þáttur víðfærla*, as is common in Old Norse sources. The earliest known occurrences of the term in Old Norse texts are in kings' sagas, such as *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, where it used to designate the lands of the Slavic, Baltic and Finno-Ugric neighbours of the Norsemen (cf. Sverrir Jakobsson (2005b), pp. 219-20).

Medieval Icelandic manuscripts contain several texts that present a geographic world view. Most of these texts stem from the fourteenth century in their present form. Among the oldest and best known is the description of the world entitled 'hversu lönd

liggja í veröldinni', in *Hauksbók*. There, the region known as *Svíþjóð in mikla* (Sweden the Great) is described as the missionary field of the apostle Philip. In *Hauksbók* it is further said that:

[Í því ríki er það er Ruzcia heitir. Það kǫllum vér Garðaríki. Þar eru þessir höfuðgarðar: Moramar, Rostofa, Súrdalar, Hólmgarður, Sýrnes, Garðar, Palteskja, Kænugarður. Þar byggði fyrst Magon sonur Jafets Nóasonar. Hjá Garðaríki liggja lönd þessi: Kirjalir, Refalir, Tafeistaland, Virland, Eistland, Lifland, Kúrland, Ermland, Pulínaland, Vindland er vestast næst Danmörk. (*Hauksbók*, p. 155)

Apart from the redactor's impressive knowledge of Russian cities, it is also noteworthy that these happen to be the lands that are generally known as *Austrríki* or *Austrvegr* in Old Norse sources. *Hauksbók* is not the only text to contain this description, as we also find echoes of it in fifteenth-century manuscripts of *Örvar-Odds saga*. The insertion of a geographical description of this sort into a *viðfǫrla*-saga is a reminder that the world-view of these narrators was not distinct from what can be found in more learned works.

It is interesting to note that these lands are to a large degree known by their Slavonic or Finno-Ugric names rather than the Latin names by which most countries in Western or Southern Europe were known in Old Norse geographical sources (see Melnikova, pp. 11-18). This could be taken as an indication that knowledge of this part of the world was disseminated through a medium other than Latin books, perhaps drawing on shared historical experiences.

Another item of note is the distinction made between *Ruzcia* or *Garðaríki* on one hand, and the various other lands by the Baltic Sea, from Karelia to the lands of the Wends, on the other. Both are commonly depicted as belonging to *Austrríki* or *Austrvegr*, but there was clearly some distinction between them, and *Garðaríki* appears more frequently within the saga tradition than any other place in this part of the world. Although *Garðaríki* was the main sphere of action for most of the widely-travelled, some of them went to other lands along the Eastern Road. In the legend of Óláfr Tryggvason it is told that Óláfr suffered imprisonment in Estonia and became the son-in-law of the king of *Vindland* (which in this context is Poland, cf. Sverrir Jakobsson (2005b), p. 240).

In *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, *Þorvalds þáttur viðfǫrla* and other legends connected with the Christianization of the East, the passage of the missionaries leads from the Eastern Roman Empire to Russia. Only in *Yngvars saga viðfǫrla* does the Eastern Road start in Russia. The Swedish prince Yngvar goes to the court of King Jaroslav because he is unsatisfied with his status in Sweden. There he stays *þrjá vetr ok nam þar margar tungur at tala* (*Yngvars saga viðfǫrla*, p. 12). He leaves Russia to find the origins of a great river that flows through Russia, and this venture takes him into unknown territories.

The centrality of *Garðaríki* as the gateway to the East is also prominent in other narratives, such as *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar* in *Flateyjarbók*. Only in *Yngvars saga*, however, does the protagonist venture out of this borderland to seek further adventures.

As mentioned earlier, *Örvar-Odds saga* is found in the same manuscript as one of the medieval versions of *Yngvars saga viðfǫrla*. Remarkably enough, the position of

*Garðaríki* is very much enhanced in this version of the saga. In the oldest manuscripts of the saga, which date from the beginning of the fourteenth century, *Garðaríki* is barely mentioned. It is recounted that Órvar-Oddr stayed there briefly but, as in other legends of the widely-travelled, his sojourn in Greece is of more significance. From there he goes to Sicily, where he is baptized along with his army. But in manuscript AM 343 a 4to the story undergoes many changes. Oddr encounters his wife, Silkisif, in *Garðaríki*, not in *Húnaaland* as he does in the earlier manuscripts. At the end of the saga, a new encounter with Oddr's nemesis, Ógmundr Eyþjófsbani, is inserted into the saga. In this version Ógmundr has become the king of Novgorod, under the name Kvillanus, and his kingdom is described in a manner that echoes Hauksbók. It can hardly be a coincidence that this additional material has its origins in the very manuscript that links *Órvar-Odds saga* with *Yngvars saga víðfjörla*. Even more remarkably, as both protagonists enter into a relationship with a royal lady named Silkisif (the name might be construed as an onomatopoeic near-equivalent of the Old Slavonic *Ellisif - Elizaveta*).

