

Two Enraging Gifts in *Egils saga*¹

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Introduction

*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*² (hereafter *Egla*) is a long prose text composed in Iceland in the first half of the thirteenth century (c.1220-1240). It is conventionally considered as an early example of the subgenre known as *Íslendingasögur*, which tell stories about the early generations of inhabitants who settled in Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries. It is structured in two main parts, each sometimes named after its protagonist, as '*Þórólfs saga*' and *Egils saga* proper. The saga is organized around two main axes: on the one hand, a genealogical axis centred on the lineage of Kveld-Úlfr, and on the other, a focus on the relationship between the protagonists and the monarchs.

Our goal in this article is to compare and contrast two instances of gifts present in the saga, which in both cases cause a furious reaction in the recipient. Each scene is briefly summarized below. These gifts do not bear any noticeable mark of mockery, which might be the most obvious cause for angering the receiver. An angry reaction to gifts is likely linked to a social dynamic of gift-giving in which the humiliating, competitive nature of generosity constitute one of the main mechanisms to create or underline social standing.³ These scenes

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² All quotations from the saga come from *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, edited by Sigurður Nordal (Íslenzk Fornrit 2), Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag: Reykjavík 1933. References are made by chapter: page number. All the translations are ours.

³ The theoretical literature on agonistic gift-giving is immense. The still much discussed classic is Marcel Mauss, 'Essai sur le don: Forme et Raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques', *L'Année Sociologique, Nouvelle série*, 1 (1923), 30–179. Among the best recent reassessments of the Maussian approach are Alain Caillé, *Anthropologie du don*, La découverte: Paris 2007; Maurice Godelier, *L'Enigme du Don*, Flammarion: Paris 1994; David Graeber, *The False Coin of Our Own Dreams: Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*, Palgrave: London 2001; Aafke Komter, *Social Solidarity and The Gift*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2005. For Medieval Scandinavia, a recent discussion of the role of gifts in political manoeuvring is Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den Vennlige Vikingen*, Pax: Oslo 2010, 25–31. For a detailed discussion of gifts primarily as tools for building and communicating power (rather than as serving social integration) see Viðar Pálsson, *Power and Political Communication. Feasting and Gift Giving in Medieval Iceland*, PhD

are unusual in the level of detail given about both the gifts transferred and the reactions and emotions of those involved, and so allow for a higher depth of analysis than the often succinct references to gift-giving in the saga corpus.⁴ Moreover, to my knowledge they have not been subject to much attention from scholars using an interdisciplinary perspective.

We will in the first place give a brief overview of each scene and proceed to comment on the particular way in which a narrative mode driven by genealogy is used to link both scenes. Afterwards, we analyse the possible reasons behind the angry reaction in each case. Later we dedicate a short section to the role of landed property in the saga, which might have influenced the specific meaning of gift-exchange as presented in the text. We conclude by making some remarks on the relationship between the results of our analysis and its link with the two main broad trends in the anthropology of exchange, those focusing on the strategies of the agents and those focusing on the gift as structurally determined.⁵ It is likely that both trends are in practice complementary, and that each yields fruitful results when used to analyse a source such as *Egla*. Finally, we will argue that the ownership of land (as the core element of production and the basic source of wealth) is meaningful to understand the reaction of the receivers to the gifts.

dissertation, University of California, Berkeley 2010 (to be published as *Language of Power. Feasting and Gift Giving in Medieval Iceland and its Saga*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2015). Viðar's text includes an excellent overview of scholarship for both Scandinavia and Medieval Europe in general, and an extensive review of the corpus. The most important classical studies for Medieval Iceland are Aaron Gurevich, 'Wealth and Gift Bestowal Among the ancient Scandinavians' in *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1992 [originally 1968], 177–189 (who emphasized the role of the gift in social integration) and William Miller, 'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland', *Speculum* 61 (1986), 18–50 (who emphasized the strategic use of gifts). Gurevich's text seems noticeably weak in his critical management of sources. Miller's study chooses particularly complex and detailed cases of exchange in the sagas, which might not be representative of the average instance of gift-giving in the corpus (which are admittedly much less detailed and rich than the examples chosen by him). Miller's interest in the most complex uses of gifts in medieval Icelandic literature reappeared in his *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business*, Brill: Leiden 2008.

⁴ We have counted forty-five explicit references to gifts in *Egla* only, excluding ambiguous cases, the transfers of food, beverages and lodging represented by hospitality and feasting, and sacrifices. Including all those forms, which arguably follow the same basic logic of gift giving (in the classical Maussian sense), the count ascends to one hundred and eighteen cases.

⁵ A good overview of the main trends in Economic anthropology is Richard Wilk & Lisa Cligget, *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology*, 2nd ed., Westview Press: Boulder 2007. Their text is accessible to the non-specialist, but it also highlights some of the main theoretical issues under current discussion, such as the integration between a Maussian and a Marxist perspective (discussed in pp. 161–162).

The Two Scenes

Skalla-Grímr, Egill's father, receives the first gift that concerns our theme. It is handed to him by his elder son Þórólfr, who (like his uncle and namesake) chose to become a royal servant. Þórólfr visits his father in Iceland, and hands an axe to him. The axe was previously given to Þórólfr by his patron, king Eiríkr bloodaxe. The king intended the axe to be a gift for the farmer Grímr, likely as a way to improve relations with him after the history of hostilities between Eiríkr's father, Haraldr fairhair and Grímr's family. Such hostilities reached a high point with the death (at royal hands) of Grímr's brother, also named Þórólfr.

