

JORVIK REVISITED – WITH EGIL SKALLA-GRIMSSON

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Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar, *Egils saga*, or just *Egla*, is one of the best known and most popular of the Sagas of Icelanders or Family Sagas.¹ It is a long and complicated narrative, and a brief summary may be useful for reference:

The saga tells the tale of Kveld-Ulf, a rich farmer in Norway and his descendants. In the first part, Kveld-Ulf's son Thorolf against the advice of his father joins the retinue of King Harald Finehair in the final phase of his conquering of the whole of Norway. Thorolf gains great favours from the king but later on falls out with him because of slander and is killed by the king himself. His father and his brother Skalla-Grim kill friends of the king in revenge and leave for Iceland where Skalla-Grim settles a large territory. Skalla-Grim has the sons Thorolf and Egil. Thorolf takes after his uncle, goes to Norway and is befriended by Harald's son, Eirik, later King Eirik Blood-Axe, and his queen, Gunhild. Egil, like his father, is an ugly man, huge and strong and a good poet. He goes to Norway, falls out with Eirik and Gunhild and is outlawed from Norway. With Thorolf he goes to England where they are received by King Athelstan. Thorolf is killed fighting for the king, but the king pays great compensations to Egil and promises him friendship. Egil goes back to Norway, marries his brother's widow and leaves for Iceland where he takes up farming. When Egil's father-in-law dies he goes to Norway to try to gain control over his wife's inheritance which has been taken over by the husband of her half-sister. At the thing he seems to be about to win the case when the king and queen interfere on behalf of the other side, and Egil has to flee, while some of his men are killed and his property is destroyed or confiscated. Before he leaves the country, Egil kills his adversaries, a number of the king's men, and the king's son, a boy of 10 or 11. He raises a *nídstong*, a 'pole of insult',² against the king and in verse conjures the gods and the deities of the land to drive the king and queen away. Then he leaves for Iceland. King Eirik fights with his brothers about the throne, kills two of them, but the third drives him and his queen away from Norway. They gain foothold in Northumbria with their residence in Jorvik. One of the king's faithful retainers and best friends is Arinbjörn, who is also Egil's relative and friend. In Iceland Egil becomes restless (through Gunhild's magic, the saga suggests) and wants to see his friend King Athelstan. He sails for England but is shipwrecked in the Humber. When he hears about Eirik's residence in Jorvik he realizes that he is in great

danger, but prefers to go straight to the king rather than be caught fleeing. He goes to Arinbjörn and on his advice puts his life in the hands of the king but offers to recite him a praise poem to ransom his head. This is strongly supported by Arinbjörn, who threatens to defend Egil if the king should try to seize him, and vehemently opposed by the queen who wants Egil killed whatever the consequences. During the next night Egil composes the poem, the king listens to it and lets Egil leave, but declares that this is no permanent reconciliation. He visits Athelstan, gets hold of his wife's inheritance in Norway, fights many a battle and composes magnificent poetry, tends to his farm and dies an old man in Iceland.

Scholars have repeatedly discussed problems connected with Egil's visit to Jorvik or York. Did he plan to go to King Eirik, or was his visit accidental? Was it really necessary for him to go to Eirik's court although he had been shipwrecked in the Humber? Had he come from Iceland or from Norway? Had he composed his Head-Ransom before he left for England, or was the poem composed in one night as the saga tells us?³ The scholars who have been asking these questions have then been wondering about the facts behind Egil's *saga* and the *poetry* ascribed to him in the same saga. There is little reason to doubt that there actually existed an Icelandic scald by the name of Egil Skalla-Grimsson in the 10th century and that some of the verse ascribed to him in the saga was really composed by this person. There is also reason to believe that some of the information about this character may be historically correct. However, it is not very interesting, from the point of view of historiography, whether the poet in question actually visited the Norwegian Viking king Eirik Blood-Axe in Jorvik under circumstances similar to those described in the saga. The saga itself, on the other hand, is a most interesting document, partly because it preserves excellent poetry, which in some cases is likely to have been composed in the 10th century, partly because it is an example of saga-writing at its best.

