

CHAPTER I

## The Skeleton

Now this has appeared to you three times, for ‘all good things come in threes’. Nor is it less true that the Trinity of God is good.

From *Íslendinga saga*, by Sturla Þórðarson<sup>1</sup>

*Egils saga* is the story of four generations of a family of Icelandic settlers. Kveld-Úlfr Bjálfason, the founder of the family, is a prosperous farmer who holds the rights of a landed man in Norway, which means that he belongs to the country’s chieftain class. He has two sons, Þórólfr and Skallagrímur. The former is handsome, popular, and ambitious for fame and fortune; the latter is ugly like his father and prefers to stay at home. In their day Haraldr hárfagri (Finehair) extends his rule over the whole of Norway, in the process creating a new social order that results in a change of status for men like Kveld-Úlfr. They must now submit to the will of a monarch or overlord, who adopts strict measures to prevent any of his subjects from being in a position to rebel against him. One such measure is to take the sons of powerful men into his service as retainers. Kveld-Úlfr and Skallagrímur distrust the king, whereas

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1. *Sturlunga saga*, trans. Julia H. McGrew, introd. R. George Thomas, Library of Scandinavian literature 9–10 (New York: Twayne, 1970–74), 1:433–34. All translations from *Sturlunga saga* are taken from this work (hereafter *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74)), with emendations where necessary. Original text: “Nú hefir þetta þrisvar borið fyrir þig enda verður þrisvar allt forðum. Það er og eigi síður að góð er guðs þrenning.” *Sturlunga saga. Árna saga biskups. Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar hin sérstaka*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson and Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1988), 2:676. This source is cited hereafter as *Sturlunga saga* (1988).

Þórólfr decides to try his luck at court. Once there his rise is so meteoric that the king soon feels threatened by his success, and a series of clashes culminates in the king's attacking and killing Þórólfr at his home. Kveld-Úlfr and Skallagrímur take revenge but this renders their position in Norway untenable and they decide to migrate to Iceland. Kveld-Úlfr dies at sea, while Skallagrímur lays claim to land in Borgarfjörður, west Iceland, and builds himself a home at a place called Borg.

A new generation now grows up at Borg, the sons of Skallagrímur; the elder is named Þórólfr after his uncle, the younger Egill. We see the same pattern repeated: Þórólfr is handsome and popular, while Egill is ugly like his father. Unlike him, he is unruly, and also a poet. While still very young he goes to drastic lengths to force his brother to take him along on his second voyage to Norway. There Þórólfr marries Ásgerðr, who grew up with the brothers and is niece to Skallagrímur's friend, Earl Þórir of Firðafylki province in Norway. Although there is little love lost between Þórólfr and Egill, they go raiding together, amassing a good haul of booty. Egill, however, repeatedly gets on the wrong side of King Eiríkr Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhildr, with the result that the brothers are forced to over-winter in England where they become mercenaries of King Athelstan. When Þórólfr loses his life in the Battle of Vínheiðr, Egill receives generous compensation from the king to hand over to his father. Afterward he returns to Norway where he marries his brother's widow before taking her home to Iceland.

Ásgerðr comes of a good family in Norway, and the couple therefore has a claim to the inheritance left by her parents, but their property is appropriated by a man named Berg-Önundur. Egill heads to Norway in pursuit of his rights but is unsuccessful, incurring instead the wrath of King Eiríkr and only managing to save his life by taking flight. He exacts a savage revenge, killing among others the king's eldest son. After this he sails back to Iceland but is seized with depression following the death of his father and heads abroad once more. This time he wrecks his ship on the coast of England, where the exiled Eiríkr is residing in York. Egill cannot escape from the king who is determined to kill him, yet he manages to save his neck with the help of his friend Arinbjörn, Eiríkr's most important retainer. It is at this juncture that Egill recites the poem "Höfuðlausn" (Head ransom).

He now heads back to Norway, where he stands in for a nephew of Arinbjörn's in a duel with a berserker whom he kills, and this time he also succeeds in obtaining the property that had previously been withheld by Berg-Önundr. Some years later he travels to Norway again. By now Arinbjörn has returned home and Egill accompanies him on a raiding expedition. After they part ways, Egill goes back to Norway where he stands in for another of Arinbjörn's nephews on a dangerous mission to Varmland for King Hákon. Having performed the mission successfully, Egill sails home to Iceland, thereby ending his series of travels abroad.

But his story is not yet over. When Egill's son Böðvarr drowns, his grief is so devastating that he decides to starve himself to death, only to be dissuaded by his daughter Þorgerðr, who encourages him to compose instead a poem, "Sonatorrek" (Lament for my sons). In direct continuation of this we are told how Egill composes "Arinbjarnarkviða" in honor of his friend in Norway. Another of Egill's sons, Þorsteinn, now takes center stage in the story. Þorsteinn is involved in a dispute with his neighbor, Steinar Sjónason, from which he emerges victorious with the help of his father. Finally, several episodes from Egill's old age are related, culminating in his death, burial and the discovery of his bones.

As will be evident from this retelling, the saga is divided into two parts. The first, set in Norway, is the political tragedy of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, which ends with his family being forced to flee the country and settle in Iceland; the second, which is double the length, is the life story of a poet and Viking. The first part is fairly clearly demarcated in time, spanning several years in the life of Þórólfr and entirely focused on the plot that culminates in his fall and the flight of his family. The second part spans some ninety years and seems somewhat disjointed. On first impression there appears to be little to link the disparate episodes that make up Egill's life, with the majority of the incidents described in the saga occurring outside Iceland on the journeys he undertakes for diverse reasons.

The apparent contrast between the two parts has led to disagreement among scholars about how well the saga is constructed. Even so, no one can fail to recognize that whoever compiled the tale of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson (chapters 1 to 22) was well versed in the



art of constructing a narrative.<sup>2</sup> No element is extraneous, each is carefully placed to create the maximum effect, and nowhere is there any slackening in the dramatic tension that climaxes with the hero's death. Conversely, it has been claimed that the second part of the saga lacks coherence; whoever composed it fails to display the same command of his material. In the opinion of the American scholar Theodore M. Andersson, the section of the saga concerned with Egill suffers from the fact that the material is diversified, the plot stretched out over too long a time span and the geographical settings too scattered around the world, with the result that the narrative lacks a single focus, or climax, to give it form.<sup>3</sup>

Andersson was not the first scholar to come to this conclusion. At the beginning of the last century the German W. H. Vogt wrote a brief study on the structure of *Egils saga* in which he claimed that the two parts could not be by the same man. He maintained that they reflected two different stages in the development of Icelandic narrative. The first part must have been by an author who had learned the art of storytelling from books, since he knew how to weave together two strands of narrative ("zweisträngig"), whereas the second was by an author who was still at the cultural stage characterized by the oral transmission of stories, being content to arrange his material in a simple, linear narrative ("einsträngig").<sup>4</sup> Vogt inferred from this that Þórólfr's tale was probably the invention of an author capable of shaping his story according to artistic requirements, while the continuation of the story was dependent on oral tradition. Andersson agreed with Vogt to the

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2. The reader is advised to keep an edition of *Egils saga* handy for reference during the following discussion. Due to the number of editions in circulation, all references are to chapter numbers, for the reader's convenience. Before the beginning of chapter 1, a key is provided to the divergent chapter numberings in the main editions of the saga.

3. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 107. The following are quotations from his comments on the structure of *Egils saga*: "[T]he matter seems more *diversified and less of a piece than elsewhere*. Both the temporal and local framework is dilated much beyond the norm. . . . There is *no genuine or inherent focus*. . . . Even the central part of the saga concerned with Egill's conflict with Erik is diluted and made bland by a *quantity of episodic scatterings about the Norwegian court, the colonization of Iceland, and Viking raids abroad*. In fact *Egill's conflict is handled with less address and considerably less dramatic intensity than Þórólfr's*. It lacks any true climax such as the depiction of Þórólfr's monumental fall three strides from his royal antagonist" (emphasis added).

4. Walter Heinrich Vogt, *Zur Komposition der Egils Saga, Kpp. I–LXVI* (Görlitz: Hoffmann & Reiber, 1909), 58.



extent that he thought the author who compiled the saga probably had at his disposal an excess of information about Egill, on which he was unable to impose a suitable form.<sup>5</sup>

If these two commentators are correct in their assessment of the second part of *Egils saga*, it would support the contentions of scholars like Sigurður Nordal, who believed that the author had based his work on sources, primarily oral traditions that had been handed down by the descendants of the men of Mýrar, but also on Egill's poems and skaldic verses, which were still preserved in people's memories when the saga came to be written down in the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>6</sup> However, alternative points of view have emerged, especially in recent years. Of course, there is every likelihood that a man by the name of Egill Skallagrímsson did exist some time between the settlement of Iceland and its conversion to Christianity, and it is not impossible that some of his poetry and the stories about him survived in oral memory, changing and developing as they were told or recited.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga* (1967), 108: "In this case it is of course curious that Þórólfr's story is brought off so well while Egill's story is dull and long-winded in comparison. A possible explanation of the paradox is that the author was handicapped by too much information in his treatment of Egill and was unable to absorb it into his inheritance conflict. Even as the saga stands, it is clear that he could not integrate Sonatorrek, Arinbjarnarkviða, the friendship with Einarr skálaglamm, and the mission to Värmland."

This attitude resurfaces in Vésteinn Ólason's comments on the saga in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 2, ed. Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1993), 90: "Eftir Jórvíkurför Egils heldur saga hans áfram án þess að um nokkra eiginlega sögufléttu sé að ræða, og er hún þó auðug af atvikum." (After Egill's trip to York, his story continues without any real plot, although it is rich in incident. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

6. See for example, the first sentences of Sigurður Nordal's foreword to his edition of the saga, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), v: "Heimildir Egils sögu eru þrenns konar. Meginefni hennar er sótt í munnlegar frásögur, sem gengið höfðu frá kynslóð til kynslóðar . . ." (Egils saga is based on three types of source. The bulk of its content derives from stories that had been passed down orally from generation to generation . . . Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

7. There is a rich tradition of studying the sagas as the result of a long oral transmission. The most recent contributions to this tradition are by Tommy Danielsson, *Hrafnkels saga, eller Fallet med den undflyende tradition* (Stockholm: Gidlund, 2002); and Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas Jones, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2 (Cambridge, MA.: Milman Parry Collection, 2004). Neither argues against authorial fashioning of the material, nor do I deny the existence of a rich oral tradition feeding into saga writing. In the following chapters, I will however insist more on the shaping by the author of this material and incorporation of themes and motifs that are not likely to have been part of this oral tradition.