Grímr accepts the axe handed to him by his son without saying a word. While Þórólfr spends the winter on the family farm at Borg, Grímr tests the axe while slaughtering cattle.⁶ After beheading the oxen, the axe hits a stone slab placed under the beasts and it is rendered useless.⁷ After the winter, Þórólfr plans to return to Norway. Grímr, who does not want his son to leave, hands back the axe (which is still in bad shape) and adds a stanza in which he disqualifies both the quality of the axe and the intentions of the king.⁸

The second scene⁹ takes place many years later, when Egill is already old and has replaced his father as the titular farmer at Borg. He befriends a young man, Einarr Helgason, who is an accomplished poet like Egill. The saga informs us that Einarr acts as a court poet for Hákon jarl, who was the most powerful man in Norway at the time.

The jarl gave Einarr a shield as a reward for his poetry. Einarr travels to Iceland in order to visit his brother, and once there he decides to also visit his friend Egill. He arrives at the farm at Borg and discovers that Egill is away in the north of the country. The saga explains that Einarr does not want to stay more than three nights waiting for his friend in order to avoid breaking the

⁶ In a short article about the axe-scene, Þorgeir Sigurðsson has argued that the axe itself symbolizes Eiríkr and that Skalla-Grímr's slaughter of two oxen resembles the king's slaughter of his own brothers in the Battle of Túnsberg (*Egils saga* 57: 164). He concludes that 'the story of the axe answers the question on why Eiríkr was driven away from Norway. It was because he made atrocious acts by killing his brothers and fortune turned back on him. The moral of the story is that the gods do not leave those making barbaric acts alone' (*axarsagan svari þeirri spurningu hvers vegna Eiríkur hrökkladist frá Noregi. Það var vegna þess að hann vann voðaverk með því að drepa bræður sína og þar með sneri gæfan við honum baki. Sá siðaboðskapur er í sögunni að guðirnir láti niðingsverk ekki afskiptalaus*). While it is hard to affirm that his interpretation is necessarily correct in all details, it seems beyond doubt that the axe indeed represents Eiríkr in the eyes of Skalla-Grímr. See Þorgeir Sigurðsson, 'Axarskaft blóðaxar', *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* 21 (1993), 7–8

⁷ It is likely that the axe was not able to endure Grímr's immense strength, which is remarked in an earlier scene, where Egill's father lifts another large slab (in this case, to use as an anvil). Then the saga remarks that 'nowadays four men could not lift it up' (*Egils saga* 38: 95–97)

⁸ The first scene is told in *Egils saga* 38: 95–97.

⁹ The second scene is narrated in *Egils saga* 78:268–273.

rules of hospitality. He chooses to leave, and on departure, he leaves the shield over Egill's bed.

That same day, Egill returns and discovers the shield. He 'asked who owned such a precious thing'.¹⁰ He is told that Einarr came and had left the shield for him. Egill, furious, insults Einarr and asks rhetorically if Einarr is expecting him to write a praise poem about the shield. He plans to pursue Einarr, but men tell him that he is surely far away already. Egill seems to change his mind, and composes a poem praising both the gift and the giver.¹¹ Finally, it is said that Egill and Einarr remained friends for all of their lives.

The saga also describes the final fate of the shield: Egill carries it on a trip northwards in which he escorts a man to find his bride, but the shield is badly damaged and so it is thrown into a tub for sour whey (*sýruker*).¹² It is said that Egill kept the ornaments, and, according to the saga, the gold in them was valued twelve *aurar*.

Genealogy and the use of prefiguration

The two scenes present evident similarities. In both cases, the titular farmer at Borg receives a gift that was owned by a powerful ruler, which is handed down by someone who is close to both the recipient and the first donor. Moreover, we can notice that in both cases the relationship between original owner and final recipient is marked by a history of mutual hostility. In both scenes, the reception of the gift is marked by an angry reaction, expressed verbally and subtly in the first case and in a more physical and visible way in the second. Moreover, at some point the present is damaged by the intended recipient.

This use of parallel narratives is a common feature in *Egils saga*. Other examples include twinned stories of ill-fated royal service, including those of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson and his nephew and namesake Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson.

¹⁰ *Egils saga* 78:272: 'hverr gersemi þá ætti'.

¹¹ Egill's reaction to a shield sent to him by Þorsteinn hersir is more normal: he welcomes it and composes a praise poem (*Egils saga* 79: 275–276). In this case, Egill has little reason for anger, as the giver is a high-ranking man and long-term ally of the poet.