If we ask what information about Egil's visit in Jorvik we can get from the verse in the saga, we soon find out that it is limited and sometimes ambiguous. The most important source is *Arinbjarnarkviða*, the poem Egil composed in praise of his friend Arinbjörn. It states that Egil had incurred the wrath of King Eirik, but had found the courage to visit the king, who looked angrily at him. Yet he ventured to bring him the poetry, and he got his head in return. In this situation he was loyally supported by his friend Arinbjörn. Stanzas 33-36 in the saga refer to the same situation, and in 36 the poet explains that he had become tired of the king's anger when he went to see him. The poem *Höfudlausn* (Head-Ransom) itself is notoriously vague in its references. It opens by saying that the poet had travelled westwards across the sea having floated his ship in the spring and loaded it with poetry. The king, Eirik, offered him hospitality, and he took the poetry with him to England. Whether *Höfudlausn* is by the real Egil or not is a matter of dispute.⁴

Other stanzas in the saga (28 and 29) refer to a conflict between Egil and the king

and queen. If they are genuine, they show that Egil has felt that he had been badly treated by the pair who had hindered him in getting his right, and he curses them and asks the gods to drive them from the land. Such a curse would have been quite a sufficient cause for the king's anger, and it seems logical to make amends through the composition of a praise poem. Stanza 31 is used in the saga to corroborate the information that Egil had killed the son of Eirik Blood-Axe and twelve other men. The stanza itself is ambiguous and could also be interpreted as saying that Egil killed 13 men and incurred the wrath of the son of Eirik and Gunnhild. It is not one of those stanzas most likely to be genuine.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that the Norwegian king Eirik Haraldsson was accepted as king in Northumbria for some periods during the years 948-954, and this is in tolerably good accordance with the chronology of *Egils saga*.⁵

In spite of these indications that *Egils saga's* narrative about Egil's visit in Jorvik has roots in historical tradition, the character Egil Skalla-Grimsson, as he appears in the saga, must be seen as the creation of a 13th century author. Many of the details of the saga must be pure fiction, and what traditional material was included or left out, as well as which episodes in the life of the protagonist were emphasised, is entirely the work of this author. There is no reason to doubt that the author used oral traditional tales and avoided contradicting anything that was considered a fact in this tradition, but this has not created any difficulties for such a master-teller of tales as the one who committed *Egils saga* to the vellum. The question of historicity will not be further discussed here, but the circumstances of Egil's visit to Jorvik are definitely among the examples where either oral tradition or the author have made up something which is most unlikely to have happened in reality. It is almost impossible to imagine that a Viking king, and one at that who had not refrained from killing his own brothers, would have accepted a praise poem from a man who was guilty of killing his young son, apart from other damage and insults, and let this man get away with his life when he had come into his power.

The life of the historical Egil is certainly not uninteresting but unfortunately beyond our reach, apart from what his poetry can tell us about him. On the other hand, the character and his destiny in the saga is open to interpretation, and the aim of this article is to discuss Egil's reasons for going to Jorvik, or rather, how this episode as a whole should be interpreted within the context of the saga as a whole.

The position of Egil's visit to Jorvik in the narrative structure of the saga is, indeed, quite clear. The main theme of the saga is a conflict between a Norwegian, and later Icelandic, family of free farmers and Norwegian kings. The reconciliation in Jorvik, albeit a superficial one, marks the formal end of this conflict, and consequently the rest of the saga lacks unity: an episodic biographical narrative takes over from a feud story.

It is possible to describe the main conflict in *Egils saga* as a feud, but one must be aware that the special nature of this feud – a family of farmers against a royal family – distinguishes it from the common feuds in the Icelandic sagas, which are conflicts between people who in principle have the same social status, that of free farmers. To make sense of the narrative structure of *Egils saga* it can be useful to see it in the light of two action patterns commonly found in Family Sagas and in the so called *þættir* (short sagas, or ‘parts’). A ‘feud pattern’ appears in the conflict between two kin-groups, where a *conflict* leads to a *climax* (killing of an important person or persons) and then to *revenge*; this pattern can repeat itself several times and include several attempts at reconciliation, but in the end *reconciliation* is arrived at.⁶ A common pattern in *þættir*, telling the tale of an Icelander and a king or prince, entails a less serious, sometimes quite superficial, *conflict*, which after the Icelander has proved his worth through *tests* leads to a *reconciliation* between the main parties.⁷ In both cases the honour of individuals and kin groups is at stake.

