

CHAPTER 5

The Saga in Context

Anno 1241 . . . Death of Snorri Sturluson at Reykholt. He was a wise man, learned in many subjects, and a great and cunning chieftain. He was the first man in this country to allow estates, namely those at Bessastaðir and Eyvindarstaðir, to become property of the Crown. He compiled the Edda and many other books of lore, Icelandic stories. He was killed at Reykholt by Earl Gizurr's men.

—From the *Oddaverjaannáll*¹

It is commonly claimed that Snorri Sturluson wrote *Egils saga*, but since there is no evidence for the fact in contemporary sources and not one of the saga manuscripts names him as author, we would do well to begin by investigating the arguments in favor of his authorship.

The first suggestions that Snorri might be the author of *Egils saga* arose in the mid- nineteenth century from the observation of similarities between the saga and *Heimskringla*, which had been attributed to Snorri ever since it was first printed in Norway in the early seventeenth century. In reality, not a single work can be attributed to Snorri with any certainty, although the Icelandic Parliament in 2002 gave the matter its vote of confidence by sponsoring the publication of Snorri's "collected works," including

1. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Anno 1241 . . . Andlát Snorra Sturlusonar í Reykholti. Hann var maður vitur og margfróður; höfðingi mikill og slægvitur. Hann kom fyrstur manna eignum undir kong hér á landi, sem var Bessastaðir og Eyvindarstaðir. Hann samsetti Eddu og margar aðrar fræðibækur, íslenskar sögur. Hann var veginn í Reykholti af mönnum Gissurar jarls." *Íslandske annaler indtil 1580*, ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania: Norsk historisk kildeskriftfond, 1888), 481.

Egils saga among them.² The most difficult case to refute is Snorri's authorship of the *Prose Edda*, popularly known as *Snorra Edda*, since its final section, *Háttatal*, is purportedly the poem he composed in honor of Earl Skúli and King Hákon, and he is named as its author in a fourteenth-century manuscript of the *Edda*. No such identification is made in any of the manuscripts of *Heimskringla*. But the early-fourteenth-century compiler of the longer version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* seems to have been under the impression that Snorri had written at least the section of *Heimskringla* devoted to King Óláfr Tryggvason, as he generally mentions Snorri by name when citing that work.³ Similarly, the seventeenth-century publishers of *Heimskringla* are assumed to have based their attribution of the work to Snorri on information from a lost manuscript.⁴ Few doubt that Snorri composed sagas about kings, especially given the comments of his historian nephew, Sturla Þórðarson, cited earlier, but we cannot be sure that the version of *Heimskringla* that has been preserved for posterity is entirely Snorri's work.⁵

The Danish educator, poet, and writer N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) seems to have been the first to propose that both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* were written by the same man. Not only do the two works display marked similarities of style and narrative method, but also much of the action in *Egils saga* is located in Norway, bringing it closer in content to the kings' sagas than to many other *Íslendingasögur*. Since then a variety of arguments have been proposed in support of this view, by commentators such as Björn M. Ólsen and Sigurður Nordal, who pointed out that all three works attributed to Snorri bear witness to a strong interest in skaldic verse; that Snorri was descended from Egill through his

2. See Vésteinn Ólason's introduction to Snorri Sturluson, *Ritsafn*, ed. Helgi Bernóðusson et al. (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 2002). See also Guðrún Nordal, "Snorri, Egill og höfundurinn," *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (21 December 2002), and the response by Vésteinn Ólason and Örnólfur Thorsson, "Snorri og Egils saga," *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (1 February 2003).

3. See Ólafur Halldórsson's article "Sagnaritun Snorra Sturlusonar," in *Snorri: Átta alda minning* (1979), 123–27.

4. *Ibid.*, 120–23.

5. Jonna Louis-Jensen, "Heimskringla—Et værk af Snorri Sturluson?" *Nordica Bergensia* 14 (1997).

maternal grandfather, and that he rose to eminence in the region where Egill's descendants had been influential ever since the settlement. Ólsen drew attention to an interesting discrepancy between the different recensions of *Landnámabók*, which suggests that *Egils saga* seems to exaggerate the scale of Skallagrímr's settlement, a fact that Ólsen connected to Snorri's rise to power in the region at the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁶ Much later, in 1968, came Peter Hallberg's groundbreaking investigation of the vocabulary of saga literature, in which he reported on a statistical comparison of *Heimskringla* and five sagas about early Icelanders, among them *Egils saga*. According to his findings, the latter's vocabulary bore a far greater resemblance to the vocabulary of the kings' sagas than to that of *Njáls saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Grettis saga*, or *Laxdæla saga*.⁷ When Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, Örnólfur Thorsson, and their colleagues further developed Hallberg's research methodology a couple of decades later, they reached the same conclusion.⁸ Bjarni Einarsson also reviewed the arguments for Snorri's authorship of *Egils saga* in his 1975 book on the saga, contributing several new points that strengthen the hypothesis still further.⁹