But we must reject the idea that the “loose” structure of the saga after Þórólfr’s tale is an argument for its being based on primarily oral sources, and that it is in that sense historical as opposed to literary in construction. In recent decades other scholars have pointed out that considerable thought seems to underlie the organization of material in the second part of the saga. In their books on *Egils saga*, both Bjarni Einarsson and Baldur Hafstað have highlighted parallels and repeated motifs indicating that the person who compiled the saga was in far better control of his material than either Vogt or Andersson gave him credit for. Indeed, Einarsson makes a strong case for the saga’s having been based only to a minor degree on independent oral sources about Egill.<sup>8</sup> He argues that it is actually governed to a far greater extent by the laws of literature, in which the repeated interplay of parallels, oppositions and variations on themes invariably has an important role.<sup>9</sup> Einarsson’s and Hafstað’s conclusions shed valuable light on the structure of the saga and the methods involved in its composition: far from being diffuse, therefore, it appears that the material and organization of the saga are informed by an overall unifying meaning.

In the present study we will continue down the same track, demonstrating that the second part of the saga and in fact the narrative as a whole are every bit as carefully thought out and organized as the tale of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson. What distinguishes the two parts is that, unlike Þórólfr’s tale, which is based on a single conflict, being solely concerned with Þórólfr’s quarrel with the sons of Hildiríðr and how their slander turns the king against him, the second part is based on two interwoven conflicts that serve to illuminate each other. These are, on the one hand, the bad blood between Kveld-Úlfur and his descendants and the Norwegian royal house, and, on the other, the less overt conflicts between Egill and his father and brother. In other words, far from being looser than the first part, the structure of the second part of the saga is actually more intricate. The main section of the saga, which centers on the

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8. Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*, Rit 8 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1975).

9. Baldur Hafstað’s research supports Bjarni Einarsson’s point of view, reinforcing it with many more arguments; see his *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (1995), 135–48.

life of Egill, is thus a complex and enigmatic story, and my intention in this book is to try to elucidate it.

### *External Structure*

When dealing with a work as lengthy and convoluted as *Egils saga*, it is essential to isolate the principles that govern the arrangement of the various narrative building blocks. Some principles appear obvious, such as that of cause and effect, illustrated, for example, by the decision of Skallagrímur's sons Þórólfr and Egill to go to England instead of over-wintering in Norway as originally planned (chapter 49). Their decision is taken following Egill's attack on Eyvindr Skreyja, the brother of Queen Gunnhildr. The second event is explained by the first, the logic of cause and effect dictating the order in which the events are narrated in the text. Doubtless this is the main principle guiding the external structure of the saga, and it would be a simple matter to list numerous examples of its usage. Yet there are other factors that seem to influence the organization of the material, from the division of the saga into parts to the distribution of different episodes within the narrative.

Since *Egils saga* is the story of a family, it seems natural for a new section to begin at the point where the focus of the narrative shifts to a new generation. The saga is accordingly divided into two parts, the first notably half the length of the second. The number of chapters, thirty in the first half and sixty in the second, serves to accentuate this division. Part one tells of the dealings of Kveld-Úlfr and his sons with Haraldr Finehair and their emigration to Iceland, with an obvious break in the saga following the description of Skallagrímur's settlement. Next, his sons take center stage, although there is actually a brief interlude before the new generation assumes the main roles in the saga, as the narrative turns first to Björn Brynjólfsson and the circumstances that lead to his daughter's growing up at Borg. Soon, however, Þórólfr Skallagrímsson assumes the mantle of main protagonist, though not for long. When Þórólfr returns from his first trip abroad, Egill takes center stage and occupies it for the rest of the story. He may vanish briefly from view during the account of his son Þorsteinn's feud with his neighbor Steinar, but he participates in its resolution in memorable style, reverting to the center of the



action for the final chapters. And although Egill is little in evidence in the accounts of Björn Brynjólfsson or Þórólfr Skallagrímsson's first trip to Norway, he is clearly intended as chief protagonist from the outset. Of all Skallagrím's children, by far the most space is devoted to the introduction of Egill, and the second part of the saga opens with an account of how the three-year-old Egill goes to a feast that his father has forbidden him to attend. It is no coincidence that the saga as a whole ends with his death.<sup>10</sup>

The division of the saga into parts represents only the simplest level of its organization. We must also consider how its smaller units are arranged. One of the points that Andersson criticizes is how clumsily the settlement episodes have been fitted into the second part of the saga. Every now and then the arrival of some settler in Iceland is announced with a description of his land-taking, and this is one of the features that make the saga seem muddled in Andersson's opinion, detracting from the tension and consequently the reader's interest.<sup>11</sup> This is another point on which there is reason to disagree with Andersson, because these settlement episodes can in fact be shown to play a highly significant role in the structure of the saga.

Bjarni Einarsson addressed the problem of these settlement stories in his book on *Egils saga*, concluding that the author did not hesitate to diverge from his sources in order to achieve aims that can be categorized as literary rather than historical.<sup>12</sup> One of the points to which Einarsson draws attention is the similarity between the story

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10. This type of bipartite structure was not uncommon in medieval European literature in the period in which *Egils saga* was composed, as Carol Clover, among others, has pointed out in relation to *Egils saga* in her book *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 42ff. Examples of stories that are similarly divided between two generations include *Cligès*, by the twelfth-century French author Chrétien de Troyes, and the translated chivalric romance *Tristrams saga*, which was probably circulating in Norway and perhaps in Iceland at the time *Egils saga* was composed. It may be even more apposite to compare the latter work with *Egils saga*, since its second part is also the life story of the central character, while the first part is like a prologue that sets the stage for his life and creates the context which lends it meaning. It could be said to play a similar role to the prelude to a piece of music, in which the main themes are introduced before being amplified and interwoven in the main body of the composition, a description that would fit both *Tristrams saga* and *Egils saga* equally well.

11. See note 2.

12. Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 66ff.; see also 73–85, in which he puts forward various arguments in favor of the author's taking liberties with his sources for artistic reasons. His conclusions are summarized on 76–79.

of Ketill hængr, in chapter 23, and the settlement described much later in chapter 78, when Ketill gufa arrives in Iceland and searches for a place for himself and his followers to live. Einarsson argues convincingly that the author made various modifications to the story of Ketill gufa, inventing details to enhance the similarity between the stories. These modifications become apparent when the saga's account of Ketill gufa is compared to the accounts in those versions of *Landnámabók* independent of *Egils saga*. Einarsson deduced from them that the author included these stories for a purpose; that is, they constituted an indispensable part of his overall design.<sup>13</sup>

The story of yet another settler, Ketill blundr, recounted in chapter 39, arguably belongs to the same category. Einarsson points out that all the other versions of *Landnámabók* that record his settlement clearly derive their knowledge from *Egils saga*. However, he omits to mention a discrepancy between these and another version of the same story, preserved in the manuscript known as Þórðarbók, which contains a version of *Landnámabók* that is independent of *Egils saga*. There Blund-Ketill is said to be the grandson of one Örnólfr, not of Ketill blundr as is claimed in *Egils saga*. On this evidence it would seem that Ketill blundr was invented in order to introduce yet another settler of this name into the story.<sup>14</sup> Whether or not this is true, the significant point is that out of the host of settlers who came to Iceland and claimed land in proximity to Skallagrím, all the men mentioned in independent stories in *Egils saga* are named Ketill and have a cognomen.

Interestingly enough, these three settlement stories are all placed at clear breaks in the narrative. Ketill hængr and his journey to Iceland are described immediately after the fall of Þórólfr

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13. Ibid., 66. "Til trods for disse episoders uafhængighed af sagaens hovedhandling, er de hver for sig knyttet til sagaens hovedpersoner og begivenheder. Det er rimeligt at antage at de er anbragt her i overensstemmelse med forfatterens bevidste plan,—at de er en integrerende del af den helhedsstruktur han havde for øje."

(Although these episodes are independent of the saga's main plot, each of them is linked to the main characters and events of the saga. It is reasonable to suppose they are used here in accordance with a deliberate plan on the part of the author—that they form an integral part of the overall structure he had in mind. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

14. Ibid., 49; *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 1:84, footnote 4, as well as the discussion in the introduction about the internal relationship among the various versions of *Landnámabók*.

### The Structure of *Egils saga*

The story of the first generation of Kveld-Úlfr's descendants  
(chapters 1 to 30):

Main protagonist: Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson.

*Interpolation: Ketill hængr's settlement.*

Skallagrímr succeeds as main protagonist.

Second generation, the sons of Skallagrímr (chapters 31 to 90):

Main protagonist: Þórólfr Skallagrímsson.

*Interpolation: Ketill blundr's settlement.*

Egill takes center stage.

*Interpolation: Ketill gufa's settlement.*

Þorsteinn becomes main protagonist before being  
displaced by Egill again at the end of the saga.

Kveld-Úlfsson and before Skallagrímr assumes the central role in the saga. The interpolation functions as a kind of dramatic respite: the story of Þórólfr ends with his tragic death and we pause a moment before embarking on the new escalation of tension that will reach its climax in the vengeance exacted by Skallagrímr and Kveld-Úlfr, and their subsequent flight to Iceland.<sup>15</sup>

The same kind of break occurs at the point where the arrival of Ketill blundr is described. It is interpolated after the account of Þórólfr Skallagrímsson's journey to Norway, during which he manages to befriend Eiríkr Bloodaxe, son of Haraldr Finehair, despite the earlier animosity between their two families. Þórólfr's return to Iceland is described, along with his plans to make a second trip abroad. At this point the saga suddenly reverts back several years, reporting Ketill blundr's arrival in Iceland, followed by two episodes from Egill's childhood: his first killing, committed when he was only seven years old, and a wrestling match during which his father comes close to murdering him, although he is a boy of no more than twelve at the time (chapter 40). After the account of

15. See Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 86.



Ketill blundr's colonization, Egill becomes the central character in the saga, and remains so more or less until chapter 82 when the story of his son Þorsteinn commences.

Ketill gufa's settlement story marks a similarly clear turning point in the saga.<sup>16</sup> When Egill returns home from his final overseas journey, the narrator leaves him for a while in order to describe Ketill's arrival in Iceland and the dreadful events that ensue when his runaway slaves rob and burn Þórðr Lambason's farm (chapter 78). The narrative then moves on to the marriages of Egill's daughter and stepdaughter, followed by the occasion of his greatest grief, the drowning of his son Böðvarr, after which the saga undergoes a marked change in tone. The chapters about Ketill blundr and Ketill gufa could thus be likened to staging posts in Egill's life, marking the beginning and end of his travels abroad.

On closer inspection, the three settlement stories about the men called Ketill turn out to have more in common than merely the name of the settler and the way each marks a pivotal point in the overall structure of the saga. For example, each is placed immediately prior to a dramatic climax: the story of Ketill hængr is related shortly before Kveld-Úlfr and Skallagrímr kill Hallvarðr harðfari and Sigtryggr snarfari, and drown the young sons of a Norwegian duke, cousins of King Haraldr (chapter 27); Ketill blundr enters the story just before Egill jeopardizes his brother's life by cutting the moorings of his ship in a south-westerly gale that is raging in Borgarfjörður (chapter 40); and shortly after the arrival of Ketill gufa, Böðvarr Egilsson drowns in a southerly storm in the same place (chapter 79). It is striking that all three cases involve deadly danger to young men, all of whom are the sons of important men.