¹² Whey also plays a role in another scene that involves a furious reaction, not to a gift but a slightly different type of sociable transfer of wealth. It is offered to Egill and his men by a Bárðr, a high-ranking royal servant who hosts them in Norway (*Egils saga* 43: 106–107). As Egill discovers the farmer tried to avoid offering them ale, which he kept reserved for a royal visit, the scene turns into a violent retaliation against the host by his guest (*Egils saga* 44: 107–111). Both scenes imply that whey was considered lowly. Further connection can be made with the scene involving Ármóðr, another farmer who offers Egill curdled milk (curds) instead of a better meal and ale (*Egils saga* 71-72: 222–230. This scene is discussed in more detail below). Besides, the lowly end of the shield is a reminder of the fate of its original owner, Hákon jarl. The infamous ruler died shamefully, hiding in a pigsty, killed by his slave. The most ignominious version of the story, given in the thirteenth chapter of *Ágrip*, has Hákon order the slave to kill him out of fear of being tortured by his enemies.

These two characters are described as similar in both physical traits and personality, being handsome, courteous and kind. In stark contrast with them, their brothers (Skalla-Grímr and Egill, respectively) are also described as sharing similar traits in appearance and personality. Both are ugly, gruff and possessive. Egill and Skalla-Grímr also participate in other twinned scenes concerning transfers of wealth, hiding treasure immediately before their respective deaths and making conflictive visits to the royal court. Both also manage the family farm jointly with their living father before inheriting it.

It is acknowledged that the use of this literary device, in which events and characters in the first part prefigure the action in the second part, is a major structural feature of the saga.¹³ Use of such a device derives possibly from Biblical models,¹⁴ and it is somewhat unusual (but not unique) in the genre. However, it should be mentioned that this is not the only narrative resource taken from Christian texts¹⁵ in *Egla*. Such devices are often entwined with motifs and topics taken from other sagas.¹⁶ In *Egla*, the elements are integrated in a solidly composed narrative, a fact that suggests both clear authorial intention and thematic unity.

¹³ On the narrative structure of *Egla*, see Jan Sand Sørensen, 'Komposition og Værdiunivers i Egils saga', *Gripla* 4 (1980), 260–272.

¹⁴ A succinct overview of the traces of prefiguration and the Biblical influence in *Egla* is given by Torfi Tulinius, 'The prosimetrum form 2: Verses as the basis for saga composition and interpretation', in Russell Poole ed., *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation and Desire in the Icelandic sagas of poets*, DeGruyter: Berlin 2000, 191–217, esp. 206–216, although he does not directly associate the use of prefiguration with the exegetical tradition of linking both testaments through this procedure.

¹⁵ Torfi Tulinius, *The matter of the North: The rise of literary fiction in thirteenth century Iceland*, Odense University Press: Odense 2002, 274–279. His ideas are considerably expanded in Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag: Reykjavík 2004.

¹⁶ The most detailed analysis of literary influences is in Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar: Reykjavík 1975. The issue of the unity of the saga has been debated. There is consensus that the first third of the saga (the so-called 'Þórólfs saga') is solidly constructed, but the opinions on the matter for the rest of the saga are diverging. Torfi Tulinius has argued that it is precisely the use of prefiguration that gives the saga an 'extraordinary formal unity' (Torfi Tulinius 2000, 213). While one does not need to agree with all of his interpretations, the repetition of certain patterns reinforces the impression that certain themes were of particular interest for the author, such as the continuities (and contrasts) between Egill, his father and each Þórólfr. In a saga arguably centred around the conflict between the descendants of Kveld-Úlfr and Norwegian rulers, that both scenes of enraging gifts present numerous similarities (and more subtle divergences) suggests that it is likely meaningful for the overall political stance presented by the saga. About *Egils saga* as an essentially political text, see Theodore Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1260)*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2006, 102–118 and also his *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200–1250)*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca 2012, 134–141. Andersson's persuasive texts also serve as good succinct introductions to the literary scholarship on *Egils saga*.

Beyond purely literary influences, it is also possible to identify in the repetition in the lives of ancestors and descendants an element of narrative unity that could be read under a sociological light. It is likely that such repetitions reinforce an ideology that emphasised lineage as a principle of social organization. Such ideology might have been to a certain degree integrated in the mentality of medieval Icelanders, or at least in the ideology of certain groups inside medieval Icelandic society.¹⁷ Family inheritance can work at the same time as a principle of literary art, and as warranty of economic and social continuity. For example, the word *feðgar* specifically refers to the group of father and son, even while the general principle of kinship organization was bilateral.¹⁸ This emphasis on lineage could have been an important element of social structuring in a society where farmers were a significant portion of the population, but also in one where the elite was structured along family lines (such as the families in the Sturlung period).¹⁹

It is interesting to note that the saga, like in most lists of paternal descent, does not assign any particular meaning to the order of birth. Egill is Grímr's second son, but he is by no means in a situation of inferiority to the firstborn, Þórólfr. The same is true for Grímr, who was also Kveld-Úlfr's second son after a first Þórólfr. This suggests that primogeniture was not meaningful for the saga composer. More importantly, it also implies that the lineage was centred on the descendants and not the ascendants, an aspect that is reinforced by bilateral ties, which allowed any given person to trace lineage to several meaningful ancestors. In other words, *Egla* focuses on the relationship between a father and *all* of his sons (and to a lesser extent, daughters)²⁰ and thus it

¹⁷ Arnved Nedkvitne has justly criticized anthropological approaches to Medieval Iceland for not paying enough attention to internal difference and providing a generalized image of the values and beliefs present in Medieval Iceland. Arnved Nedkvitne, 'Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 25 (2000), 27–51.