As we have seen, Sturla Þórðarson is the only contemporary source for Snorri's saga-writing activities, but he did not specify any works in particular and there is nothing in the actual text of *Egils saga* to identify its author. Unfortunately, the annal entry cited at the beginning of this chapter, referring to "many other books of lore and Icelandic sagas" by Snorri, is so vague as to make it impossible to tell whether these were sagas about early Icelanders or Icelandic tales of Scandinavian kings. Nor is the entry particularly early, dating from the sixteenth century, although based on older sources,

6. Björn M. Ólsen, "Landnáma og Egils saga," *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1904); Sigurður Nordal, introd. to *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* (1933). On Ólsen's and Nordal's arguments and their dialogue with other scholars, see Vésteinn Ólason "Er Snorri höfundur Egils saga?" *Skírnir* 142 (1968).

7. Peter Hallberg, *Stilsignalment och författarskap i norrön sagalitteratur: Synpunkter och exempel*, Nordistica Gothoburgensia 3 (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1968).

8. Örnólfur Thorsson, "Orð af orði: Hefð og nýmæli í Grettlu," MA thesis, University of Iceland, 1994; see especially chapters 3–5.

9. Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (1975), 219–28.

some of which are now lost.¹⁰ It may be that further comparative studies of the type performed by Hallberg and his adherents, with an increased focus on stylistic features, would reinforce the theory that one of the Icelandic sagas “compiled” by Snorri was *Egils saga*. This type of methodology, used by art historians to establish whether paintings or sculptures are by specific individuals, could well be applied to *Egils saga*, but there is little hope that it will ever be possible to establish beyond doubt that the same author also composed the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskringla*.

My own investigation into the use of one particular stylistic feature is worth mentioning here as it seems to support the hypothesis. The phrase *ekki er þess getið*, “it is not mentioned,” crops up twice in *Egils saga*. In chapter 56 we learn of Egill’s homecoming after the death of Þórólfr and his wedding to Þórólfr’s widow Ásgerðr in Norway. He brings home two chests full of silver, compensation for Þórólfr from the English King Athelstan, which he is supposed to present to Skallagrímr as a wergild for his son, while part is to be shared among those kinsmen of Þórólfr whom Egill judges most deserving. He himself is to receive compensation for his brother in the form of land or wealth when he returns to the king’s court. But after his homecoming, the saga states: “Egill had an enormous amount of wealth, but it is not mentioned whether he ever shared the silver that King Athelstan had presented to him, either with Skallagrímr or anyone else.”¹¹

If whoever composed *Egils saga* were a historian reporting what was stated in his sources, we could take his words literally as indicating that he simply did not know whether Egill shared out the money or not, but a few chapters later it becomes apparent that this is not the case. There is perfect awareness that Egill has not given the silver to Skallagrímr, for in chapter 59 Skallagrímr confronts his son and demands his share of the money, whereupon

10. Jakob Benediktsson, “Annals (Iceland and Norway),” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano, Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages 1, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 934 (New York: Garland, 1993), 15–16.

11. Scudder (2004), 105. “Egill hafði þar ógrynni fjár, en ekki er þess getit, at Egill skipti silfri því, er Aðalsteinn konungr hafði fengit honum í hendr, hvárki við Skalla-Grím né aðra men.” ÍF 2:151.

Egill does his best to evade the issue. In response, Skallagrímr takes his own silver and sinks it in the Krumskelda bog, as described earlier in this study. He then goes home and dies sitting on the edge of his bed platform. Egill is summoned to perform the burial rites and duly inter his father's body in a mound. Once again, the same phrase is used: *Ekki er þess getit at lausafé væri lagt í haug hjá honum*, "It is not mentioned whether any money was put into his tomb."