Further, it is worth noting that in close proximity to each of the stories of the three men named Ketill there is reference to the killing of slaves. Ketill hængr's slaying of the sons of Hildiríðr in the first part of the saga could be interpreted as a kind of slave killing. The sons have been deprived of their birthright on the grounds that their mother was taken by force. As a result their fate is to be regarded as the sons of a female slave, or *þýbornir*, "born of a slave woman," to use a term that occurs later in the saga (chapter 57). The second episode from Egill's

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16. Ibid.

**Settlers' Stories**

Ketill + cognomen

Dramatic climax

Chieftain's son in mortal danger

Wedding(s)

Killing of slaves

childhood involves the killing of two slaves, the bondswoman Brák and Skallagrímr's foreman, while later in the saga Lambi Þórðarson kills the slaves of Ketill gufa in revenge for his father.

Finally, in each case there is reference to weddings in close proximity to the settlement of the three Ketills. The last thing to be reported before the account of Haraldr Finehair's attack on Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson is the marriage of Skallagrímr, while the account of Ketill hængr follows directly on from Þórólfr's fall. The account ends with the king ordering Eyvindr lambi to marry Þórólfr's widow (see the end of chapter 20 and chapter 22). The same pattern occurs in relation to the story of Ketill gufa, directly after which we are told of the marriage of Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir and subsequently that of Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir (see the end of chapter 78 and beginning of chapter 79). In the case of Ketill blundr's settlement, it seems at first glance as if only one marriage is reported, the wedding of his son to Skallagrímr's daughter, but another wedding is already in the offing. Þórólfr has informed his father that he intends to travel to Norway with Ásgerðr, Björn Brynjólfsson's daughter, who was raised at Borg, and in due course it emerges that he intends to ask for her hand in marriage.<sup>17</sup>

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17. The story of a man named Ketill with a cognomen, a dramatic climax, the drowning of a powerful man's son, two weddings and the killing of slaves are narrative elements that can be found juxtaposed in all three cases. Other elements are also repeated, though only in two cases. One is rebellion against an authority figure. Grímr and Úlfr rebel against King Haraldr in revenge for Þórólfr, and later Egill rebels against his father and brother, who try to forbid him to go abroad. No such rebellion can be detected in the vicinity of Ketill gufa's story, except perhaps the escape of the slaves and their attack on Þórðr Lambason's farm. Two other elements occur only twice in the vicinity of a settlement story: the killing of the agent of the authority figure at whom the rebellion is directed (Hallvarðr and Sigtryggr, and Skallagrímr's foreman) and the saving of Egill's life by a woman. Þorgerðr brák saves him from his father, as noted before, and his daughter, also named Þorgerðr

Some notion of an overall design thus clearly governs the organization of the narrative elements of the saga. Whether conscious or not, there must have been an intention behind the arrangement of all the aforementioned themes around the interpolations about the three characters named Ketill, who otherwise play only a minor role in the action.

Interestingly enough, only one other Ketill takes part in the saga, in a similarly minor role to the other three.<sup>18</sup> This Ketill has the cognomen *höðr*, and may also be an invention as he turns up nowhere else in saga literature. He is said to be the kinsman and helmsman of King Eiríkr, to whom he bears a close resemblance, and Egill dispatches him with a spear when his ship passes that of the king in the half-light of early morning (chapter 57). The saga hints strongly that Egill had intended to kill the king himself, which is doubtless what is implied by stressing the resemblance between Ketill and the king, and setting the incident in poor visibility.

Ketill *höðr* is portrayed with more care than his role justifies, given that he is introduced barely a page before his death, and various details are supplied that are of little consequence for the development of the narrative. However, if we look more closely, it turns out that many incidents similar to those found in relation to the other Ketill stories have also been arranged around Ketill *höðr*. For example, there is a dramatic climax at this point in the saga when Egill's dispute with Berg-Önundr over their father-in-law's legacy escalates into an all-out conflict between Egill and the king (chapters 57 and 58). We have here a rebellion against

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(a coincidence?), tricks him into giving up his plan to starve to death, thereby saving his life (see chapter 80 and the discussion of this episode in chapter 2 of the present study). Perhaps the attempt by Sigríðr, Þórólfr's wife, to secure a truce for her husband could be viewed as a parallel, juxtaposed with the story of Ketill *hængr*, but in this instance the main character is not saved. There is an analogy here with the fact that Þórólfr does not drown when his ship is cast off in the south-westerly gale in Borgarfjörður. The theme is present (a woman saves a man, the son of an authority figure drowns) but is not treated in quite the same way as in the previous instances. In fact, it could be said that although Þórólfr himself does not drown, a twelve-year-old boy does lose his life in close proximity to the story of Ketill *blundr*, since the boy Egill kills is exactly twelve years old.

18. Actually, reference is made to two others, though only in genealogies. They are Ketill *hængr*, a cousin of Kveld-Úlfr and ancestor of the settler Ketill *hængr* (chapter 1), and Ketill *kjölfari*, grandfather of Grímr the Hålogalander who steered Kveld-Úlfr's ship.



a figure of authority and we do not have to wait long before a young boy, the son of a powerful man, drowns; in this instance it is Rögnvaldr, the son of Eiríkr Bloodaxe and Queen Gunnhildr (chapter 58). He is described as a promising boy of ten or twelve years old, a description which concurs almost exactly with the descriptions of Guttormr's sons and of Böðvarr Egilsson. No slaves are executed in proximity to the description of Ketill höðr, yet the slave motif is present. Ásgerðr, Egill's wife, is referred to as *þýborin*, "born of a slave woman," and accordingly regarded as having the same legal status as a slave, which would mean she had no right to her inheritance, as in the case of Hildiríðr's sons mentioned earlier.

We do not have to look far, either, to find two weddings, since the chapter about Egill's marriage is the penultimate one before the account of his dispute with Berg-Önundr, and we have just been told how Berg-Önundr received the hand in marriage of Gunnhildr, Ásgerðr's half-sister (chapter 56). A third marriage is also reported on this occasion, that of Egill's follower Þorfinnr to his sister Sæunn.

The repeated pattern discernible in relation to characters who are all named Ketill with a cognomen can hardly be dismissed as mere coincidence. It is tempting to conjecture that it is linked to some overall meaning that the saga is intended to convey. The four characters named Ketill apparently serve the purpose of drawing attention to a constantly repeated theme, which we could sum up as follows: there is a rebellion against an authority figure, generally in relation to an inheritance claim; this occurs in close proximity to a wedding, followed more often than not by the death of one or more young men shortly afterward. The meaning of these repetitions will be examined in more depth later, but for now suffice it to point out that the stories of the four men named Ketill create a definite principle in the external structure of the saga. The colonist Ketill hængr divides the first part into two narratives of differing length, each with a dramatic climax. The settlement stories of Ketill blundr and Ketill gufa bracket the section of Egill's life story that tells of his adventures abroad, with his killing of Ketill höðr occurring in the middle. Furthermore, the section of the second part of the saga that precedes the account of Ketill blundr is more or less the same length as the section that follows the account of Ketill gufa. This

**Structural Regularities in *Egils Saga***

**Part One**

Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson (chapters 1 to 22)

**KETIL HÆNGR** (chapters 23)

Skallagrímr (chapters 24 to 30)

**Part Two**

Þórólfr Skallagrímsson (chapters 32 to 38)

**KETIL BLUNDR** (chapter 39)

*EGILL'S OVERSEAS JOURNEYS*

Egill (chapters 40 to 57)

**KETIL HÖÐR** (chapter 57)

Egill (chapters 58 to 77)

*EGILL RETIRES FROM TRAVELING*

**KETIL GUFA** (chapter 78)

Þorsteinn and Egill (chapters 80 to 90)

enhances still further the artistic equilibrium conferred by the Ketill stories on *Egils saga*.

Other repetitions of names serve to accentuate the structure of the saga still further. The famous account of Egill's trip to his grandfather's feast against Skallagrímr's will is the first incident described in Egill's life and gives him a leading role in the action from the very outset of part two. The reader's attention is therefore bound to be attracted by a strikingly similar event toward the end of the saga, just before Egill's death. Again he is keen to go to a social gathering and again a man named Grímr forbids him to go, only in this case it is Grímr of Mosfell, husband of Egill's niece Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir, with whom he has chosen to live in his old age.

The stories deliberately echo each other, drawing attention to the fact that Egill's character, which was pronounced from early childhood, remains unchanged at the end of his long life. A degree of manipulation was evidently required to place this incident right at the end of the saga, when in fact it would have made more sense chronologically to include accounts of Egill's extreme decrepitude

after this episode in which he still has the strength to kill two slaves (see chapter 88).<sup>19</sup>

It might seem rather far-fetched to see a correlation between trips to an assembly and a feast, yet such trips have much in common. First, these are journeys away from home to a social setting; away from the family and out into society. Second, feasts and assemblies are comparable in that both require the differentiation of people according to rank. The importance of status is stressed in both accounts: Egill is accorded a seat of honor beside the master of the house when he arrives at his grandfather's farm as a wet and weary three-year-old. However, when, as an old man, Egill asks Grímr of Mosfell's permission to ride with him to the assembly, Grímr asks Þórdís to see if she can find out what is behind his wish. In the seventeenth-century copies of *Egils saga*, which seem to preserve a more complete text than *Möðruvallabók*, the conversation between Þórdís and Egill makes explicit how important it is for Egill to lead his party at the assembly. Þórdís points out that he would not be accorded the seat of honor that was his due, presumably because his blindness would render him incapable of fulfilling his former role.<sup>20</sup>

These two stories of Egill, at three and at ninety, are like staging posts marking the beginning and end of the section devoted to his story. It is thus striking that between his earlier two and later two

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19. A further indication that the author is making highly creative use of his sources here is the strikingly similar story preserved in *Landnámabók* of an aged Viking, Ketilbjörn hinn gamli (the Old) of Mosfell, who is blind and kills the slaves who help him bury some silver that he does not want to fall into the hands of his heirs. This story may have been the origin of the episode in *Egils saga*. See *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* (1968), 384–86.

20. See Bjarni Einarsson's essay "Um Eglutexta Möðruvallabókar í 17du aldar eftirritum," *Gripla* 8 (1993): 7–54. The manuscript copies describe the conversation between Þórdís and Egill and include the following about Þórdís: "[E]nn er hún fann að Eigill gjordiz málrættenn þá spurde hún so, er það nockud með alhuga að þú vilier rýða í sumar til alþings, Þikir mier það undarlegt að þú l vilier rýða til þings so að þú ráder ei frer flocke að <eg> ætla sýdan þú varst tvýtugur, að þú hafer allðri so til alþings ridid að ei værer þú flockstiöre. Enn ef þú villt nú fara og veita Grýme filgd þina og fórunente, þá mun þikia skilld naudsin til bera umm fór þina" (And when she discovered that Egill was in a mood to talk, she asked, "Are you certain you want to ride to the Alþingi this summer? I find it odd that you should wish to ride to the assembly when you are not in charge of the party, since I imagine that ever since you were twenty you have never ridden to the Alþingi without being the leader of your party. But if you want to go now, accompanying Grímr, it seems you must have a very urgent reason for your journey." Trans. Victoria Cribb.). See *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, vol. 1, *A-Redaktionen*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, Editiones Arnarnagænanæ, Series A, 19 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 2001), 181.



overseas journeys we find a chapter in which the same elements are repeated (chapter 59). This is the last conversation between Skallagrímr and Egill, followed by the account of the death of the former after he has sunk a chest of silver and a copper cauldron in Krumskelda bog.<sup>21</sup> This chapter is comparable with the others in that it reports the dealings between a man named Grímr and Egill, one of whom is going to a social event, the other of whom is not. In this case, as in the first story, the event is a feast at the home of Egill's maternal family at Álftanes. All three episodes involve arguments between a man named Grímr and Egill. In the latter two stories the argument is about what is to become of the silver that King Athelstan of England intended for Skallagrímr in recompense for his son Þórólfr. Significantly, Þórólfr's name also crops up in the first episode, when Egill insists on going to the feast because his brother is invited.