The main theme of the family sagas with their feud stories is the honour of the free farmer. They are heroic epics in prose – sometimes leaning towards the comic mode, but more often tragic in nature – revealing the mechanisms of the play about power and reputation in a stateless society of free farmers where honour is considered more valuable than life, and where a strict code of conduct based on this attitude frequently leads to tragedy. The *þættir* of the type described above, on the other hand, describe how an individual can gain honour through subordinating himself to a king without losing his status of freedom through this subordination. The basic conflict could lead to tragedies, but since the general image of both parties is as a rule positive, sometimes idealised, the *þættir* almost always have a happy end. They can often be seen to deal with the socialization of eccentric individuals and are, at least in these cases, essentially comic. Elsewhere in saga literature we find different kinds of kings, and some of them are unjust and ruthless.

To a certain extent the relationship between king and free farmer in *Egils saga* is in accordance with that of the *þættir*, although the story reveals aspects of this relationship that are rarely explicit in the short tales. Here it is clearly demonstrated that the free farmer cannot honourably get along with a ruthless king; having come into conflict with such a king, the free man must either rise against him and be broken or leave the realm. From another point of view the saga can be said to exemplify the fact that basically “ex-centric” characters absolutely resist centralization. The first part of *Egils saga* is in agreement with the *þættir* in accepting as a fact that the strength of the king, which Kveld-Ulf explicitly interpretes as ‘luck’, is so great that the farmer-chieftain is not able to win over him, should it come to conflict. However, the saga is also very different from the *þættir*. The conflict between free man and king goes deeper and is more vehement, and it soon develops beyond any possibility of reconciliation, or so it seems. The picture of Harald Finehair is by no means altogether negative. He is a strong leader with great luck, but he is ruthless, and he does not possess the quality of being able to see through appearances and is therefore

duped by slanderers. Although the king may be right in sensing that Thorolf's success and his pride are such that it might threaten his authority, it is obvious that he does wrong when he takes Thorolf's goods and his privileges away from him, and from that point on Thorolf has no option but fight him or leave the country. According to *Egils saga*, then, the settlers of Iceland and their Norwegian ancestors show a much more uncompromising attitude to the king than do the lucky heroes of the *þættir*, and kings, in turn, are seen as dangerous company. It is of vital importance for the freedom of the farmer to resist the force that draws him to the centre.

Although Kveld-Ulf and Skalla-Grim cannot touch the king himself in their attempts at revenge, both they and other relatives succeed in doing him such harm that the honour of the family is saved, but they cannot live on in Harald's kingdom.

In contrast with most of the *þættir*, *Egils saga* takes the problem of the ruthless king seriously. The possibility that the king may turn with full force against the free man is not suppressed here, but the possibility of giving in to the king and becoming his 'slave' is not considered.

The end of the first part of *Egils saga* demonstrates a very important feature in the pattern of conflict between kings and Icelanders: The Icelander – or the settler in the Age of Settlement – has the possibility to leave the realm if he does not get along with the king. Iceland is a sanctuary where the free farmer keeps his ancient rights and his dignity undiminished. This view of Iceland appears in several Icelandic works from the 13th and 14th centuries, and it is an important element in what can be considered an Icelandic myth.⁸

Kveld-Ulf and Skalla-Grim leave for Iceland with all their belongings, and as far as they are concerned, the story is finished. But the saga does not end there. A second generation renews the contact and then the conflict with the kings. The crisis of this conflict occurs in chs. 56 and 57 in *Egils saga*, where Egil is pleading his case against his wife's brother-in-law. The king is present, but it is obvious that he is not considered by Egil or the author to be above the law. His role ought to be that of a guardian of the law. However, when Egil seems to be about to win his case, the king's party interferes and upsets the courts, and subsequently Egil is attacked by the king's men who want to kill him. In the beginning, the king is hesitant whether he is to let the law take its course and stay on good terms with the local chieftains or to interfere on behalf of his friend, Egil's enemy. Although his wife takes the initiative, the king soon takes sides, and he is greatly provoked by Egil's unyielding and aggressive attitude. There is a latent conflict of interests between the king and the local assembly, but more important is the clash of personalities. The queen is a spokesman of the attitude that the king is above the law. Egil's views about this are clear, and the audience of the saga is firmly directed to the same position: the role of the king is to defend his kingdom and award honour and glory, but he should not infringe upon the lawful rights of free men.