¹⁸ Kirsten Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1985, 70–104. Hastrup thinks that the main use of ancestry for medieval Icelanders was to define their own contemporary alliances and that therefore ancestry was relatively insignificant (Hastrup 1985, 103). The emphasis should be placed on *relatively*. In an agrarian, pre-state society where kinship (by blood, alliance or by forms of fictive kinship such as concubinage or fosterage) served as one of the main structuring principles of much of the political and economic organization, that ancestry in itself was less significant does not mean that it was meaningless. Moreover, Hastrup notices that "later, when the genealogical depth had been re-established on Icelandic soil, the aspect of descent seems to have regained some prominence" (Hastrup 1985, 103). *Egils saga* might be seen both as reflecting such reestablishment and as promoting it actively.

¹⁹ In both cases, they stand in contrast with societies where institutionalized roles were equally or more important for placing individuals in the social structure, such as thirteenth-century Norway.

²⁰ In that aspect, the literary representation of an *ethos* emphasizing lineage in thirteenth-century Icelandic texts did not directly follow the patrilineal continental models in its depiction of

highlights the meaning of descent along the male lines, but without giving privilege to any of those lines by default. The actual effect of reinforcing a specific line, however, can be achieved by different means, such as the use of prefiguration devices. In other words, it is by making Egill and Skalla-Grímr similar in personality, appearance and actions that the saga shows how this line of descent is the most meaningful one.

Rage, gifts and inalienable property

In the context of a literary reinforcement of father-son ties, the aforementioned similarities between the two scenes become easier to understand. However, it might also be fruitful to understand the considerable structural differences underlying both examples. We will consider here two main aspects for comparison. Firstly, the possible motivation(s) behind the furious reaction of the recipients will be considered. Secondly, we will assess the issue in relation to the structure of the circulation of the gifts. Our hypothesis is that there is a close link between both aspects. That connection might have been easier for the intended public to understand than for a modern reader, who reads the saga from a world informed by fundamentally different metaphors of exchange.²¹

A first possible explanation for both cases stems from the fact that both Egill and Grímr, proud and independent-minded characters, see the gifts as humiliating. Both gifts are magnificent and, as weapons, typically lordly or royal. These would have been quite hard to reciprocate, as they would have required a structure of production and acquisition of special luxury goods that was hardly available to farmers, even wealthy ones such as Grímr and Egill.

family ties, even if such models were of great literary and cultural influence in a broader sense, as it is attested by the considerable number of translations and imitations of romance in both Iceland and Norway. There are several studies considering literary continental influences in *Egils saga*, but none of them has gained widespread support. Paul Schach argued for a direct Tristanian model for *Egla*. See Paul Schach, 'Was *Tristrams saga* the structural model for *Egils saga*?', *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Literatures* 2:1 (1990), 67–86. Torfi Tulinius recently pointed to an influence from *Le chevalier au lion* (See Torfi Tulinius, 'Writing Strategies: Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland', in Massimiliano Bampi and Marina Buzzini (eds), *Textual Production and Status Contests in Rising and Unstable Societies*, Edizioni Ca' Foscari: Venice 2013, 33–42). Alison Finlay has cast severe doubts on the supposed continental models for the sagas about Skalds in her analysis of the arguments brought forth by Bjarni Einarsson, but she does not consider *Egla* directly. See Alison Finlay, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts', in Russell Poole ed., *Skaldsagas. Text, Vocation, And Desire In The Icelandic Sagas Of Poets*, DeGruyter: Berlin 2000, 232–271.

²¹ This was a crucial point in the conclusions to Mauss' *Essai sur le Don*. While the resilience of such logics in the modern world has been currently reassessed by Alain Caillé in his *Anthropologie du don*, there is consensus that it is no longer a dominant form of exchange, appearing subordinate to both the market logic (driven by utility maximization) and to the logic of redistribution (articulated mainly by the State).

Contrary to a modern perception of gifts as ultimately voluntary actions that are reciprocated out of goodwill and not out of obligation, the inability to reciprocate gifts meant subordination in societies that practiced competitive forms of gift-giving, as it was a crucial component of political manoeuvring.

Skalla-Grímr's reaction is congruent with this explanation. His actions and words aim to reduce the value of the axe to its practical utility, trying by performance to transform a splendid piece of jewellery into a mere tool, an item easily available to most people. The only value that he is willing to recognize is *use value*. He publicly announces this to Þórólfr in a *lausavísa*:²²

There lie many flaws in the edge of the fierce wound-wolf [axe]; I have a soft sickbed-lash [axe]; bad deceit is in the axe. Let the wicked axe-head travel back with the sooty shaft. I do not have the need for it here, it was a shabby gift. In plain words, Skalla-Grímr says: 'the axe is useless and dirty, and it is deceitful (and by implication the same applies to the donor); so I do not need it (here it is implied that only need and use are matters of concern for Grímr)'.