In an earlier chapter, I suggested that there might be something more to the fact that no money was buried in Skallagrímr's mound, but the significant point here is the use of the stylistic device of avoiding a direct statement by claiming that there were no reports of the opposite. This is a clear case of authorial irony. By referring to the lack of evidence, the narrator of the saga is drawing attention in a humorous manner to one of Egill's most prominent character traits, his avarice. Egill keeps back Athelstan's silver because he wants it all for himself. Perhaps his failure to place money in his father's tomb can be attributed to the same motive, although an alternative possibility, explored in an earlier chapter of this book, is that he is afraid Skallagrímr will return to haunt him. Either way, the narrative voice in the saga is implying that Egill had not put a penny in the mound.

I have searched for the phrases *ekki er þess getið*, *þess er ekki getið*, *eigi er þess getið* and *þess er eigi getið* in the computerized concordance of Icelandic saga literature, which encompasses the *Íslendingasögur*, *þættir*, *Heimskringla*, *Snorra Edda*, *Sturlunga saga*, and *Landnámabók*.¹² It turns out that there are only four other instances of the phrase in texts included in the concordance. Two of these are from *Króka-Refs saga* and *Bolla þátrr Bollasonar*, which are believed to date from no earlier than 1300 and hence cannot be by Snorri or his contemporary.¹³ The other two examples occur in the *Gylfaginning* section of *Snorra Edda* and in *Óláfs saga helga* in

12. The concordance is the work of Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson, Örnólfur Thorsson, et al.

13. *Króka-Refs saga*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*. . . , ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslensk fornrit 14 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritfélag, 1959), 150; *Bolla þátrr*, in *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritfélag, 1934), 243.

Heimskringla, where the phrase is used in a narrative the evidence points to as being largely composed by whoever authored that work.

In *Gylfaginning*, the phrase is used in the well-known tale of Þórr's journey with his companions to visit Útgarda-Loki, related at the end of chapter 45. On their way they encounter the giant Skrýmir, who tricks them, much to their chagrin. When their ways finally part, Snorri says: "ok eigi er þess getit at Æsirnir bæði þá heila hittask" (and there is no report that the Æsir expressed hope for a happy reunion).¹⁴ This is clearly the same stylistic device; after the way Skrýmir has treated the Æsir, the desire to meet him again in good health must be the last thing on their minds. The ironic humor is a little more obvious here than in *Egils saga*.¹⁵

In *Óláfs saga helga*, the same rhetorical trick is used in the account of King Hrærekr, whom Óláfr has had blinded but nevertheless, for the sake of their kinship, keeps at his side in a manner befitting a king.¹⁶ A young relative of Hrærekr's is appointed his attendant, since it was a sign of honor to be attended by men of high birth, as is widely attested in our sources on the early thirteenth century.¹⁷ Hrærekr persuades his young kinsman to make an attempt on the king's life, but it misfires. After this, the blind king is given new attendants "og er þess eigi getið að þeir hafi verið af tignum ættum" ([and we] are not told that they were men of high birth).¹⁸ Commoners are chosen for the role because they are less likely to be persuaded by Hrærekr to assassinate the king. In the event, he is forced to make the next attempt himself but is again unsuccessful. The king now feels that he

14. *Edda. Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 39 (*Edda*, trans. and introd. Anthony Faulkes, Everyman Classics (London: Dent, 1987), 41).

15. In fact the phrase also occurs (without *þess*) in *Porgils saga og Haflíða*, a contemporary saga thought to date from the time of Snorri, though not written by him, where the context is almost identical to that in *Gylfaginning*. The *goði* of Vatnsfjörður leaves a wedding feast in a huff after coming off worse in an exchange of insults. The saga says: "Eigi er getið að neitt yrði að gjöfum." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:22. "It is not told that anyone spoke of giving gifts." *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 2:43.

16. This story is in chapter 81 of *Óláfs saga* in *Heimskringla* (1991), 1:333-34.

17. See, for example, the scene in *Íslendinga saga* by Sturla Þórðarson, where Sighvatr Sturluson teases his son Sturla Sighvatsson about his ambition to become an earl by claiming that the noblest men in the country will serve him (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:394).

18. *Heimskringla*, trans. Hollander (1964), 323.

can no longer keep Hrærekr at his court and banishes him to Iceland where he lives at Kálfskinn in Eyjafjörður until his death, the only king to be buried in Icelandic soil.¹⁹

In other words, the ironic use of the phrase *eigilekki er þess getið*, implying the existence of records while simultaneously emphasizing comic aspects of the characters or their situations, seems comparatively rare in saga literature. Given that it is a fairly sophisticated literary device, the temptation is to suppose that it was a particular authorial trait later writers, such as those who wrote *Bolla þátrr* or *Króka-Refs saga*, may have imitated. We can therefore add it to the arguments in favor of Snorri's authorship of *Egils saga*, with the caveat that further research of this kind is needed before the results can be considered appropriately significant.