The centrality of the Eastern Roman Empire (*Mikligarður*) and Russia (*Garðaríki*) to depictions of the *Austrvegr* can hardly be overstated. The glory and nobility of the Christian monarchs in the East made these lands attractive in the eyes of Scandinavians in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries, before political realities changed. This attraction is still very much evident in Icelandic texts produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

### The Eastern Road to Distant Lands

Not all the Scandinavians who won fame and the epithet *víðfjörli* through distant travels managed to go further than Russia. Þorvaldr víðfjörli was content with becoming lord of all the kings in Russia, but of course he had the furthest to go from his birthplace in Iceland. But the legendary characters Eiríkr and Oddr went a bit further, as did the semi-legendary Yngvar. As Yngvar's literary exploits were tied to a historical person, who, according to the saga, lived from 1014 to 1039,<sup>1</sup> his journey makes a convenient starting-point if one wants to discern any historical truth behind the legend.

Several runestones from the eleventh century mention the exploits of Yngvar. Some of them mention people who went *austr með Ingvari*. A few men are mentioned who went with Yngvar and died *sunnarla á Serklandi*. From these sources one can only gather scant information, such as that Yngvar journeyed East and reached *Serkland* (the land of the Saracens). During three centuries whatever factual information gained during this venture was lost (cf. Shepard on the historical evidence for the expedition). In *Yngvars saga víðfjörla* these journeys have become legend rather than fact, and *Serkland* is not mentioned. The voyages of Yngvar, and later those of his son, do not lead to any known country but to lands of myth and wonder.

It is recounted that Yngvar and his men sailed:

<sup>1</sup> This is according to the saga; the Icelandic annals date his death to 1041.

marga daga ok um mǫrg h́erut ok þar til, at þeir sáu annan sið ok lit á dyrum, ok af því skyldu þeir, at þeir fjarlægðust sín h́erut eður lǫnd' (*Yngvars saga víðfǫrla*, pp. 13-14).

They encounter terrible dragons before they reach a city built of white marble, called Citopolis. There Yngvar meets a queen, called Silkisif, and he tests her linguistic ability:

ok svo reyndist at h́ón kunnir at tala rómversku, þýversku, ðönsku ok girsku ok margar aðrar [tungur], er gengu um austrveg' (*Yngvars saga víðfǫrla*, p. 15, cf. Kalinke).

This city is nevertheless situated in the lands of the pagans and *fullt var af blótskap allt umhverfis*, but Yngvar and his men remain firm in their Christian faith. This underlines their distinctiveness and is an important mark of their identity.

The same applies to the next city they visit, called *Heliopolis* (or Heliopolis, 'City of the Sun'). There the king is called Júlfr and speaks Greek, but knows none of the other languages attributed to Silkisif. The common aspects that Yngvar and his men share with the strangers are becoming fewer in number. Beyond the City of the Sun there are no further encounters with any people who can be understood, as Júlfr can).

The river that Yngvar follows turns out to originate in a source called *Lindibelli*, and from it one could follow another river to the Red Sea. Battles with giants and dragons occur frequently in these distant lands, and they appear to be abundant in gold and treasure, but otherwise one learns little about their ethnic characteristics, except that they are inhabited by pagans, some of whom understand Greek. Names such as Citopolis and Heliopolis bring to mind actual cities in the Near East (cf. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, 'Introduction', p. 7; Glazyrina) and indicate some knowledge of clerical authorities, such as the Bible and Isidore of Seville, although the actual description of these cities probably belongs to the realm of fantasy. Encounters with giants and dragons typify the nature of the lands visited by Yngvar. These creatures belong to the realm of the unknown and fantastic. However, such encounters are hardly exclusive to the East. Treasures, giants and dragons could be found in any unknown lands, not only those belonging to the East.

After the death of Yngvar, his team is split up and those who survive arrive either *í Garða* or *út í Miklagarð*. The later journeys of his son, Sveinn, are characterized by sightings of wondrous beasts, trade, fighting with pagans, and the spreading of the Christian faith to the lands of Silkisif. Several episodes seem remarkably similar to accounts of the Vinland journeys as they are depicted in *Eiríks saga* and other sources (cf. Sverrir Jakobsson (2001), pp. 90-91).