It is hardly coincidental that these three stories punctuate the saga at such regular intervals. They constitute a kind of variation on a theme, their distribution bestowing a strong overall character on the section of the saga that centers on Egill. And just as there are three men named Ketill in the second part of *Egils saga* and only one in the first, so we can also find a single instance of the theme just described in the first part of the saga. I have in mind here Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson's decision to become King Haraldr's liegeman against his father's will (chapters 5 and 6). Here a father is again shown trying to dissuade his son from attending a large gathering, the court being considered analogous to feasts and assemblies in the sense that it too involves leaving the family to go to a place where social rituals are performed, and where, moreover, social hierarchy is of fundamental importance.<sup>22</sup> All that is lacking from this episode, in contrast with the others, is mention of an inheritance or a brother. Yet, like the others, it centers on a confrontation between paternal

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21. Bjarni Einarsson discusses the links between this chapter and the narratives of Ketill hængur and Ketill gufa, drawing attention to the way it is placed between Egill's second and third trips abroad. See *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), especially 79–80.

22. Banquets were important in the Middle Ages, among other reasons because they provided an opportunity for society to place itself on stage. The prevailing social hierarchy was revealed partly by where people were seated. There are countless examples of this theme in early writings. Suffice it to mention the account in *Brennu-Njáls saga* of the quarrel between Bergþóra and Hallgerðr over the latter's placing during a feast at Bergþórshváll.

### Themes Repeated at Key Points

#### Part One

Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson goes to Haraldr's court against the advice of his father Kveld-Úlfr (chapter 6).

#### Part Two

Egill goes to a feast against the orders of his father Skallagrímr (chapter 31).

#### *Egill's two overseas journeys*

Egill goes to a feast and quarrels with his father Skallagrímr (chapter 59).

#### *Egill's two overseas journeys.*

Egill is forbidden to attend the assembly by Grímr of Mosfell (chapter 88).

authority and a son's wishes, as is clearly revealed when Skallagrímr remarks that he would rather obey his father than the new monarch. The brothers Skallagrímr and Þórólfr are opposites in this respect, for one obeys his father while the other does not.

This analysis of the external structure of *Egils saga* has revealed that several components of the narrative seem to play a key role in its organization. On the one hand, there are the cases involving a clash of wills between a father and son.<sup>23</sup> On the other, there are the interpolations about men named Ketill with a cognomen, and around these stories cluster other narrative elements that cannot have been chosen at random. In the first part of the saga (chapters 1 to 30) each type occurs only once, whereas in the second (chapters 31 to 90) each occurs three times. These two structural elements do not merely govern the internal organization of each part; they also serve to bind the saga together, providing it with

23. Grímr of Mosfell could also symbolize a father figure, given that he not only bears the same name as Skallagrímr but is also master of the household where Egill lives as an old man, and thus has power over him, like a father over a son.

semantic cohesion. The second part, however, is more complex than the first, due in part to the fact that the hero's relations with royal authority, the main theme of the first part, are complicated in the second by the hero's relations with his father and brother.

We cannot move on from this discussion of the external structure without pointing out that some editions of the saga have been divided into ninety chapters, which is a multiple of three, a number whose prominence in the external structure we have already noted. As it happens, the chapter division is only partly the work of editors. The *Möðruvallabók* text, on which all editions of the saga are based, is itself divided into chapters but unfortunately there are two lacunae in the manuscript. Finnur Jónsson filled these using a text from another manuscript, the Wolfenbüttel book, which contains no chapter divisions. However, it has been possible to compensate for this thanks to Bjarni Einarsson's above-mentioned study of seventeenth-century copies of *Möðruvallabók* made before the pages were lost. Similarly, recent editors have assumed that the accounts of the circumstances behind Egill's composition of his major poems, "Sonatorrek" and "Arinbjarnarkviða," must have formed separate chapters. They have thus introduced a chapter break at the point where the account of Einarr skálaglamm begins. The result is that the saga must have contained a total of ninety chapters, and while we cannot state for certain that the the saga was deliberately organized in this way, it must be considered plausible.

If it was so, it would fit in nicely with the fact that the saga preserves sixty skaldic verses by Egill and three major poems, as well as references to three others. Furthermore, Egill is three years old when he enters the story and ninety when he dies. If the number three and its multiples have influenced the way the work was constructed, it would be perfectly in keeping with the aesthetics of the times. In the Middle Ages, the structure of poems and other works of art was often based on numbers, especially the number three, symbolic of the Holy Trinity. This basis was consistent with people's understanding of the Scriptures, since number symbolism was considered an important aid to their interpretation. One of the most celebrated works of medieval literature is Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, composed more than half a



century after *Egils saga*.<sup>24</sup> Dante's work consists of one hundred cantos, one forming an introduction, the rest divided into three canticles, each containing thirty-three cantos. Dante was almost certainly thinking of the Holy Trinity when choosing this form for his work.<sup>25</sup> Icelandic poets of the first half of the thirteenth century often composed with such numbers in mind, an obvious example being Snorri Sturluson's "Háttatal," which consists of one hundred and two stanzas, again a multiple of three. If the last two stanzas, which form a kind of epilogue, are subtracted, we are left with one hundred stanzas, and indeed the poet emphasizes in the hundredth stanza that "svo er tírætt hundrað talið" (so ten tens are told).

Due to the circumstances in which *Egils saga* has been preserved, we will never be able to state with absolute certainty that its construction is based on a numerical scheme.<sup>26</sup> But the way the number three governs the organization of the plot elements in part two of the saga does suggest that this was the intention.

Finally, it is worth mentioning how many parallels the overall structure of the second part of the saga, which centers on Egill, has with the structure of the poem "Höfuðlausn." The poem consists of twenty stanzas, divided into three parts. First comes the *upphaf*, or beginning section of five stanzas, then comes the *stefjabálkr*, a set of ten verses including four half stanzas forming a refrain, and finally comes the so-called *slæmr*, or third and last division of five stanzas and no refrain, and right at the end, the twenty-first stanza, a half stanza that forms a sort of coda.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Vincent Foster Hopper's *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression*, Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature 132 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938) provides an invaluable guide to the subject and the justification for it provided by St. Augustine, among others, and includes an exploration of *The Divine Comedy's* roots in this tradition. For Augustine's views, see p. 78ff. There is another useful discussion of the influence of numerology on medieval literature in Ernest Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke, 1948), 493–500 (trans. Willard R. Trask as *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Bollingen series 36 (New York: Pantheon, 1952), 501–9).

25. For Dante and number symbolism, see Vincent Foster Hopper's *Medieval Number Symbolism* (1938).

26. See, however, the article by Edward G. Fichtner, "The Narrative Structure of *Egils saga*," in *Les Sagas de Chevaliers (Riddarasögur): Actes de la Ve Conférence Internationale sur les Sagas*, ed. Régis Boyer (Toulon: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1982), 355–66.

27. The most recent discussion of the poem can be found in Susanne Kries and

Comparison between the structure  
of “Höfuðlausn” and part two of *Egils saga*.

Structure of “Höfuðlausn”	Structure of part two of <i>Egils saga</i>
<i>Upphaf</i> (stanzas 1–5)	Þórólfr Skallagrímsson (chapters 32 to 38)
<i>Stefjabálkr</i> (stanzas 6–15)	Egill Skallagrímsson (chapters 39 to 79)
Refrain 2 stanzas	<b>Ketill blundr</b> (chapter 39)
Refrain 2 stanzas	Egill’s 1st and 2nd overseas journeys
Refrain 2 stanzas	<b>Ketill höðr</b> (chapter 57)
Refrain 2 stanzas	Egill’s 3rd and 4th overseas journeys
Refrain	<b>Ketill gufa</b> (chapter 78)
<i>Slæmr</i> (stanzas 16–20)	Þorsteinn and Egill (chapters 80 to 90)
Coda (stanzas 21)	Egill’s death (chapters 89 and 90)

If we re-examine the structure of the second part of the saga, we can compare the stories of the men named Ketill to a refrain, and the accounts of Þórólfr at the beginning and Þorsteinn at the end to the *upphaf* and *slæmr* sections of a *drápa*. One could also compare Egill’s four overseas journeys to the stanzas interposed between the refrains.

The parallel is not exact, but the similarities between the construction of the saga and that of the *drápa* are nevertheless striking. They can be taken as yet another indication that the organization of episodes was dictated by a sense of form rather than the haphazard nature of historical events. Moreover, it is a sense of form that is remarkably akin to that of the skaldic poet and therefore fitting that it infuses the biography of a skald with a structure that reflects his art.

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Thomas Krömmelbein, “‘From the Hull of Laughter’: Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s ‘Höfuðlausn’ and its Epodium in Context,” *Scandinavian Studies* 74, 2 (2002): 111–36, which examines the discrepancies between the extant versions of the poem and argues that the poem originally took the form I have described.

### Internal Structure

By internal structure I mean primarily the way the saga forms causal connections between the events it describes, which is a fundamental part of its form. The process by which one incident is precipitated by another and acquires meaning from it is what binds the narrative together, turning it into a saga rather than merely a collection of unrelated incidents. The tale of Þorsteinn Egilsson and his feud with his neighbor Steinar Sjónason (chapters 83 to 85) is an example of this type of narrative: Steinar orders his slave to pasture his herd of cattle on Þorsteinn's land; Þorsteinn kills the slave, so Steinar sends along a second slave who is twice as belligerent. Þorsteinn kills this slave as well. The events proceed in logical progression from one to the next. Sometimes the connection is obvious; at others more is demanded of the readers, who are alerted to the hidden strands that link events.