The author of *Egils saga* leaves us in no doubt that the laws and an hallowed *þing* were considered sacred, and it is on the basis of this belief that Egil executes his powerful *níd* against Eirik and Gunnhild. The divine powers of the land are here more or less identified with the laws and the chieftains who carry them out. The king could act in harmony with these divine powers, but Eirik does not choose to do so, and provokes them. It is more or less left to the audience to make up their own minds about the efficiency of Egil's *níd*, but the most natural (although perhaps naive) understanding is that it was effective and at least one of the causes of Eirik's loss of power. Although Egil is an overbearing man, he has a strong sense of justice, and the saga carefully controls the response of the audience to the conflict at the thing: Egil is acting according to his right, and the king, but especially the queen, are wrong. There is a difference between the two however. While the queen is a pure villain, the king is an impressive figure and a formidable enemy who, like his father, is led to doing wrong by those around him and by his own pride.

The conflict between Egil and the Norwegian king climaxes in ch. 57 when Egil kills his main enemies, many other of the king's men, and even the king's son, and erects a pole of insult against the king. This revenge is so excessive that Egil could not have had any illusions about escaping with his life if the king ever should get hold of him. Nevertheless, he goes back to the king as we learn in chs. 59-61, the Jorvik-episode.

As stated in the summary above, the meeting in Jorvik does not lead to a full reconciliation, but structurally it fulfills the need for such an end to the conflict. Moreover, it makes brilliant use of the traditional *höfudlausn*-motif. But such exclusively formal explanations seem unsatisfactory, although they may be all readers can agree upon. The rather far-fetched explanations of Egil's visit to Jorvik demonstrate how important it is for the author to bring him and King Eirik together for a final meeting under circumstances which entail the greatest possible disadvantage to Egil. Even such a headstrong character as he must get reconciled with the exiled Norwegian king, however superficially; it seems to be an existential question, or a question of fate if one dislikes the modern jargon.

It could possibly be of some importance that at the heart of Egil's conflict is the question of ownership of land in Norway, of his wife's Norwegian heritage. His father and grandfather had to leave their land in Norway and it had no doubt been confiscated by the king. Can we perhaps see Egil in his struggle against the king as driven by a desire for compensation for the loss of the family's home-land, by the feeling of amputation of a farmer who has lost his land and his king? Can we see his story as an expression of a deep rooted and suppressed Icelandic wish for reconciliation and reunification with the old country? As a matter of fact, this was the theory of the Norwegian novelist and essayist Hans E. Kinck. He wrote:

The main psychological content [of the saga] is in reality the emigrated

chieftains' liquidation of their feelings towards the Old Country; and, now, shreds of these feelings are still left and they hurt... The central motif is this unconscious sorrow that comes of having been pulled out by the roots...⁹

Kinck's idea is typical of his brilliant flashes of insight into the world of the sagas, but it is hardly meant to apply to our particular case.¹⁰ Egil's meeting with Eirik in Jorvik has no direct influence on his attempts to get control over his wife's inheritance, and King Eirik is hardly the most natural choice of symbol or representation of Norway in his exile in England.

The answer to our questions must be found in the saga text itself. It is not the only occasion on which Egil's courage and ability to escape from difficult situations astonishes us. His behaviour in Jorvik is entirely in character, but we must remember that *Egils saga*, is not a realistic novel but a story about a hero with very distinct characteristics. Compared to other sagas, even other Sagas of Icelanders, it reveals many unique features, and this seems to strengthen the feeling that it is not just a recording of traditional tales but the work of a highly conscious artist. It is now accepted by most scholars that *Egils saga* must have been written by the same author as *Heimskringla*, i.e., Snorri Sturluson.¹¹ Studies in *Heimskringla* have revealed how the author frequently rationalises the accounts of earlier sagas and is always careful in his analyses and presentations of motives.¹² If this same author had found what his sources told him about Egil's visit to Jorvik extremely unlikely, he would have had no trouble in changing them. But he chose to have the episode this way, and it is in actual fact likely that the author, fully aware of what he was doing, increased and exaggerated the reasons for Eirik's grievances against Egil. Snorri would have been quite capable of composing stanza 31 himself and inventing the killing of the young prince.