In Egill's scene, the situation is somewhat similar, but it is also complicated by the fact that the donor is a younger and poorer man than the final recipient.²³ A further cause of offence might be that Einarr did not personally hand over the gift, but instead he left it in his absent host's house. This might have prevented Egill from quickly counter-giving, for example by way of a conventional parting gift. Such action would have allowed Egill to eliminate any risk of humiliation derived from an unreciprocated gift. Moreover, it also would have shown denial of any will to have a continual, balanced gift-exchange. Such a continuous type of relationship could be understood as a declaration of equality among partners, and this would have meant Egill's status was diminished. Egill's reaction (to publicly promise to chase Einarr and kill him) is similar to the reaction he gave to a host (the farmer Ármóðr) who offended him at a feast,²⁴ with the difference that Ármóðr effectively suffered Egill's wrath.²⁵ Contrary to what his father does, Egill does

²² *Egils saga* 38:97: 'Liggja ýgs í eggju, / á ek sveigar kǫr deiga, / fox es illt í øxi, / undvargs flǫsur margar; Arghyrnu lát árna / aprt með roknu skapti. / Þórf erat mér til þeirar, þat var [hr]linga gjoð, hingat'.

²³ The surviving stanzas of both shield poems in *Egils saga* (*Berudrápa* and the *drápa* for Einarr's shield) might have included references to the imagery in the shields (*ekphrasis*), but the two surviving stanzas show no direct traces of it; see Margaret Clunies-Ross, 'Stylistic and Generic Definers of the Old Norse Skaldic Ekphrasis', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007), 161–184, at 165. It is possible that these valuable and ornamented shields included imagery and that these shield-poems described it, but there is no way to affirm it with certainty considering the minimal amount of verse preserved for both poems.

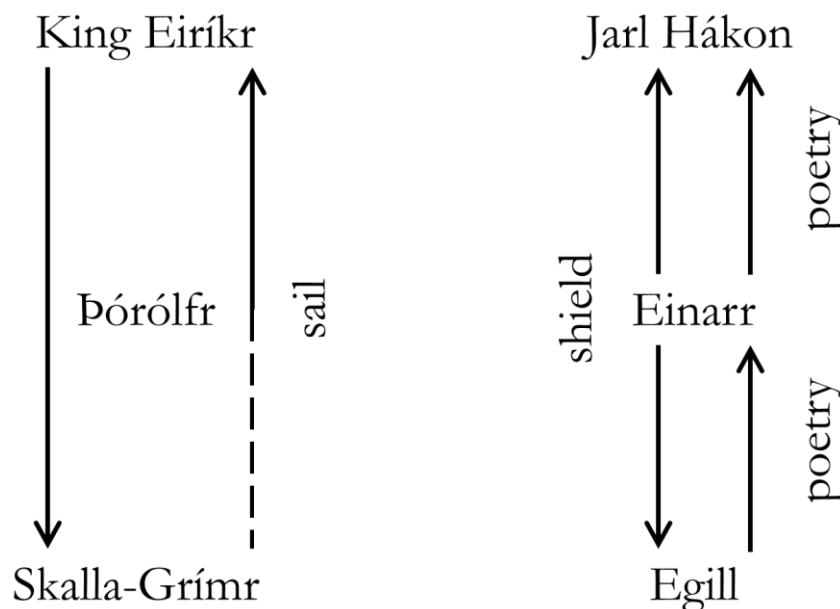
²⁴ *Egils saga* 71–72:222–230.

²⁵ As the farmer Bárðr did for the same reason. See above, footnote 12.

not minimize the gift, but instead he raises the bet by aiming to overdo the overdoer. The result is a violent threat, which is nevertheless inconsequential.

Those actions are coherent with the general portrait of both characters. The father and son are different in their ways of being unsociable. Grímr is an isolationist who avoids trouble (and deeds) in order to protect his wealth, which according to the saga he increases mostly by his own effort and skills.²⁶ Egill, on the contrary, is boastful and violent, and he actively seeks conflict as a way to protect (and accumulate) his wealth, getting involved in a series of exploits, disputes and adventures of an acquisitive nature.

It is also possible to remark that beyond such literary differences, the difference in reaction might be explained by different structures in the circulation of each gift. If we attend to the ‘biographies’ of the presents, we discover some interesting differences, which might be schematized in this way:



The main difference is to be found in the role played by Þórólfr and Einarr in each case. Þórólfr acts mostly as an intermediary between the king and his father, while Einarr constitutes a full middle link in the chain of transfers by acting through his own will. However, in both cases the dominant element seems to be the link between the gift and the original owner,²⁷ king Eiríkr and Hákon jarl respectively. It is interesting to note that the saga makes no mention

²⁶ *Egils saga* 29:75–76

²⁷ By original, we mean in fact the first mentioned owner. The actual producers, which we can imagine to be smiths, are hidden in the narrative. This is a regular trend in *Egils saga*, in which the level of distribution and exchange is overemphasized (as it is crucially political), while the level of production is mostly (but not totally) ignored, with the exception of the emphasis on farm management by the members of Egill’s family.

of the provenance of neither axe nor shield beyond them. We can imagine that they were produced by specialist artisans serving both aristocrats, who were alienated from the product of their labour.²⁸ It is the first owners (also presented as the first donors) who seem to give fundamental weight and meaning to further donations and receptions. It is against them that the anger expressed by Grímr and Egill is aimed. Such hostility is easy to explain: Eiríkr is the son, and heir, of Haraldr, whose actions caused the shift from neutrality to enmity to the crown in Kveld-Úlfr's family (an enmity which continued in the days of Egill). Hákon jarl, on the other hand, is the cause of the death of Arinbjörn, a Norwegian landowner and Egill's best friend.