As pointed out above, scholars are unanimous in regarding the first part of the saga as extremely well constructed. The narrative is tight and little or nothing is included that does not prepare in one way or another for the tragic demise of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson. First, Kveld-Úlfr and his sons are introduced. Next, there is a brief account of how Haraldr Finehair conquers all of Norway and the changes this brings about in the circumstances of the chieftains of the land, confronting them with a choice between serving the king or earning his enmity or distrust. Þórólfr opts for court service and the hope of advancement. Immediately after this, the story turns to Björgólfr of Torgar, relating how he had sons in his old age with Hildiríðr, a young woman of lowly birth whose family is nonetheless wealthy. We are also told how his legitimate grandson, Bárðr Brynjólfsson, receives the hand in marriage of Sigríðr of Sandnes, the daughter of a rich nobleman from Hålogaland, before joining Haraldr's court. He and Þórólfr become friends, and when Bárðr lies dying of wounds received in the battle of Hafrsfjord, he extracts a promise from the king to bestow his wife and entire inheritance on Þórólfr, including his royal commission to levy tribute in Hålogaland and Finnmark. By this means tension has been created among three different forces. Having taken over the inheritance of Björgólfr of Torgar, Þórólfr must deal with the sons of Hildiríðr, who are aggrieved at being denied a share of their patrimony. He must also



be on his guard against Haraldr's suspicion of those who might potentially lead an uprising. And finally, as his father warns him on more than one occasion, he must beware of his own obstinacy and intemperance. As in a game of chess played by a master, the pieces have been manoeuvred into position by thinking many moves ahead, and now the situation can be allowed to unfold for tragedy to ensue.

It begins when Þórólfr invites the king to a banquet, heedless of the fact that Haraldr may be alarmed if his agent flaunts a larger retinue than his own. Seeing their chance, the sons of Hildiríðr spread the rumor that Þórólfr has summoned such a large band of men to the banquet because he intends to assassinate the king. From now on they seize every opportunity to misrepresent Þórólfr's actions to the king, insinuating that he is not to be trusted with the royal office. Gradually the king becomes convinced and orders Þórólfr to return to his service as his leading retainer. Thus Þórólfr has come off worse in his dealings with two forces, the hatred of Hildiríðr's sons and the paranoia of the king. Now his ability to control the third force will be put to the test; namely, his ability to restrain his own obstinacy and submit to authority, however unjust. He fails the test when the king invites him to become his head retainer (chapter 16):

Thorolf looked to either side where his own men were standing.

"I am reluctant to relinquish this band of men," he said. "You shall decide my title and the privileges you grant me, king, but I shall not hand over my band of men for as long as I can provide for them, even if I have to live by my own resources alone."<sup>28</sup>

With this response Þórólfr has effectively placed a weapon in the hands of Hildiríðr's sons, his attitude serving only to strengthen Haraldr's suspicions that he is a rival for power.

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28. *Egil's Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder and ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2004), 26. "Þórólfr sá til beggja handa sér. Þar stóðu húskarlar hans. Hann mælti: 'Trauðr mun ek af hendi láta sveit þessa; muntu ráða, konungr, nafngiptum við mik ok veislum þínum, en sveitunga mína mun ek ekki af hendi láta, meðan mér endask fǫng til, þótt ek véla um mína kosti eina.'" ÍF 2 (1933), 40. All Old Norse quotes from the saga are from the ÍF edition (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933)) unless otherwise indicated. The English renditions are from Bernard Scudder's 2004 translation, hereafter Scudder (2004).

But the sons of Hildiríðr must misrepresent yet another deed of Þórólfr's to the king before Haraldr can be provoked to take action against him. Þórólfr has been away in the wilderness over the summer like the sons of Hildiríðr, who excuse their lack of success at collecting tribute by lying that Þórólfr has been there before them and stolen the king's property. In proof of their accusations, they point out that Þórólfr has purchased a valuable cargo in England with the proceeds of his plundering. The king accordingly has the cargo of Þórólfr's ship examined and impounded.

Now Þórólfr is in a predicament because the last thing he wants to do is to "relinquish this band of men," although he must feed and clothe them, despite being short of money. He resorts to undertaking a raiding expedition in the Baltic but acquires little booty. On the way home one of the king's ships, loaded with valuable goods, crosses his path, and the temptation proves too great. Having seized the ship, Þórólfr makes matters worse by raiding the farm of Sigtryggr and Hallvarðr, the royal henchmen responsible for confiscating his vessel. One of their brothers is killed in the fray and the other has his arm chopped off. After this, Þórólfr carries out widespread raids in Haraldr's domains, an action that shows him to be guilty of intemperance, as his father points out (chapter 19): "Now you have taken the course that I cautioned you against most of all, by challenging King Haraldr."<sup>29</sup> The die is cast. Haraldr attacks Þórólfr's farm when the latter is on the point of leaving the country. Þórólfr is offered the chance to give himself up to Haraldr but refuses, thereby demonstrating that he would rather compete with the king than submit to him. His dying words are proof: "I took three steps too few here."<sup>30</sup> Had he managed to take three more steps, he would have been within striking distance of the king.

This part of the saga works out beautifully. There are no extraneous elements in the story of the rise and fall of a valiant man who is unable to defend himself against the king's anger; the intrigues of those who believe he has cheated them of their rights; and ultimately, his own lack of moderation. The narrative shows strong affinities with the greatest classical tragedies, featuring a hero who is a victim

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29. Scudder (2004), 49. "Hefir þú nú þat ráð upp tekit, er ek varaða þik mest við, er þú etr kappi við Harald konung." ÍF 2:32.

30. Scudder (2004), 54. "Nú gekk ek þremr fótum til skammt." ÍF 2:36.

both of circumstance and of his own character traits, traits that are simultaneously virtues and flaws.<sup>31</sup> Few if any loose ends remain.<sup>32</sup>

Having demonstrated the artistry of the first part of *Egils saga*, we are bound to ask whether the author or authors were equally successful in the second part. Many have found it difficult to see causal connections between events in Egill's life. An example of this seeming lack of coherence is how the tale of Þorsteinn Egilsson's feud with Steinar Sjónason does not seem to fit in with the overall plot. I will first take an in-depth look at Þorsteinn's tale in order to uncover its relationship to other strands of the saga, before addressing the general problem of the coherence of the saga's account of Egill's life.

### *Þorsteinn's Tale*

The chapters devoted to Þorsteinn Egilsson in *Egils saga* (chapters 82 to 87) have long been regarded by scholars as problematic. Þorsteinn's tale has been seen as stylistically compressed and composed in a spirit different from that of the preceding matter. Quite a few critics have claimed, with varying degrees of conviction, that it cannot have been included in the first version of the saga.<sup>33</sup> The manuscript evidence does not support this contention, however, since the tale is present in all the manuscripts that preserve the end

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31. For the attributes of a tragic hero, see *Aristotle on the Art of Fiction: An English Translation of Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. and trans. L. J. Potts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 33–34.

32. There is, however, one interesting loose end. Bárðr Brynjólfsson had a son called Grímr with Sigríðr of Sandnes. Bárðr entrusted him to Þórólfr's care but the saga does not relate what happens to him. Given the importance of the name Grímr in the saga and the fact that he is heir to property that is in the hands of an unrelated stepfather, it is tempting to see a link here to one of the saga's main preoccupations, which will be discussed later in this book, i.e. the withholding of an inheritance. Amusingly, in his edition of *Egils saga*, Sigurður Nordal felt compelled to plug what he believed to be a gap in the sources the author relied on by noting that Þórólfr would no doubt have paid out the boy's inheritance, had he survived; see *Egils saga* (1933), 24.

33. In 1980 Ralph West performed a statistical analysis comparing the style of *Egils saga* with other works by Snorri Sturluson. He concluded that the latter part of the saga differed from the earlier part and from other works by Snorri. See Ralph West, "Snorri Sturluson and *Egils saga*: Statistics of Style," *Scandinavian Studies* 52, 2 (1980): 191. Vésteinn Ólason seems to concur with this view in his "Íslendingasögur og þættir," in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 2 (1993), 92, where he implies that Snorri may not have finished compiling the saga before he was killed at Reykholt.



of the saga.<sup>34</sup> In my own view the internal coherence of Þorsteinn's tale points strongly to its being an integral part of *Egils saga*.

We have already mentioned how the first events in the story of the dispute between Þorsteinn and Steinar follow on logically from one to the next. Steinar pastures his cattle on Þorsteinn's land despite the latter's embargo, so Þorsteinn kills two of his slaves. Next, believing he can win a case against Þorsteinn at the assembly if he can drum up the support of powerful men, Steinar applies to the other two *goðar* or chieftains of the region, Einarr of Stafaholt and Tungu-Oddr Önundarson. He offers them a financial bribe and they agree in return to support him. Þorsteinn, who as it happens is also a *goði*, is summoned but takes the precaution of sending messengers south to his father, who is living in his old age with his stepdaughter Þórdís at Mosfell. When the time for the assembly arrives, Egill turns up fully armed with a large band of fighting men from Suðurnes, which causes Önundr sjóni, Steinar's father and Egill's former companion on his adventures abroad, to intervene on behalf of his son, granting Egill right of sole judgment in the case between Þorsteinn and Steinar. Once this has been agreed, Egill pronounces the verdict that Steinar is to move away from the lands neighboring Þorsteinn's and that he is to receive no compensation for his slaves. Father and son are unhappy with Egill's decision but are powerless to object. Þorsteinn, meanwhile, thanks his father for his help.

Þorsteinn's troubles with Steinar are not over, however. Once, when Þorsteinn is traveling through the region, he receives intelligence that Steinar has laid an ambush for him. He reacts by finding an excuse to take a different route, thus avoiding conflict. On a

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34. One possible argument in support of this theory is that the saga provides the same information about Þorsteinn in two different places using almost identical phrasing. This could indicate that the saga originally finished at the end of chapter 83 and that what follows is a later interpolation. At the end of chapter 83 we find the following comment: "*Frá þorinum Þorsteins er komin kynslóð mikil ok mart stórmenni, þat er kallat Mýramannakyn, allt þat er frá Skalla-Grími er komit*" (ÍF 2:276; emphasis added). While in chapter 90 we find: "*Frá Þorsteimi er mikil ætt komin ok mart stórmenni ok skáld mǫrg, ok er þat Mýramannakyn, ok svá allt þat er komit er frá Skalla-Grími*" (ÍF 2:299; emphasis added). The similarities are emphasized here. The theory that Þorsteinn's tale is a later addition receives some further support from the above-mentioned observations by Ralph West. But the difference in vocabulary and repetition of information can also be explained as the work of scribal copyists.

second occasion, Steinar takes Þorsteinn by surprise and they fight a battle in which both lose their ten-year-old sons. Steinar then tries yet again to ambush Þorsteinn, this time alone, but their neighbor and Þorsteinn's kinsman, Lambi Þórðarson, turns up in the nick of time and restrains Steinar until Þorsteinn has ridden past. After this Þorsteinn sends word to Steinar, warning him that unless he leaves the region he will be killed. Steinar obeys and is now out of the story.

This tale of conflict is perfectly logical. Beginning with small skirmishes, it escalates into a lawsuit involving the most powerful men in the region. The loser tries repeatedly to avenge himself until it is made clear to him that he has no choice but to give up. It should be noted that this story has an analogue in another section of the saga, in the account of the causes of the Battle of Vínheiðr. There, Edward, King of England, has died and been succeeded by his inexperienced young son Athelstan. Those who resent the relatively new monarchic status of the English royal dynasty now see their chance to rise up against Athelstan (chapter 50).<sup>35</sup> There is a clear correlation between this situation and Þorsteinn's dispute with Steinar in the sense that a new chieftain has succeeded his father and those who were subordinate to the old chieftain now want to test the new leader's strength of will. Some may find it far-fetched to compare the men of Mýrar's skirmishings over grazing land with the struggle for the English kingdom, but the same pattern underlies both conflicts. A further similarity is that both power bases have been relatively recently acquired. Athelstan's grandfather Alfred was the first sole ruler of England, according to the saga, while Skallagrímur, Þorsteinn's grandfather, was the original colonizer of Borgarfjörður.