We must, therefore, try to find a plausible explanation of what happens in the text, plausible from the point of view of the text's own intrinsic logic. First of all, Egil's journey demonstrates the force that draws the hero from the periphery to the centre, to kings and princes. Egil wants to go to Athelstan to gain honour and riches. Instead he lands in a situation where he has to make up his mind whether to go to his enemies, Eirik and Gunhild, or not.

The course of events is rather complicated: first, Gunnhild's magic makes him uneasy, and he wants to go and see his friend the English king; then his ship is wrecked not far from Jorvik, and Egil's grounds for going to Eirik in Jorvik instead of going straight to Athelstan are stated thus in the text:

Ok er þeir hittu menn at máli, spurðu þeir þau tíðendi, er Agli þóttu háskasamlig, at Eiríkr konungr blóðøx var þar fyrir ok Gunnhildr ok þau höfðu þar ríki til forráða ok hann var skammt þaðan uppi í borginni Jórvík. Þat spurði hann ok, at Arinbjörn hersir var þar með konungi ok í miklum

kærleikum við konunginn. Ok er Egill var viss ordinn þessa tíðenda, þá gerði hann ráð sitt; þótti honum sér óvænt til undankvámu, þótt hann freistadi þess, at leynask ok fara huldu höfði leið svá langa, sem vera myndi, áðr hann kæmi ór ríki Eiríks konungs; var hann þá auðkenndr þeim, er hann sæi; þótti honum þat lífílmannligt, at vera tekinn í flótta þeim; herði hann þá huginn ok réð þat af, at þegar um nóttina, er þeir höfðu þar komit, þá fær hann sér hest, ok reid hann þegar í borgina.¹³

When they met people they were told news which seemed threatening to Egil that King Eirik Blood-Axe was there and Gunhild and had the command of that area, and that he was not far away in the town of Jorvik. He was also told that Arinbjörn was there with the king in high favours. And when Egil had heard this, he considered what course he should take; he felt that an escape would be difficult, even if he were to try to disguise himself and go secretly such a long distance, as he thought necessary to get away from King Eirik's territory; he would be easily recognized by those who saw him; he also felt that it would be cowardly to be caught in such a flight; then he hardened his mind and took a decision and already in the same night as they had come, he got hold of a horse and rode to the town without delay.

On his friend Arinbjörn's advice, Egil then bows to the authority of the king, and through the mediation of Arinbjörn, the friend of both, the king accepts Egil's offer: a praise poem with which Egil buys his head. He has not won a victory over the king – to make him win such a victory and kill the king was not an open possibility for the author because of tradition – but he gets in and out of this difficult situation with the greatest possible honour. It is, indeed, overwhelmingly likely that there was according to tradition some sort of meeting between Eirik and Egil in Jorvik where Egil saved his life with a poem, *Höfudlausn*, whether or not the one we have is that poem. The author of the saga obviously wanted the king's grievances to be so great that Egil would not have sought him out of his own free will. On the other hand, it would not have been in Egil's style to be taken prisoner. The saga's combination of accident and free choice is very skilful, and the author is so anxious that we should be in no doubt about Egil's motives that he goes to unusual lengths in opening his mind to us. Again we must remind ourselves that this is not a realistic novel, and a reader should not ask pedantic questions, like: how would anyone in Northumbria have recognized Egil, and how could the king have heard of him and captured him before he had left the area and entered the territory where his friend King Athelstan was in full command? In this episode Egil, as usual, shows exceptional courage and daring, and it is a final victory in the long conflict between him and queen Gunnhild.