Attitude to the Discourse

One advantage of such stylistic arguments for authorship over the arguments cited earlier is that they are based on a particular brand of humor, and, as everyone knows, humor is highly personal. Irony of this kind, which is fairly rare in the sagas, is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it is evidence of an attitude toward humanity typified by gentle mockery of men's faults. The Icelandic writer Guðbergur Bergsson has described irony as "tempered mockery":

Tempered mockery may escape the reader on the first reading, but the translator must nevertheless risk it in the hope that the work will be read again and that someone will discover the depth of the mockery. Mockery that cuts deeply tends to have an undertone of tragedy, of man's sorrow and defenselessness when confronted with himself and his own nature.²⁰

Irony has the additional quality of creating a sense of complicity between the saga's narrator and his reader/audience. To clarify, let

19. For other accounts of Hrærekr, see Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's introduction to the second volume of his edition of *Heimskringla*, 3 vols., Íslenzk fornrit 26–28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941–51), 2:lx.

20. Trans. Victoria Cribb. Guðbergur Bergsson, "Um þýðingar," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 44, 5 (1983): 499.

me refer to the communication model devised by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson in 1960. He claimed that all communications, from the simplest messages to the most sophisticated, polysemous works of art, consist of six basic elements. The first three are self-evident: the sender and receiver of the message and the message itself. But Jakobson deemed these insufficient, adding three further elements: first, what he refers to as the code, that is, the key or knowledge common to the sender and receiver of a specific sign or language that enables the former to compose the message and the latter to decipher it.²¹ One example of this is the traffic code that dictates that a green light means go and a red light means stop. Another example is the English language that enables us to read this book. Yet another is the specialist knowledge of Norse mythology that is a prerequisite for deciphering skaldic verse.

Second, a communication invariably refers to a given context that the receiver must know in order to decode it. One example of this is the sentence: "I'll see you tomorrow at John's house." To understand this message, the receiver needs to know when it was sent in order to work out when "tomorrow" is. He also needs to know John's address, but above all he needs to know who sent the message, namely, the identity of "I." The final element intrinsic to all messages is the medium or channel, whether it is a voice, written text, picture, or, in the case of traffic signals, a colored light.

Ironic communications are characterized by a special relationship between sender and receiver, since the sender sends a message that the receiver must interpret by reversing or otherwise transforming the meaning in obedience to clues provided in the context. The ironic use of the phrase referred to above, which seems to have been an authorial trait shared by both Snorri Sturluson and the narrator of *Egils saga*, requires the same attitude to the text as the one that has informed the present analysis of the saga. The receiver is expected to look for a hidden meaning in the text beyond the literal sense. The context in both the story and the broader circumstance of the story's contemporary background will guide him to an alternative meaning.

21. Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960).

Egils saga contains quite a few examples of this type of message. One of the most striking occurs in the account of Skallagrímr's visit to King Haraldr Finehair to seek redress for the death of his brother Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson (chapter 25). The king invites Skallagrímr to join his court and serve him, no negligible offer since royal service was the surest route to wealth and status in the society described in the saga. Moreover, he does not rule out the possibility of paying compensation for Þórólfr at a later date if he is satisfied with Skallagrímr's service. Skallagrímr's response is as follows:

"Everyone knows that Thorolf was much more able than I am in all respects, but he lacked the good fortune to serve you properly. I will not take that course. I will not serve you, because I know I lack the good fortune to serve you the way I would like and that you deserve. I imagine I would lack many of Thorolf's qualities."²²

Skallagrímr's answer is ostensibly humble; he declares himself unworthy to serve the king since his brother Þórólfr, who was a better man than himself, failed to give satisfaction. Now, anyone who is aware of Þórólfr's dealings with Haraldr will be unable to avoid the suspicion that something else lies behind Skallagrímr's words, on the one hand because Haraldr himself dealt Þórólfr his death blow and so the latter's brother is unlikely to be sincere in his sentiments; on the other, because the service that Skallagrímr wishes to render the king, and regards as his just deserts, is unquestionably to kill him. This is confirmed by his last comment ("Hygg ek, at mér verði meiri muna vant en Þórólfi," literally, I imagine I would fall farther short than Þórólfr), which observant readers will recognize as an allusion to Þórólfr's dying words in chapter 22: "Nú gekk ek þremr fótum til skammt" (I took three steps too few here). Þórólfr utters these words after killing Haraldr's standard-bearer, who was standing only a few feet in front of the king. The import of Þórólfr's comment can only be that he regretted not having killed Haraldr