Egill refers specifically to the colonization when pronouncing the settlement between Þorsteinn and Steinar and significantly uses here the same arguments as those that, according to the saga, underpin the system of vassalage established by monarchs (chapter 85):

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35. "After Athelstan's succession, some of the noblemen who had lost their realms to his family started to make war on him, seizing the opportunity to claim them back when a young king was in control." Scudder (2004), 89. "En er Aðalsteinn hafði tekit konungdóm, þá hófusk upp til ófriðar þeir hofðingjar er áðr hofðu látit ríki sín fyrir þeim langfeðgum, þótti nú, sem dælst mundi til at kalla er ungr konungr réð fyrir ríki." ÍF 2:128.

Then I will pronounce the settlement between Steinar and Thorstein: I will begin my statement with my father Grim's arrival in Iceland, when he took all the land in Myrar and around the district and made his home at Borg. He designated that land for his farm, but gave his friends the outlying lands which they settled later. He gave Ani a place to live at Anabrekka, where Onund and Steinar have lived until now.<sup>36</sup>

Once a man has received land from another man, he is subordinate to him. That is the chief principle on which the monarchy is based, according to the saga's description of Haraldr's conquest of Norway, whereby he takes possession of the whole country and the landholders become his tenants (chapter 4).<sup>37</sup> The saga therefore gives us reason to see a parallel between Þorsteinn and Athelstan. They are both young and inexperienced and consequently are considered easier to deal with than their fathers or grandfathers. It is said of Athelstan in chapter 51 that when he "ascended to the throne at an early age he was considered less imposing a figure and many people who had once served the king became disloyal."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, it has emerged that Þorsteinn is a smaller, weaker man than his forefathers, and modest into the bargain (chapter 82). Although it is nowhere explicitly stated, the internal causality of *Egils saga* implies that Steinar intended to reverse the order of precedence of the men of Ánabrekka and Borg, and that Tungu-Oddr and Einarr supported him in order to change the power ratio within the region.

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36. Scudder (2004), 195. "Þá vil ek lúka upp sættargörð milli þeirra Steinars ok Þorsteins; hef ek þar upp þat mál, er Grímr, faðir minn, kom hingat til lands ok nam hér öll lönd um Mýrar ok víða 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; hann gaf Ána bústað at Anabrekku, þar sem Öundur ok Steinar hafa hér til búit." ÍF 2:287.

37. "In each province King Harald took over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited, and even the sea and lakes. All the farmers were made his tenants, and everyone who worked the forests and dried salt, or hunted on land or at sea, was made to pay tribute to him." Scudder (2004), 7. "Haraldr konungr eignaðisk í hverju fylki óðul öll ok allt land, byggt ok óbyggt, ok jafnvel sjóinn ok vötnin, ok skyldu allir búendr vera hans leiglendingar, svá þeir, er á mörkina ortu ok saltkarlarnir ok allir veiðimenn, bæði á sjó ok landi, þá váru allir þeir honum lýðskyldir." ÍF 2:11-12.

38. Scudder (2004), 90. "Aðalsteinn konungr kom ungur til ríkis, ok þótti af honum minni ógn standa; gerðusk þá margir ótryggvir, þeir er áðr váru þjónustufullir." ÍF, 2:129.



Thus the dispute between Þorsteinn and Steinar, far from revolving solely around grazing rights on a bog, serves as a testing ground to ascertain whether Þorsteinn is capable of maintaining the authority that his father and grandfather held in the region.

Various readers of the saga have felt that Egill betrays serious bias in denying Steinar compensation for his slaves and moreover having him banished from his lands. Several people's sense of justice has also been offended by the fact that Önundr is an old friend of Egill's and as such declares that he will entrust his family affairs to Egill, who nevertheless imposes a costly sanction on the old man and his son. But they have not paid sufficient attention to what the saga itself has to say on this score. What is striking is its failure to reveal whether Önundr has had any involvement in his son's conduct towards Þorsteinn, until he himself claims that he has tried to bring about peace. Tellingly, this is not until after Egill has arrived at the assembly with his large retinue. Egill asks whether Önundr is present. When he shows himself, Egill asks (chapter 84):

“Are you responsible for the charges your son Steinar has brought against my son Thorstein and the forces he has gathered to have Thorstein declared an outlaw?”

“Their quarrel is none of my doing,” said Onund. “I have spent a lot of words telling Steinar to make a reconciliation with Thorstein, because I have always been reluctant to bring any dishonour upon your son Thorstein. The reason is our life-long friendship, Egil, ever since we were brought up here together.”

“It will soon emerge,” said Egil, “whether you are speaking earnest or empty words, although I consider the latter less likely.”<sup>39</sup>

Egill is implying that Steinar and his father may have conspired together to put pressure on Þorsteinn, though Önundr strongly

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39. Scudder (2004), 193. “Hvárt ræðr þú því, er Steinarr, sonr þinn, sækir sökum Þorstein, son minn, ok hefir dregið saman fjölmenni, til þess at gera Þorstein at urðarmanni?”

‘Því veld ek eigi,’ segir Önundr, ‘er þeir eru ósáttir. Hefi ek þar til lagt mörg orð ok beðið Steinar sættask við Þorstein, því at mér hefir verit í hvern stað Þorsteinn, sonr þinn, sparari til ósæmdar, ok veldr því sú hin forna ástvinátta, er með okkr hefir verit, Egill, síðan er við fæddumsk hér upp samtýnis.’

‘Brátt mun þat,’ segir Egill, ‘ljóst verða, hvárt þú mælir þetta af alvöru eða af hégóma þótt ek ætla þat síðr vera munu.’” ÍF 2:284–85.

denies the fact. When Egill invites the father and son to drop their dispute, Önuendr compels his son to agree to the verdict. At this point it is important to examine closely Önuendr's words to Steinar: "I have made the decisions on our behalf until now, and that's the way it shall stay."<sup>40</sup> Whereas previously he claimed that Steinar had been acting against his advice, here Önuendr gives himself away by stating that he has decided matters for them both up to now. Penetrating readers are evidently expected to see here an example of the character trait that Egill thanks Óðinn for having granted him in his poem "Sonatorrek": the "nature / that I could reveal / those who plotted against me / as my true enemies" (stanza 24), in other words, his ability to perceive who his enemies are, even when they are trying to deceive him.<sup>41</sup>

This explains why Egill comes down so hard on father and son. He perceives that his old comrade has been exposed as hostile to his son and himself. Önuendr's eagerness for reconciliation can be put down to the fact that Egill has turned up with such a large band of men that it is unlikely father and son would be able to take him on, even with the support of the other *goðar*.<sup>42</sup>

A long section of the saga, which has generally been considered problematic, is thus explained if we look carefully at the causality created within the text. It is interesting to note that this tale has to some extent been prepared for earlier—sometimes much earlier—in the saga, by the introduction of Önuendr sjóni, by Egill's ability to see through those who hide their deception under fair words, and by the description of Þorsteinn's peaceable nature and small stature in comparison to others of his kin.

It also applies to another aspect of this narrative that has yet to

40. Scudder (2004), 194. "Hefi ek enn hér til ráðit fyrir okkur, ok skal enn svá vera." ÍF 2:285–86.

41. Scudder (2004), 176. ". . . ok þat geð / es ek gerða mér / vísa fjandr / af vélöndum." ÍF 2:256.

42. This probably explains another of the saga's very few loose ends, or elements that appear in the story without apparently serving any purpose. Önuendr is introduced in chapter 69 where it is said that he goes abroad with Egill on his third voyage. He is not mentioned again until the end of chapter 72 where it is reported that he does not join Egill's mission to Varmland because he was away when the summons arrived. It is difficult to see why this information is included in the saga unless it has the sole purpose of toning down Egill's friendship with Önuendr; although he traveled with Egill, Önuendr was not there when it came to the crunch.

be mentioned. Although the main subject of the tale is Þorsteinn's feud with Steinar, it is also concerned with Þorsteinn's reconciliation with his father, though this is never made explicit. When Þorsteinn is introduced in the saga (chapter 82), Egill is said to have little love for this son, and the feeling is apparently mutual. Next we are told how Þorsteinn ruins the silk cloak that Arinbjörn gave Egill, and Egill's reaction. Father and son are still estranged when the dispute arises with Steinar, but after Egill has helped Þorsteinn, it is said that they "parted on warm terms" (chapter 86).<sup>43</sup> The dispute has thus provided a chance for father and son to improve their relationship.

At this stage it is worth mentioning a significant feature of the internal structure, which is the way in which other parts of the saga can apparently shed light on what is happening at any given point. An example of this is the parallel noted above between Þorsteinn and King Athelstan of England, both of whom are forced to deal with subordinates intent on taking advantage of their youth. The account of the silk cloak is an even better example, as it has a parallel in Egill's last conversation with his own father. Skallagrímur accuses Egill of having divided up his inheritance before he is even dead, which is exactly what Egill complains of in the verse he recites after opening his chest and seeing what has happened to his cloak (chapter 55):

I had little need of an heir  
to use my inheritance.  
My son has betrayed me  
in my lifetime, I call that treachery.  
The horseman of the sea  
could well have waited  
for other sea-skiers  
to pile rocks over me.<sup>44</sup>

"I had no need of my heir," says Egill in the stanza. "My son deceived me while I was still alive. He might have waited until I was dead and buried in my mound." By this means a parallel between

43. Scudder (2004), 197. ". . . skildust . . . með blíðskap." ÍF 2:288.

44. Scudder (2004), 186–87. "Áttkak erfínytja / arfa mér til þarfan, / mik hefr sonr of svíkvinn, / svík telk í því, kvikvan; / vel mátti þess vatna / viggríðandi bíða, / es hafskiða hlæði / hljótendr of mik grjóti." ÍF 2:274.



Þorsteinn's quarrel with Egill and Egill's quarrel with his father is drawn, the difference being that Þorsteinn and Egill are reconciled before Egill dies, something the latter did not achieve with Skalla-grímr. So this account can be said to restore the equilibrium in the relations between the generations, which Egill's difficult relationship with his father had upset.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that Þorsteinn's dispute with his neighbor has a logical connection with other elements of the saga. However, one point has yet to be raised, which may explain why people have had problems in seeing how the tale fits into the saga as a whole. That is the contrast between Þorsteinn's behavior and what we would have expected of his father, grandfather or great-grandfather. Þorsteinn is incredibly slow to react to provocation and there is nothing heroic about his battles with Steinar and his slaves. He does not try to avenge his son, nor does he even evince a wish to do so. Moreover, the account of how Lambi Þórðarson physically restrains Steinar while Þorsteinn rides past is completely at odds with the spirit of the saga hitherto. Nevertheless, Þorsteinn's conduct accords well with the description of his character given in an earlier chapter (chapter 82): "Þorsteinn was a wise and peaceful man, a model of modesty and self-control."<sup>45</sup> This last quality probably provides the best explanation for the contrast between his behavior and that of his father or grandfather. He seeks to avoid trouble and has his temper well under control; even after his son has been killed he gives Steinar another chance to emerge from their dispute with his life intact.