This indicates that gifts were intimately linked to their original owners, and that they were never fully alienated from them, as suggested by the anthropologists Annette Weiner²⁹ and Maurice Godelier.³⁰ Each passing of hands added to the 'biography' of the gift, a fact already perceived by Malinowski nearly a century ago,³¹ and which has been very productive in anthropological research.³² Most often, its biography is perceived positively, as it adds a layer of value to the fame and prestige of the gift. In the cases here discussed, *Egils saga* captures this motif and inverts it. This procedure is a variation of a common narrative feature of the sagas, which often use the vocabulary of gift-giving ironically. It is likely that such a motif is related to the common structural features shared by vengeance, blood feud and gift-exchange.³³ It also constitutes a variation of the topic of the poisoned or cursed gift, which for example enables much of the drama in the cycle of the Volsungs.

²⁸ For an interdisciplinary analysis of the link between artisans and chiefs, see Johann Callmer, 'Wayland. An Essay on Craft Production in the Early and High Middle Ages in Scandinavia', in Lars Larsson and Birgitta Härdh (eds), *Centrality – Regionality. The Social Structure of Southern Sweden during the Iron Age* (Uppåkrastudier 7), Coronet: Lund 2003, 337–361.

²⁹ Annette Weiner, *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1992.

³⁰ Maurice Godelier, 'Some things one keeps, some things one gives, some things one sells, and something must neither be sold nor given but kept to pass on', in *In and Out of the West: Reconstructing Anthropology*, Verso : London and New York 2009, 45–61.

³¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*, Routledge: London 1922.

³² See the articles compiled in Arjun Appadourai ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1998, and in Algazi, Gadi et al (eds), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen 2003.

³³ See Helgi Þorláksson, 'Hvað er blóðhefnd?' in Gísli Sigurðsson et al. (eds) *Sagnaþing: helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. Apríl 1994*, Híð Íslenska bókmenntafélag: Reykjavík 1994, 389–414. The classic study of these matters for medieval Iceland is William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London 1990. Miller's views have been widely influential, but he insists more on the negotiated rather than structural features of the feud, while we argue that it is from those structural similarities that the analogy with gift-giving is best understood.

However, it is likely that the different role played by both intermediaries is what explains the conclusion of the three-step gift chain, which is noticeably different in each case. Þórólfr delivers a counter-gift (a sail) to the king in the name of his father. This counter-gift comes in fact from Þórólfr himself, and he lies to the king about its origin. The reason is entwined here with the tension present between loyalty to family and obedience to lord. Þórólfr, at the service of the king, knows that telling the king the truth would be a declaration of enmity from his father and (assuming family solidarity is active) also from himself. He has no margin to remain neutral or to argue that his actions and the actions of his father must be told apart. Besides, the sail also seems to be a very suitable gift: rich enough to show the position of Grímr as a wealthy farmer, but not lordly enough to risk challenging the supremacy of the king. Antagonising a king and not being humble enough made Þórólfr's uncle Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson lose his life, and we can speculate that the young retainer assessed the risks more carefully while dealing with the monarchy.

In the second scene, Egill reconciles with Einarr, and simply destroys the shield, keeping the ornaments made of precious metals. The problem here is solved by turning a gift into another gift, one that is much less martial and lordly: the shield is simplified into generic wealth (after being devalued symbolically by immersion in whey). In this case, Einarr does not need to give the jarl anything in return, as he already received the shield as a counter-gift for his service as a court poet. As such, the first cycle of exchange was already closed when the young poet decided to start the second.

Egill does not give a specific counter gift to Einarr, behaving with characteristic avarice. Even if he delivers a stanza when he realises that his threats to kill the younger poet are unrealistic, such a verse is obviously less meaningful if compared with the poetry that Einarr gave to Hákon in the court, which has to be understood as a service rendered (and repaid). Moreover, by controlling his rage, Egill makes it clear to Einarr that the position of the latter is one of friendly subordination, a type somewhat similar to that found in the patron-client ties that are often depicted in sagas.³⁴ The latent threat of violence serves to sustain the hierarchical social bond between Egill and Einarr, in a context where reaching such a goal through overdoing (typically, with an even more lavish counter-gift) did not seem possible.

Landed property and movable property: the farm at Borg.

It should be noted that both Skalla-Grímr and Egill become the first and second farmers, respectively, at Borg in Iceland. We can argue that this position is an important element in the ideological stance held by the saga, and that it can

³⁴ See Lars Hermanson et al. (eds), *Vänner, Patroner och Klienter i Norden*, Háskólaútgáfan : Reykjavík 2007.

explain to a certain extent the margin of independent action that both characters display in the aforementioned instances of gift giving.

The farm is presented as intrinsically linked to the descendants of Kveld-Úlfr. His death on board of the ship that carries him to the unsettled lands of Iceland is followed by the omen of his coffin washing ashore in Borgarfjörður.³⁵ Following his death-wish, the rest of his men settle in that area. His coffin is then placed in a mound. It is unclear if burial goods are added, but this is unlikely as no mention to the quality of the burial is made in this case. The prophetic nature of the death and burial suggest to the audience the intrinsic connection between these men and those new lands.