The travels of Orvar-Oddr also lead him to the East, to Greece and Sicily, and thence to the Holy Land and Syria. Then he travels *land af landi; er ekki sagt af ferð hans fyrr en hann kemr austr á Ungaraland* (i.e. to Hungary) (*Orvar-Odds saga*, pp. 119, 121). In some Old Norse narratives, Hungary was considered to be a part of the extensive realm of *Austrriki* (see e.g. *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, II, pp. 62-63, 69; cf. *Þiðriks saga*, I, pp. 45, 48),<sup>2</sup> but the geography of *Orvar-Odds saga* nevertheless seems to be unorthodox at best.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Austria is known as *Austrriki* in Modern Icelandic, but that has no relevance for the use of the term in Old Norse.

After some adventures there he continues his journey, *ok ferr nú mǫrg lönd ok stórar merkr* (*Orvar-Odds saga*, p. 139). In the end he comes to *Húnaland*, where he meets a farmer called Jólfr and marries the king's daughter, Silkisif. These names bring to mind persons from *Yngvars saga*, and *Húnaland* itself is clearly equivalent to the wondrous eastern lands depicted in *Yngvars saga*. In younger manuscripts, however, this kingdom is in fact called *Garðaríki* and the wars with the neighbouring *Bjálkaland* are situated in Antioch.

In *Eiríks saga víðfǫrla* the travels of the protagonist to *hins ysta Indíalands* are depicted in a vague manner, except that the journey begins in Syria. It is related that Eiríkr's men use ships or horses, but walk most of the time. Their journey is facilitated by the fact that:

hvar sem þeir koma á ókunnig lönd þá var við þeim vel tekit ok allr lýör greiddi ferð þeirra, því at þeir höfðu með sér bréf ok innsigli Grikkjakonungs ok patriarche ór Miklagarði ritat á allar tungur þeirra þjóða sem von var at þeir mundi koma til. Þat var ok sagt hverir þeir voru eðr hvert þeir ætlaði at fara, ok sýndist í því hversu mikil guðs gipta þeim fylgdi ok hverr guðs vinr Grikkjakonungr var, at hvar sem hans bréf sást þá skyldi þeim sæmdir veita en hvergi grand gjöra. (*Flateyjarbók* I, p. 32)

Here, there is no mention of dragons or giants or other fantastic creatures. The East seems very safe and civilized, and no heathen armies make the journey to Paradise hazardous for the protagonist and his fellowship. It seems that this description mostly serves to emphasize the glory of the emperor and his authority in distant lands. The lands on the way to Paradise do not seem to merit any mention until the companions approach the river Phison (the modern Ganges), which was thought to originate in Paradise. Eiríkr then continues his journey toward Paradise, but that is another story.

Which was the 'authentic' East: the marginal area inhabited by giants and ferocious beasts which we encounter in *Yngvars saga*, or the civilized and cultured lands that Eiríkr víðfǫrlr crosses on his road to Paradise? It has already been noted that giants and wondrous beasts were in no way particular to the East in Old Norse literature. Such creatures could, on the contrary, be found in any unknown territory. It is different with the monarchs in *Mikligarðr* and *Garðaríki*. From the *víðfǫrla*-narratives one cannot escape the conclusion that the presence of these Christian lords was one of the defining characteristics of the East as it was represented in Icelandic textual culture.

## Conclusion

In the *víðfǫrla*-narratives, the East appears as an important space where inter-cultural relations took place, and where the identity of the travellers themselves was constructed with the help of the speculum of the 'Other'.

1. The Scandinavian travellers who visit the East usually enter the service of a great Christian monarch, be it the lord of Constantinople, Kiev, Novgorod or any of the main city-states of Russia. Their role in Christianizing the Eastern lands is clearly important, and might be one of the reasons why most of these narratives are set in the period 980-1050.

2. The East is a place of kingdoms and peoples, hardly an uncivilized territory or a fantastic region of giants, dragons and wondrous beasts, although such creatures could be encountered in uncharted territories there, just as they might be in any other corner of the world.

3. The 'Eastern road' was not only a progress towards a geographical goal, it also led to social and spiritual advancement. In the eastern lands, the Scandinavian travellers meet and mingle with people of the highest order, become *valdsmenn* themselves, gain instruction in the Christian world view and exercise their faith. In this sense, the journey toward Paradise takes place on many levels.

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