

Tulinius, Torfi H. 2014. *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*. Trans. Victoria Cribb. *Islandica* 57. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Library. ix + 326 pages. ISBN: 978 0 935995 16 9.

The present volume is a translation and revision of the author's *Skáldin í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* from 2004. It comprises two semi-discrete sections, the first on the structure and literary context of *Egils saga* and the second on the historical and sociological context in the thirteenth century. The author opposes the view that the saga flows from heterogeneous traditions and advocates a tightly structured and well-articulated narrative architecture. He does not disallow a role for tradition but emphasizes a controlling author working from decidedly literary precedents. These precedents are largely Christian or theological in nature, bearing the imprint of the author's earlier studies on the impact of canon law.

The orientation is therefore markedly different from what is to be found in the books of Gísli Sigurðsson and Tommy Danielsson published two years earlier than Torfi Tulinius's original version in 2004 and stressing the importance of oral tradition. Torfi Tulinius does not address this disparity directly, and one could have wished for a fuller statement on his view of the oral tradition, but his interests lie elsewhere. His Christian orientation has something in common with Andrew Hamer's new book on *Njáls saga* (*Njáls saga and its Christian Background*), also from 2014. We therefore have before us a new variation on the weather-worn debate between traditionalists and inventionists going back to the divide between Joseph Bédier and Ramón Menéndez Pidal in the vernacular arena and the age-old Homeric question, which seems to be as intractable as ever, in the classical arena. In the saga area we thus have a standoff between two well-armed traditionalists and two inventionists in full panoply.

We may well wonder where the middle ground lies in the study of the sagas. Perhaps we might surmise that the longer sagas (*Egils saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*) are more subject to authorial design while the shorter sagas dip into the tradition more selectively and with less forethought. That would certainly enhance the importance of *Egils saga*, which Torfi places at the outset of saga writing (292) though he assigns a relatively late date ca. 1240. This reviewer believes that there is plenty of evidence that sagas about early Icelanders (as well as kings' sagas) were written in the period 1200-1230. Nonetheless, *Egils saga* retains a crucial position in the sequence of fully developed family sagas.

The most controversial part of Torfi Tulinius's book is likely to be his sallies into the allegorical tradition, of which he reminds us on pages 79-81. There is no doubt that such readings would have been known to the Icelanders in the thirteenth century, and when Egill marries his brother's widow both against canon law and Icelandic law, there is every reason to believe that the clerically

informed Icelanders would have discussed the matter, although the author of *Egils saga* raises no flags. The question is whether they would have applied allegorical reading to a secular text. When Torfi Tulinius weighs the idea that the son of Erik Bloodaxe, Rognvaldr, killed by Egill in the presence of twelve others (the number of disciples), might be a Christ figure (84), or that when Egill uses a slab of rock as a breastplate in Värmland, it might be a reminiscence of Christ's founding rock Peter (130–3), the reader may feel some strain. A slab of rock as a breastplate occurs after all in at least two other sagas and looks more like a storytelling motif. Allegorical reading of secular texts is of course not unexampled. Heraclitus performed this service for Homer in the first century CE, and, more famously, a commentary attributed to Bernardus Silvester provided a full-dress allegorical reading of the first six books of the *Aeneid* in the twelfth century, but these readings did not catch on.

Quite separate are the chapters in the second part of the book, the first one of which is titled “Saga and Society” and is inspired by Bourdieu's studies of social interaction. It gives a most instructive account of the accumulation of “cultural capital” as part of the social dynamics in the thirteenth century. The following chapter (“The Saga in Context”) shifts to the problem of the saga's author, who has often been identified as Snorri Sturluson. Torfi Tulinius is careful not to accept this identification whole-heartedly, and he takes some shelter in the possibility that the author might be someone in Snorri's circle. In point of fact, however, he operates with the premise that Snorri himself is indeed the author. He therefore devotes “The Saga in Context” to a detailed account of Snorri's troubled relations with his older brother Sighvatr and Sighvatr's son Sturla, as well as his relations with his own son Órækja. He connects these strains with what he perceives to be the fraught relationship between Egill and his brother Þórólfr and his cool relationship with his son Þorsteinn. When Egill ultimately comes to Þorsteinn's defence in the final sequence of *Egils saga*, Torfi is inclined to see that as an act of reparation, and he goes on to suggest that the saga as a whole may be a sort of penance for Snorri's history of hostilities with his kin. Some readers may feel that *Egils saga* does not have a very penitent tone, but it is useful to have such a clear exposition of Snorri's family vicissitudes.

As a kind of afterthought, Torfi Tulinius ruminates briefly on what gave rise specifically to the sagas about early Icelanders. He does not consider the promotion of aristocratic families in the thirteenth century to be an adequate explanation (208) and finally comes down on the central importance of the conversion in these sagas (292). He concludes with the interesting observation that it may be no coincidence that the sagas about early Icelanders do not carry us much beyond the conversion year 1000.

The book gives the reader much to ponder. It is also bibliographically rich and reminds us once more of the extraordinary burst of activity in the medieval

field in Iceland in the past fifty years. It should also be noted that the book is exceptionally well translated by Victoria Cribb.

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