By contrast, Skalla-Grímr's death and burial in a mound are presented in full detail.³⁶ It constitutes one of the most memorable scenes of the saga, but it can be argued that both burials serve a similar function. No reader will fail to notice that Grímr was rich, was a landowner, was entombed near his lands, and that his property was inherited by Egill. This practice highlights the importance given to the association between ancestry and land.³⁷ This presents a partial parallel to the *óðal* ideology, which entwines landscape with lineage.³⁸ Moreover, the scene of Grímr's death prefigures Egill's own death at the end of the saga, even if the latter happens at the Mosfell farm (owned by his son-in-law), as Egill preferred to live with his daughter rather than with his son.

The strongest statement of the claim of authority given to the descendants of Kveld-Úlfr as owners of the Borg farm is present in a speech delivered by Egill to solve the only conventional bloodfeud³⁹ present in the saga. The feud involves Þorsteinn Egilsson, who inherits Borg from his father, and Steinarr Önundarson. Steinarr also inherited his own lands from his father, who in turn received them as a grant from Skalla-Grímr's land claim.⁴⁰

When Egill has to settle the feud, he says⁴¹

³⁵ *Egils saga* 27:71–72.

³⁶ *Egils saga* 58:175.

³⁷ Aaron Gurevich, 'Representations of property during the high middle Ages', *Economy and Society* 6:1 (1977), 1–30.

³⁸ Torun Zachrisson, 'The Odal and its Manifestation in the Landscape', *Current Swedish Archaeology* 2 (1994), 219–238; cf. Michael Gelting, 'Odelsrett – Lovbydelse – Børdsrätt – Retrait Lignager. Kindred and Land in the Nordic Countries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries', in Lars Hansen ed., *Family, Marriage and Property Devolution in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century*, Centre for medieval studies: Tromsø 2000, 133–165.

³⁹ This bloodfeud is one that happens in Iceland, involves two people of relatively equivalent social standing (farmers), and escalates in alternative reciprocal steps.

⁴⁰ *Egils saga* 28:73–74.

⁴¹ *Egils saga* 82: 287: '...hef ek þar upp þat mál, er Grímr, faðir minn, kom hingat til lands ok nam hér qll lqnd um Mýrar ok viða herað ok tók sér bústað at Borg ok ætlaði þar landeign til, en gaf vinum sínum landakosti þar út í frá, svá sem þeir byggðu síðan'.

...I will begin my speech saying that when Grímr, my father, came to the country and claimed here all the land around Mýrar and around the district, and took for himself abode in Borg and intended to own the ownership of that land, but gave to his friends the available lands surrounding it, where they later inhabited.

After this, he dismisses Steinarr, his allies, and even his own friend Qnundr, making openly clear that he is a lesser man because his lands are the lands given to his father by Egill's father. Egill therefore thinks that he can take them back as he sees fit. In practice, he expropriates the farm at Ánabrekka from Steinarr and Qnundr.

In short, Egill acts like a lord and his main argument is that of right derived from ancestry. The suggestion is that, ultimately, all the land in the Mýrar district belongs to him as the current head of the founding family. Therefore, he claims the right to decide on disputes and consider everybody a subordinate. This attitude, added to the 'knightly' splendour and the armed retinue of his arrival at the assembly, should have been familiar to a thirteenth-century audience, as it resembles the behaviour of the powerful men of their own time locked in the conflicts of the Sturlung age.

It appears clear that the saga has a marked stance about the independence of the early Mýramenn.⁴² They are their own masters because they decide over their own lands. It should be noted that these settlements and the farm at Borg are created *ex nihilo* by Grímr. This seems to be of fundamental importance. Grímr (and then his inheritors) do not get them by concession of a higher power, and therefore there is no taint of submission or need to enact reciprocity.⁴³ This situation contrasts with the fast rise to power by Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, whose prominence as a landed lord depended ultimately on the king's will. The loss of confidence by the king directly meant the downfall of Þórólfr.⁴⁴ By contrast, nobody can destroy the powerbase of Grímr and Egill, because they are conveniently far from the royal reach, in terms of both physical distance and in terms of the independent legitimacy of their landholding pattern.

⁴² This has been masterfully summarised by Theodore Andersson, who (2012, 138–139) wrote: 'The Mýramenn retain a kind of moral title to the land and the land to retract what they bestowed (...) He [Egill] will forego no right because his rights are grounded in history. The Mýramenn are a historical entity, coeval with the centralized monarchy in Norway and therefore co-entitled. In historical terms at least, the conflict between the Mýramenn and the Norwegian crown is a confrontation of equals'.

⁴³ Simply put, 'a gift of land could never be reciprocated', because land is too valuable. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Odense University Press: Odense 1999, 92.

⁴⁴ The downfall is described in *Egils saga* 22:51–57, but the crucial moment is the visit of Þórólfr to Trondheim to see the King in *Egils saga* 16:38–41.