The author of *Egils saga* seems to concentrate on creating from his own traditional culture a family, a line of impressive figures culminating in a man who epitomizes the vitality and strength, but also the verbal culture of the class of free farmers, a man who can hold his ground in conflict with the kings of Norway, one who certainly often

behaves in an unkingly manner, but nevertheless evokes no less respect than the kings themselves. In the first generation a member of this family was only three feet away from killing Harald Finehair, the king who had united Norway and was the forefather of the Norwegian kings down to the time of the saga, but the blond and beautiful Thorolf had chosen to be closely allied with the king and had to pay with his life. His dark and ugly brother Skalla-Grim only goes to the king once, to claim compensation for his brother, and it is a courageous expedition that challenges the authority of the king and would have cost him his life if the king had been able to get it. After that Skalla-Grim becomes a farmer in Iceland, and the saga describes carefully what an industrious and excellent farmer he is. When Egil is introduced into the story, the narrative slows down considerably, and it is obvious that a major figure is entering the stage. It is doubtful that the author could have known any narrative where such attention was paid to a character in his childhood as is done here – apart from St Luke's Gospel! Egil is from the start an imposing figure, but he is described with great humour and with many comic traits.¹⁴ Egil inherits his fathers' looks as well as his skills as a farmer, but he is a poet and a Viking too. And when he is wronged by the Norwegian king, he teaches him a bitter lesson and yet succeeds in gaining a reconciliation of sorts, which might be seen as humiliating for the king. No doubt we are, however, to understand the king's gesture as a token of true greatness. Only a great man could have done what he does in Jorvik, as Arinbjörn explains. But the chance that he would show this greatness was infinitesimal. The author of the saga carefully draws a picture of two great men facing each other in Jorvik. When the king agrees to hear Egil's poem and let him leave Jorvik with his head on his shoulders, this gesture expresses resignation and an acceptance of the fact that the freedom of a man of Egil's kind cannot be removed or reduced and that nothing is won by having him killed. The king and the free farmer are equals in moral strength and heroic stature. Having had this confirmed, Egil returns to his farming in Iceland, lives to old age, and has numerous offspring living in Iceland in the days of the saga.

It is interesting to note that the contrast between a pair of brothers appears in both generations of our family of farmers. The blond and beautiful ones get along well with princes to begin with, but perish; the dark and ugly ones have sufficient strength and intelligence to survive.¹⁵ This distinction invites the interpretation that the dark and ugly figures represent the true nature of the farmer and his closeness to nature, whereas the blond heroes bear the mark of aristocracy. The blond heroes, whose proto-type is Sigurd, are basically tragic figures embodying the ideals of the society of warriors that worshiped Odin, and in many cases they are thought to descend from him. The dark and ugly heroes have direct affinities with the nature god Thor who was without doubt the most popular god among the farmers of Norway and Iceland. They are basically comic figures, as is amply demonstrated in *Egils saga*, but one of the elements that complicate the figure of Egil is that with his many Thor-like qualities he is a worshipper of Odin, and it has even been argued that as an outsider, from the Norwegian point of view, he is something of a Loki figure.¹⁶

It has recently been argued contrary to earlier opinion that Snorri Sturluson wrote *Egils saga* in the final years of his life, between his return from Norway in 1239 and his death in 1241.¹⁷ As a matter of fact there are even certain indications that he did not finish the saga and that the final chapters are written by somebody else.¹⁸

In *Heimskringla* Snorri had written a magnificent history of the kings of Norway, whom he had portrayed as a line of impressive characters but with greatly varying characteristics and destinies. No doubt Snorri wanted this work to be known in Norway and at the Norwegian court, and he may have wanted to benefit from it directly or indirectly in his struggle about wealth and power in Iceland. Not only was he following in the footsteps of the old scalds through composing praise poetry about Norwegian magnates including King Hakon Hakonarson, but also joining in the new kind of export from Iceland in writing sagas about foreign kings. All these activities are indicative of an Icelandic interest in the Norwegian kings as centres of glory and sources of honour. Inevitably, however, Snorri expressed his own world view in his works. It is, basically, the world view of the class of free farmers which had its roots in a stateless, pre-feudal and pre-Christian society.¹⁹

At the age of forty Snorri visited the Norwegian court or *hird*, as it was called and became one of its members, which was considered a great honour. But in 1239 Snorri must have returned to Iceland from his second stay in Norway with mixed feelings. He had actually left for Iceland in spite of a ban by King Hakon, and probably realised that the position of his old friend and ally Duke Skuli was threatened. Being a member of the *hird* was, indeed, a great honour, but it was also a bond which meant that Snorri was not immune from the king's punishment in Iceland. King Hakon had by this time begun his interference in Icelandic politics. Having written his great works about the glory of kings, and about the various fortunes of kings and those with close ties to them, Snorri must have experienced with painful clarity the possibility of being one of those who were turned down on the wheel of fortune around the king. When the accounts were settled, the kings had given nothing back in return for all Snorri had composed and written about their kin. His position was threatened, and his own family had suffered heavy losses, although, it must be admitted, more through their own doings than those of the king.