There is still more behind this description of Þorsteinn than has been touched on here, as will become apparent if we consider the earlier account of his killing of the slave Þrándr. Steinar has purchased Þrándr with the intention of using him to kill Þorsteinn (chapter 83):

Steinar gave Thrand a big axe, measuring almost one ell across the head of the blade and razor-sharp.

"From the look of you, I can't tell how highly you would think of the fact that Thorstein is a godi, if the two of you met face to face," Steinar added.

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45. Scudder (2004), 186. "Þorsteinn var vitr maðr ok kyrrlát, hógværr, stilltr manna bezt." ÍF 2:274.

Thrand answered, “I don’t owe Thorstein any loyalty, but I think I realise the job you’re asking me to do. You don’t reckon you have much to lose in me. But when Thorstein and I put our strength to the test, whichever of us wins will be a worthy victor.”<sup>46</sup>

Although Þrándr is much stronger and better armed, Þorsteinn does not hesitate to meet him alone. Þrándr acts arrogantly, almost openly threatening Þorsteinn, but Þorsteinn replies as follows (chapter 83): “That’s a risk I’m prepared to take if you don’t do anything about the cattle grazing. I trust there’s as much difference between our fortunes as there is between our claims in this matter.”<sup>47</sup> To show Þorsteinn that he is not intimidated by him, Þrándr lays down his axe while he is doing up his shoelaces, whereupon Þorsteinn chops off his head. This is the act neither of a coward nor of an overbearing man; Þorsteinn simply has no alternative. If he hesitates, Þrándr will almost certainly kill him, if he flees he will lose face. He does what is necessary, just as later he is ready to attack Steinar in force, should he refuse to leave the region.

The words *hamingja*, “good fortune, luck,” and *málaefni*, “a cause, the circumstances of a case,” in Þorsteinn’s answer are significant. The former crops up several times in *Egils saga*, particularly in association with Haraldr Finehair. Kveld-Úlfr regards it as inadvisable to attack the king because their own king, who leads the uprising, has *eigi krepping fullan*, “not enough [fortune] to fill the palm of his hand,” while Haraldr has *byrði nóga*, “plenty of good fortune” (chapter 3). The word occurs again in the same part of the saga, only this time it is put into Haraldr’s mouth. After Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson has raided the farm of Hallvarðr and Sigtryggr, killing one of their brothers and mutilating the other, they request permission to attack him in retaliation. The king replies (chapter 21): “You may think

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46. Scudder (2004), 189. “Steinarr seldi í hendr Þrándi ǫxi mikla, nær álnar fyrir munn, ok var hon hárhvǫss. ‘Svá lísk mér á þik, Þrándr,’ segir Steinarr, ‘sem eigi sé sýnt hversu mikils þú metr goðorð Þorsteins, ef þit sjáizk tveir á.’ Þrándr svarar: ‘Engan vanda ætla ek mér á við Þorstein, en skilja þykkjumk ek, hvert verk þú hefir fyrir mik lagt; mantu þykkjask litlu til verja, þar sem ek em; en ek ætla mér vera góðan kost, hvárr sem upp kemr, ef vit Þorsteinn skulum reyna með okkr.’” ÍF 2:279.

47. Scudder (2004), 190–91. “‘Á þá hættu mun ek leggja, ef þú gerir eigi at um beitina; vænti ek, at mikit skili hamingju okkra, svá sem málaefni eru ójǫfn.’” ÍF 2:280.

there are grounds for taking Þórólfr's life, but I feel you badly lack the good fortune to perform that deed."<sup>48</sup> When the king finally gives in and lets them go, they experience adverse winds, whereas Haraldr himself is able to take Þórólfr by surprise, apparently possessing more *hamingja* than Sigtryggr and Hallvarðr, or indeed Þórólfr.

*Hamingja* thus seems to indicate some sort of relationship with the power that decides human destinies.<sup>49</sup> Some leaders have this quality that enables them to triumph over others. Þórólfr has more *hamingja* than the two brothers, but less than Haraldr, which is consistent with the position that Egill's family seems to occupy in the saga: they do not have quite what it takes to be royal but are well fitted for ruling over populous regions. This, more than anything else, explains Þorsteinn's *hamingja*. He was born to deal with men like Þrándr. Yet it is worth noting that here *hamingja*, or good fortune, is somehow linked to the concept of justice, which brings us to the second word, *málaefni*. Hermann Pálsson pointed out that the Latin phrase *justa causa*, "just cause," was translated in the following way in a thirteenth-century Norse rendition from Latin: "Það er gott og rétt málaefni, að menn halli ekki dómi, styðji rétt málaefni en felli röng, eftir lögum og guðs rétti og manna" (It is a good and just cause that men should not give an unfair judgment, that they should support just causes and abandon unjust ones, according to the laws and justice of God and man).<sup>50</sup> This word, then, is used in reference to disputes between individuals and to the justice or injustice of their causes. In the *þáttr* of Bishop Jón Halldórsson, for instance, it is used as follows to describe a just chieftain: "Hann virði jafnan meira málaefni en mútur eða mannemun" (He invariably respects a just cause more than bribes or men's relative status).<sup>51</sup>

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48. Scudder (2004), 34. "Vera munu ykkur þykkja sakar til, þó at þit ráðit Þórólfr af lífi, en ek ætla, að ykkur skorti mikit hamingju til þess verks." ÍF 2:50.

49. Hermann Pálsson, "Hamingja í íslenskum fornsögum og siðfræði miðalda," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 35, 1–2 (1974): 80–86; Gehl, *Der germanische Schicksalsglaube* (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1939); Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic*, FF Communications 296–297 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2009), 228.

50. Hermann Pálsson, *Uppruni Njálu og bugmyndir* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1984), 59. See also Alcuin, *De virtutibus et vitiis i norsk-islandsk overlevering: Og Udvidelser til Jonsbogens kapitler om dome*, ed. Ole Widding, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Series A 4 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1960), 147.

51. *Þáttur Jóns byskups Halldórssonar, in Byskupasögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), 1:467.



In Þorsteinn's tale, the word *hamingja* is related to the idea of having a just cause, a meaning that does not apply to the earlier examples in the saga. This usage is not unique in saga literature. In *Ljósvetninga saga*, for instance, we are told that a man called Þórir challenges Guðmundr of Möðruvellir to single combat. As they are very differently matched in physical strength and skill with weapons, it seems unlikely that Guðmundr will survive the fight. Yet when asked about the likely outcome of the duel, he says: “Ætla ek, at hamingja ok góð málaefni munu skipta með okkr hólmgöngunni” (I think good fortune and the right cause will determine the outcome of the duel between us).<sup>52</sup> In both cases, the words contain an implicit reliance on the idea that the powers governing men's fates will secure victory for the man who has justice on his side. In the event, Guðmundr is spared the duel in *Ljósvetninga saga*, while Þorsteinn is given a chance to dispatch Þrándr in *Egils saga*.

This begs the question whether the *hamingja* Þorsteinn refers to is linked somehow to the idea that justice is on his side and even of a divine nature. In one of King Sverrir's speeches in *Sverris saga*, the word *hamingja* is unambiguously associated with divine will. Sverrir is speaking of his enemies, Earl Erlingr skakki and his son Magnús, who has been crowned king:

There is good reason to suppose that Fortune has abandoned them, and they have come to the end of their days; but we shall win victory and honour, as is our due. Thus shall God decide between us and them. For a long time they have held possession of what is ours; maybe they will now lose what aforesaid they wrongfully seized, and will lose life as well.<sup>53</sup>

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52. *Ljósvetninga saga með þáttum*, ed. Björn Sigfússon, Íslenzk fornrit 10 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1959), 40; trans. Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller as *The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn in The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales*, gen. ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 4:222.

53. *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway (Sverrisaga)*, trans. John Sephton, (London: David Nutt, 1899), 46. “Þess þykki mér ok meiri ván at þeir sé nú hamingjulausir, ok mun komit að endadegi þeira lífstunda. En vér munum fá sigr ok sœmilega tign, sem oss byrjar. Mun Guð svá skipta með oss, því at þeir hafa lengi yfir váru ríki ok sœmðum setið, ok kann nú vera at þeir missi er með röngu fengu, bæði sœmðanna ok ríkis. Er ok eigi ólíklegt at þar með týni þeir nú lífinu.” Karl Jónsson, *Sverris saga*, ed. Þorleifur Hauksson, Íslenzk fornrit 30 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2007), 57–58.

It should be borne in mind that *Egils saga* states explicitly that Þorsteinn converted to Christianity when the religion reached Iceland. Therefore the intention here may be for the reader to understand that Þorsteinn trusts in God to save his life, since justice is on his side; in other words, that he puts his faith in divine providence. It may seem an unlikely explanation for Þorsteinn's behavior, but in favor of this interpretation is the foolish risk he takes in opting to ride with a single companion from Álfanes home to Borg after Steinar has recently attacked him with a band of armed men. This time his *hamingja* manifests itself in the shape of Lambi Þórðarson who restrains Steinar, preventing him from attacking Þorsteinn with the sword Skrímir. The name of Þorsteinn's savior is probably not chosen at random, as will be seen when we examine this incident in more detail in the next chapter, but for the present, suffice it to conclude that Þorsteinn's tale displays a rich internal coherence, as well as corresponding to other parts of the saga in both form and content.

### Coherence in Egill's life

*Egils saga* is above all the biography of Egill Skallagrímsson, and the sections of the saga we have discussed hitherto serve as prologue and epilogue to the roughly fifty chapters that trace his long, eventful life. We might expect the saga of such a man to be full of incidents that, far from being connected, are random like those we know from our own lives. At first sight this seems true of Egill, as it is hard to see any causal connection between such remote events as the *Höfuðlausn* episode in York (chapters 60 to 62) and Egill's mission to Varmland (chapters 72 to 77), or between Skallagrím's sons' raiding expeditions in Kúrland (chapter 46) and their decision to go to England (chapter 49). It is also hard to discern any strands linking the fall of Þórólfr Skallagrímsson in England (chapter 54) with the drowning of Böðvarr Egilsson in Borgarfjörður (chapter 79).

However, Egill is a character in a saga; in other words, the details of his life have been selected and arranged by someone who, as we have seen, knew the art of constructing a complicated sequence of events in which each element forms part of a single, integrated plotline. It has also emerged that he took as much care over the ordering of the narrative elements in the later part of the saga

that relates to Egill as he did in the earlier part. It seems a fair assumption, then, that Egill's life story is as coherent as the tale of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson. Let us therefore examine the skill as a chess-player involved in the composition of this part of the saga, to discover whether as much care is taken here in positioning pieces and preparing events in advance as in the first part.