Such a background gives both farmers the margin to refuse lordly gifts. This is an interesting point theoretically speaking, because it places a clear limit to the classical model of the gift as a concatenation of three obligations: to give, to receive and to reciprocate. In this case, independence and distance, grounded in landownership, enable the receivers to not reciprocate without fear of retaliation or subordination.⁴⁵

This does not mean that the basic rule is not active, but that the demand of each obligation has to be assessed in each specific context. Þórólfr cannot afford to not reciprocate (in the name of his father) the king's gift, because his position is one of direct dependence. It is Skalla-Grímr who can avoid giving back without incurring any real risk, because he stands on his own means. The gift, as a type of social relationship, has to be understood in connection with the structures of property, and not as an isolated, self-contained phenomenon happening at the level of distribution. Immovable property must be the principal type to consider in assessing the margins for decision-making, as land was the fundamental part of the means of production.⁴⁶

Besides, a contrast between servants of kings and lords (such as *lendr menn*) and independent and highborn quasi-allodial farmers characterizes *Egils saga*. It also forms the background of the two scenes in which the farmer at Borg reacts furiously to a gift. It seems likely that the two main representations of social order presented in *Egla*, one focused on independent families of farmers (exemplified by Iceland) and the other on a well-structured hierarchical order based on established authority (exemplified by Norway), affect the way in which the final ownership of land was presented. This in turn affected how gifts (and related notions, such as bestowed honour) operated within each context. In other words, gifts given by Norwegian leaders have a much stronger value inside their domains, as they represent their persons and their role as landholders, but are much less meaningful for the non-dependant holders of

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that in each scene, the original owner and donor is a large landholder who belongs to the Norwegian elite, the angry recipient is a smaller landholder in Iceland, and the intermediaries do not control lands on their own.

⁴⁶ We use the term in the Marxist sense, meaning the physical assets, either natural or created by labour that enable production (together with labour force), given a set of social relationships. It is obvious that for most agrarian societies it remains the main asset and access to land is a crucial element for defining the position of individuals within the social structure. The Marxist approach in Economic anthropology is usually associated with French scholars such as Maurice Godelier, Claude Meillassoux and Emmanuel Terray who made their most fundamental contributions in the 1970s and 1980s. Such an approach has not been much used to analyze medieval Scandinavian societies. This is maybe derived from the often obscure and jargon-loaded style which characterized their approach, and with the general decline of interest in economic history, economic anthropology and Marxism in the last three decades. For a recent reevaluation of this school of thought, see Stephen Nugent, 'Some reflections on anthropological structural Marxism', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (New Series)* 13 (2007), 419–431.

Iceland.⁴⁷ Gifts, it can be said, are effective because they communicate power. Therefore, where the donor is powerless, gifts consequentially also lose much of their power.

Final remarks

We aimed to analyse and explain two detailed and atypical instances of gift-giving from *Egils saga*. In this case, we have advanced two possible explanations of the reasons behind the angry reactions of the receivers of those gifts. The first derives from the individual personality of each character and their chosen courses of action in face of the gifts received. The second is linked with the structural features of competitive gift-giving and, beyond that, the ideas of alienability and landownership which impact on the operation of gifts in a given context.

These explanations roughly correspond to the two main traditions of analysis in studies about the gift. A trend derived from the sociological approach of Mauss insists on the gift as a compulsive, structural, total social fact (*fait social total*). The opposed trend criticizes structural and determinist analysis of gifts for being extremely rigid and for failing to give a reliable account of the diversity introduced by the motivations and manoeuvring of the parties involved. Instead, this second trend of studies proposes a more dynamic approach centred on negotiation and decision making based often on the ideas expressed in the sociology of Bourdieu.⁴⁸

Somewhat paradoxically, our analysis confirms at the same time the advantages of both trends, the one centred on the structure and the one centred on the agents. On the one hand, it is evident that each case here discussed reveals a lot of creative decision-making and negotiation of meaning by the parties involved, and that such types of negotiation were interesting enough to be made into a literary narrative. It would be inappropriate to explain Grímr's devaluation of the axe, Þórólfr's heterodox counter-gift, or Egill's threats from a schematically determinist approach, as if the characters were passive vessels of socially determined courses of action.

On the other hand, a postulate at the core of the classical, structural gift theory seems to be confirmed by our cases: that the determinant element in gift-exchange is not placed in the actors, but instead in the gift itself as a non-commodified, person-bearing object that embodies social ties, and its relationship to the larger background of the structure of production.⁴⁹ The socially instituted, extra-personal (but never impersonal) nature of gifts

⁴⁷ The same contextual value applies to bestowed honour, as analyzed by Helgi Þorláksson, 'Virtir menn og vel metnir', in Helgi Þorláksson ed., *Sæmðarmenn: Um heiður at þjóðveldisöld*, Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands: Reykjavík 2001, 15–22.

⁴⁸ As for example in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Polity Press: Cambridge 1990.

⁴⁹ Here embodied mostly by the control of land and estates, as discussed above.

constrains and structures the possible courses of action available to the persons involved. Strategic choices are therefore limited not only by the creativity and motivation of agents, but also by their participation in a social mode of exchange that is characterized by the transfer of non-alienated objects. The limits imposed by this structural constraint are seen most clearly in Skalla-Grímr's behaviour: his attempt to commodify (this is, to 'depersonalize') the axe, to treat it simply as a thing, is at the same time a reaction to the anger caused in him by that same gift, which is for him much more than a mere object, but instead a material reminder of the enmity between his family and the king of Norway.

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