The actual intentions of an author, let alone one who lived eight centuries ago and wrote in the non-committal saga style, is beyond the reach of the interpreter. It is, therefore, only a hypothesis, and one that can neither be corroborated nor refuted, that Snorri, consciously or unconsciously, with the saga about his forefather Egil was expressing a deeply felt need for a return to an old world, that he really wanted to strengthen his own self-respect and that of his fellow Icelanders of the class of free farmers, and show them how dangerous it could be to become the king's man.²⁰ Snorri and his ambitious elder brothers, Thord and Sighvat, had risen to the new class of great chieftains with aristocratic ambitions, and both Snorri himself and his nephews, the sons of Sighvat, had become members of the Norwegian *hird*. For a

while, no one seemed to have better chances to succeed in becoming an Icelandic aristocrat with close ties to the Norwegian king than Snorri, with his upbringing in Oddi, where power and culture were united in the days of his foster-father Jón Loptsson. But in his final years Snorri is, indeed, likely to have asked if his family had not in actual fact lost an important source of strength when they severed the ties with their origins as farmers and entered on a route that led to destruction. The tragic fate of his blond and beautiful nephew Sturla Sighvatsson, who was killed with his father and some of his brothers in 1238, is indirectly paralleled in the saga about Thorolf Kveld-Ulf's son. It is more difficult to point to a parallel to Egil Skalla-Grimsson among his descendants in the 13th century, although old Egil Halldorsson, who was at Borg when Snorri lived there, might have presented a link.²¹ In any case, a figure embodying Snorri's mental picture of the values of the old world probably was prominent among his own forefathers. In Egil Skalla-Grimsson's poetry he had an excellent source of inspiration for the delineation of this character, and considerably more could no doubt be wrought from oral tradition. But Egil's figure is unique and could not have had the same dimensions in tradition as it has in the saga. It bears the marks of a literary master, one who had learnt from the myths he had given literary form to in his Edda that the most important and serious matters could be treated with humour.²²

Egil's visit to Jorvik is the high point of his saga. He faces a formidable opponent, and all the reasons he has for not going to him only increase the feeling of the reader or audience that nothing can break the will or the strength of this man, who is really the equal of kings, although he is of an altogether different mould and has ambitions of another kind.

NOTES

- 1 *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, ed. Sigurdur Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, II (Reykjavík 1933). Recent translations into English are by Gwyn Jones, *Egil's saga* (New York 1960), Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Egil's saga* (Harmondsworth 1976), and Christine Fell, *Egils saga* (London 1978); and into German by Kurt Schier, *Die Saga von Egil* (Düsseldorf 1978).
- 2 *nídstöng* was probably considered to have magical effects, see art. "níd" in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder (Copenhagen 1956-78)*, XII.
- 3 See, e.g., Nordal's comments in his *Introduction*, pp. xix-xxv; Hallvard Lie, "Jorvikferden", in *Edda*, 33 (1946), repr. in Hallvard Lie: *Om sagakunst og skaldskap* (Øvre Ervik 1982); Odd Nordland, *Höfudlausn i Egils saga. Ein tradisjonskritisk studie* (Oslo 1956).
- 4 Jón Helgason, "Höfudlausnarhjal," in *Einarsbók. Afmælikvedja til Einars Ól. Sveinssonar 12. desember 1969* (Reykjavík 1969); cf. Dietrich Hofman, "Das Reimwort gior in Egill Skallagrímssons *Höfudlausn*", *Medieval Scandinavia*, 6 (1973).
- 5 See *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, rev. translation Dorothy Whitelock & al. (London 1961), 72-73.
- 6 Although I use the terms coined by T.M Andersson in his *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge 1967), I do not think that his model is a practical tool to describe the structure of sagas as a whole. L.Lönnroth and other scholars have successfully