Immediately after describing the antics of the three-year-old Egill in the first chapter of the second part of the saga, the focus shifts to Björn Brynjólfsson, who, having abducted Þóra hlaðhönd, sister of Þórir hersir, flees to Iceland, where their daughter Ásgerðr is born and subsequently reared at Borg (chapters 32 to 33). The seeds have been sown here for a lawsuit over Ásgerðr's legitimacy as an heir that will come to fruition much later in the saga (chapter 57). Further preparations are made for the lawsuit in chapter 35, which tells of Björn's reconciliation with Þóra's kinsmen, and again at the end of chapter 37, where Berg-Önundr and his brothers are introduced, and finally at the beginning of chapter 56, where we are told that Berg-Önundr marries Ásgerðr's half-sister. The development of events is evidently firmly controlled and preparations made in advance for an episode that will not occur until twenty-five chapters and even more years later.

The same applies to a somewhat more cryptic but no less fateful sequence of events resulting in Þórólfr's and Egill's taking service with King Athelstan in England. When Egill first accompanies his elder brother to Norway as a youth, it does not take him long to get on the wrong side of Queen Gunnhildr and King Eiríkr Bloodaxe. He kills their steward, Atleyjar-Bárðr, thus nullifying the success in winning Eiríkr's friendship that Þórólfr had achieved on his first visit to Norway. The king seizes the chance to declare that he wants Egill out of Norway. Egill and Þórólfr therefore go raiding and plundering in Kúrland. In one attack Egill and his company become separated from the main force and are taken prisoner by their enemies. Egill manages to free himself and his men, as well as a rich man called Áki from Fynen in Denmark, whom the Kúrlanders have also taken captive. They escape, defeat the Kúrlanders, and make it back to Þórólfr and his band. After this the brothers head south, benefiting from Áki's guidance through Öresund and parting from him in Denmark after he has pledged them his friendship.



Now they head back to Norway and spend the winter there. But tension again sparks between the king and the brothers when Eyvindr skreyja, the queen's brother, kills one of Þórólfr's men and Þórólfr refuses to accept compensation. Eyvindr is exiled to Denmark and kept there under royal protection, while Þórólfr and Egill spend the summer raiding in Frísland. That autumn they intend to return to Norway, but one night, when the brothers have anchored their ships off the coast of Jutland, Áki's messengers come to Egill and warn him that Eyvindr is lying in wait for them with a superior force (chapter 49). Ordering his men to keep quiet, Egill sets sail in a single ship, takes Eyvindr by surprise at dawn and routs him and his men. When he returns he tells Þórólfr what has happened and Þórólfr replies: "Þetta ætla ek yðr svá hafa gort at oss mun ekki haustlangt ráð at fara til Nóregs," which can mean either "I think what you have done will make it inadvisable for us to go to Norway this autumn" or "I think you have done this *in order to make* it inadvisable to go to Norway this autumn."

This course of events has many interesting features. Once again many moves are thought through ahead. Egill becomes separated from Þórólfr and rescues Áki from captivity. Consequently, Áki owes a debt of gratitude to Egill but not to his brother, and so it is natural for him to send warning to Egill of Eyvindr's ambush and not to Þórólfr, although the latter commands the brothers' company. Events are so arranged subsequently that Eyvindr is sent to Denmark while the brothers go raiding farther south, which means they have to sail along the Danish coast on their way back to Norway in the autumn. An opportunity has thus been created for Egill to seize the initiative from Þórólfr and attack the Queen of Norway's brother.

The attack is carried out by Egill, and it is made clear that he does not inform Þórólfr of his plans. Whether this is to take Eyvindr by surprise or to conceal his movements from Þórólfr is uncertain, but many things point to the latter alternative. Egill orders his men to be quiet before they set off, and the only obvious explanation is that he does not want to have to seek Þórólfr's approval for his decision. Yet there are more compelling reasons for his action, though they are not as obvious, which can be deduced from Þórólfr's words cited above. He points out that the attack on Eyvindr will mean that the brothers cannot over-winter in Norway. This is of

greater significance for Þórólfr than for Egill because his young wife Ásgerðr is waiting for him there. His comment is ambiguous in the way it is articulated in Old Icelandic, meaning either that they will not be able to return to Norway due to the repercussions of Egill's attack on Eyvindr, or that Egill has acted in this way deliberately in order to prevent their going there.

A complicated sequence of events has thus placed Egill in a position to have a decisive influence on the brothers' future. The question is whether Egill's behavior should be placed in an even wider context. After he refuses as a three-year old to remain at home while his parents and elder brother go to a feast, he is not mentioned again until after the account of Þórólfr's first overseas journey, his homecoming, and the news that he intends to go abroad again, taking Ásgerðr with him. Ásgerðr is Skallagrímr's and Bera's foster-daughter, besides being of noble family in Norway and the heir to a large property as the daughter of Björn and Þóra. After the news of Þórólfr's and Ásgerðr's planned voyage abroad, there is an interlude while the narrative turns to Skallagrímr's treatment of an axe the king has sent him, followed by the account of Ketill blundr's settlement. Then two incidents are described that occurred some time before and may be called Egill's boyhood antics, the second of which has recently occurred when Þórólfr returns home. When it emerges that Þórólfr intends to go abroad again, Egill asks to be allowed to go with him, but when his request is refused, he reacts very badly indeed.

This type of flashback is unique in the saga, which as a rule reports events in chronological order. We might well ask why such a device has been employed here. Previously it has been pointed out that narratives of settlers called Ketill serve as staging posts marking the beginning and end of Egill's adventures abroad. Why not tell of Egill's misdemeanors at the time he committed them? As so often in the saga, we can think of two answers to this question. In the first place, a new section is beginning in which Egill will be the central character. The saga recounts how Egill killed his first man at the age of seven and did not hesitate at twelve to avenge the death of his friend and nurse by killing his father's foreman. These episodes give the reader important information about Egill's personality, which is further illuminated by the fact that he will apparently stop at nothing to achieve his aim of going abroad with Þórólfr.

Another explanation is also possible, however: attention is being diverted from what really lies behind Egill's determination to go abroad with his brother. When the flashback ends and we return to Þórólfr's imminent departure for Norway, there is no mention that Ásgerðr is accompanying him. She is not referred to again until some time later, when they have arrived in Norway and Þórólfr escorts her home to her father. There are many indications that Þórólfr's intention to take her abroad with him is of more consequence for Egill than is directly stated in the text. This gradually becomes apparent as the saga progresses. Shortly after their arrival in Norway, Þórólfr asks for Ásgerðr's hand in marriage and it is granted, but when the wedding is due to take place Egill falls ill and does not attend. Some time later, after Þórólfr's death in England, Egill himself marries Ásgerðr, acquiring along with her his brother's inheritance and the prospect of an inheritance from Björn höldr, Ásgerðr's father. His action in attacking Evyindr skreyja, without giving Þórólfr a chance to avoid conflict with a man who was, after all, the King of Norway's brother-in-law, may be part of this plotline: Egill does not want Þórólfr to spend the winter with Ásgerðr.<sup>54</sup>

The flashback that begins in chapter 39 presumably serves to delay the reader from making the connection regarding Egill's relationship with Þórólfr and Ásgerðr. He wants at all costs to hinder their marriage, and when not long afterward he gets a chance to prevent their being together, he seizes it. This decision, however, is to have fateful consequences, leading to the brothers' taking service with King Athelstan of England and ultimately to Þórólfr's death in battle. Egill's wish to marry Ásgerðr himself can now be realized, but only at the cost of his brother's life. If Egill's life is examined in this light, it is easy to understand why he declines Athelstan's offer to make him an important man in England and goes instead to Norway to seek out Ásgerðr. When Egill confides in his friend

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54. It is not the first time this point has been made. Sigurður Nordal writes that "Egill hefur unnað Ásgerði frá barnæsku og aldrei annarri konu. Lýsing þessi í *Eglu* er líklega hófsamasta ástarsaga, sem til er í heimbókmenntunum" (Egill has loved Ásgerðr from childhood and no other woman. This description in *Egils saga* is probably the most restrained love story in world literature) (*Íslensk menning*, Arfur Íslendinga (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1942), 169). Thomas Bredsdorff discusses the relationship of Egill and Ásgerðr in similar terms in *Kaos og kærlighed: En studie i islændingesagaers livsbillede* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1971), 28–30.



Arinbjörn that he wants to marry his brother's widow, the veil is stripped from the motivations for his earlier behavior. Now he is in a position to realize his hidden desire.

The saga's structure is thus extremely interesting. A causal connection is created in Egill's life but at the same time every effort is made to divert the reader's attention away from it. Nevertheless, there seems little doubt that what directs the action and lends it meaning is Egill's determination to have Ásgerðr, although his story is far from over when he marries her in chapter 56. The main events in the following chapters are his dispute with Berg-Önundr over Ásgerðr's inheritance, the resulting conflict with King Eiríkr, his trip to York, his journey to Varmland, and Böðvarr's drowning after Egill retires from traveling. These events are not visibly connected, but various factors point to their forming an integrated plotline that gives meaning to Egill's entire life story, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

### The Enigma of Egill

In chapter 56 it is said that Egill had long been out of sorts that winter. His friend Arinbjörn asks him why, evidently believing that Egill is still mourning for his brother. As so often, Egill's behavior is described—he is sitting with his head bowed into his cloak—but not explained. It is a riddle, both to the reader and to the other characters in the saga. The same applies to many incidents in the text, such as the occasion when Egill vomits in the face of Ármóðr skegg ("Beard") (chapter 72) or sits facing Athelstan after the Battle of Vínheiðr, fiddling with his sword and lowering one eyebrow while raising the other to the roots of his hair (chapter 55). The behavior of other characters in the saga is no less enigmatic, such as Skalla-grímr's action of sinking a chest of silver and a copper cauldron in *Krumskelda bog* (chapter 59).

We seem here to have uncovered another important characteristic of the saga, in addition to its formal external structure and strong internal coherence, which is the tendency to turn Egill's story into a riddle. Not until chapter 56, for instance, is an explanation offered for Egill's earlier behavior, and the reader really needs to retrace his steps in order to work out why Egill should ask for Ásgerðr's hand

after Þórólfr's death. This is not dissimilar to a riddle in which the solution is concealed in the manner of presentation. The question is whether the events described after Egill's homecoming from his first overseas journey are not part of that enigma.

Up to now I have concentrated on the structure of the saga. As in the analogy of a skeleton unearthed from the ground, the first step was to describe the saga structure as accurately as possible. Now it is time to use our knowledge of the saga's contemporary context to flesh out these bones and solve the enigma of Egill. This will be done by examining how meaning is generated in the saga by allusion, both direct and indirect, to countless other texts that were known at the time of writing. Doing so also gives us an opportunity to understand better how the saga comes to life in the interaction between whoever composed it and his intended audience, the former directing the latter's attention to aspects of the narrative and their possible significance through intertextual allusion.