- used this model to account for sections of sagas, see his *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley & c. 1976).
- 7 See Joseph Harris, "Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendingaþættir*," *Scandinavian Studies*, 44 (1972). See further Vésteinn Ólason, "Íslendingaþættir," *Timarit Máls og menningar*, 46 (1985), and "Den frie mannens selvforståelse i islandske sagaer og dikt," in *Medeltidens fødselse. Symposier på Krappereups borg*, 1 (Lund 1989).
 - 8 See Gerd W. Weber, "Irreligiosität und Heldenzeitalter. Zum Mythencharakter der altisländischen Literatur," in *Specvlvm norroenvm. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke & al. (Oxford 1981).
 - 9 "Den sagas sjælelige hovedinnhold er nemlig i virkeligheten dens utflyttede høvdingers likvidasjon av følelsene mot gamlelandet: det er foregått et brutalt opprykk, og nå sitter slintrene igjen og svir ... Hovedmotivet er denne *ubeviste* ve over å være rykket opp med rot ..."
- Hans E. Kinck, "Et par ting om ættesagaen. Skikkelser den ikke forsto," in H.E.K., *Sagaenes ånd og skikkelser* (Oslo 1951), 28. The essay was originally published in 1916.
- 10 If one accepts Fredric Jameson's idea (in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London 1981) that contradictions and difficulties in a text can be symptomatic of suppressed desires and even of some sort of collective unconscious of a certain society, it is not impossible to apply it to *Egils saga*. We then must assume that an original collective trauma of an emigrant society suppressing the desire for the Home-land was kept alive for centuries while contradictions in the attitude to the old country remained unresolved. This would then have found expression not only in *Egils saga*, but in the general attitude to Norway in Old Icelandic literature. This interpretation seems, however, only applicable to Egil's strong wish to go to Norway in the first place and his eagerness to gain possession of land there, but it does not explain his reasons for risking his life by going to Jorvik.
 - 11 See Peter Hallberg, *Snorri Sturluson och Egils saga Skallagrímssonar. Ett försök till språklig författarbestämning. Studia Islandica*, 20 (Reykjavík 1962); Vésteinn Ólason, "Er Snorri höfundur Egils sögu?" *Skírnir*, 142 (1968); Ralph West, "Snorri Sturluson and *Egils saga*: Statistics of Style," *Scandinavian Studies*, 52 (1980).
 - 12 See Sigurdur Nordal, Snorri Sturluson (Reykjavík 1920); Bjarni Adalbjarnarson, Introductions to *Heimskringla*, I-III, Íslenzk fornrit, XXVI-XXV III (Reykjavík 1941-51); Hallvard Lie, *Studier i Heimskringlas stil* (Oslo 1937).
 - 13 Ed. Nordal, 177-178.
 - 14 For an excellent and lively description of Egil see the Introduction to *Egil's saga*, transl. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards.
 - 15 See Jesse Byock, "The Dark Figure as Survivor in an Icelandic Saga," in *The Dark Figure in Mediæval German and Germanic Literature*, ed. Edward R. Haymes and Stephanie Cain Van D'Elden, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 448 (Göppingen 1986).
 - 16 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Starkadr, Loki og Egill Skallagrímsson," in *Sjötíu ritgerdir helgadar Jakobi Benediktssyni* 20. júlí 1977 (Reykjavík 1977). Although it can be conceded to Sørensen that Egil plays a role in the banquet in Atley which in some respects is reminiscent of Loki's in Ægir's hall, there are also important differences. In the saga Egil is not the one who begins the conflict. The killing of the host is, as is usual with Egil, an excessive reaction to what he interprets as aggressive behaviour towards himself, the sympathy is all on his side.
 - 17 Jónas Kristjánsson, "Egils saga og konungasögur," in *Sjötíu ritgerdir helgadar Jakobi Benediktssyni*.
 - 18 See West in *Scandinavian Studies* 1980.
 - 19 This statement about Snorri's world-view is a controversial one, cf. Lars Lönnroth, "Ideology and Structure in Heimskringla," *Parergon*, 15 (1976).
 - 20 It should be emphasized that this 'anti-royalist' attitude had very little to do with modern feelings and ideas of nationalism.
 - 21 See *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Kålund (Copenhagen 1906-1911), I, 273-274.

- 22 *Egils saga's* relationship with older literature is discussed and several instances of literary influence argued in Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík 1975).