22. Scudder (2004), 43. "Þat var kunnigt, hversu miklu Þórólfr var framar en ek em að sér gorr um alla hluti, ok bar hann enga gæfu til at þjóna þér konungr. Nú mun ek ekki taka þat ráð. Eigi mun ek þjóna þér, því at ek veit at ek mun eigi gæfu til bera at veita þér þá þjónustu sem ek mynda vilja ok vert væri. Hygg ek, að mér verði meiri muna vant en Þórólfi." ÍF 2:64.

himself. Thus Skallagrímr's humility lies not in regarding himself as unfit to become the king's retainer but in the admission that he is even less likely than his brother to succeed in killing the king. Since Haraldr knows as well as the reader how his dealings with Þórólfr ended, he picks up the ambiguity in Skallagrímr's answer, as indeed do the other people present. Escaping this encounter by the skin of his teeth, Skallagrímr leaves himself and his father little option but to flee the country.

Sometime earlier, when urged to go and see the king about compensation for his brother, Skallagrímr had uttered the following comment (chapter 24): "I do not feel I have any reason to," said Grim. "The king will not be impressed by my eloquence, and I do not think I would spend much time asking him for recompense."²³ Although Skallagrímr proved prescient on this point, his response in fact betrays a verbal dexterity that lends his utterance a marked ambiguity. Whether this eloquence was the result of a formal education or simply learned in the school of life, it is nevertheless a skill related to the literary device that Snorri calls *ofljóst* or wordplay, discussed earlier. According to Snorri, this device enables one to *yrkja fólgit*, that is, charge one's words with a meaning that is not at first sight obvious.

Strictly speaking, the word *þjónusta*, "service," in Skallagrímr's reply to the king is not ambiguous, as it has only one meaning in Old Icelandic. However, it is double-edged in this context, and indeed this is not the only example of its ambiguous usage in a medieval text.²⁴ But the ambiguity alone is not sufficient to alert the reader to what lies behind Skallagrímr's comment. It is his allusion to Þórólfr's dying words that removes all doubt of his meaning.

It is significant that such ambiguity is employed in conversation with kings, whether in speeches addressed to them or in the kings' own words. In *Egils saga* ambiguity seems to be associated with dealings with authority, providing a means of expressing sentiments

23. Scudder (2004), 41. "‘Ekki ørendi ætla ek mik eiga,’ sagði Grímr; ‘mun konungi ek þykkja ekki orðsnjallr; ætla ek mik ekki lengi munu biðja bótanna.’” ÍF 2:61.

24. The word is used in a similarly ambiguous way in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* with reference to "að serða einhvern" (to service someone); see *Íslendinga sögur og þættir* (1987), 3:2217.

to men of power that it would be impossible to state openly. In connection with this, it is worth recalling Snorri Sturluson's famous comment in the prologue to *Heimskringla* on the perils inherent in performing poems for kings if they do not tell of true events, since these could easily be misconstrued as *háð en ekki lof*, "mockery, not praise." The same words can have a diametrically opposite meaning, depending on the context. It is tempting to analyze the final verse of *Höfuðlausn*, the poem Egill composed and performed for King Eiríkr Bloodaxe at York, in light of Snorri's words (chapter 61):

I bore the king's praise
into the silent void,
my words I tailor
to the company.
From the seat of my laughter
I lauded the warrior
and it came to pass
that most understood.²⁵

The kenning *hlátra hamr*, "seat of laughter," is of particular interest. The meaning is clearly "breast," since this is the source of laughter. When Egill says he knows how to tailor his words when in company, one wonders if his knowledge consists in using irony to effect, since the praise is borne from the seat of laughter, a phrase which must sound double-edged to the audience and thus raise doubts as to the poet's sincerity. These doubts are, as it happens, strengthened by the context, since it is unlikely that Egill is overly fond of Eiríkr after all that has passed between them. His manner of referring to the understanding of "most" rather than "all" suggests that the poem cannot be understood without some effort on the part of the listener, and therefore that the meaning is not what it appears to be. Thus the final verse of *Höfuðlausn* seems to contain a strong hint that the poem as a whole may be "mockery, not praise."

25. Scudder (2004), 132. "Bark þengils lof / á þagnar rof; / kannk mála mjöt / of manna sjöt; / ór hlátra ham / hróðr bark fyr gram; / svá fór þat fram, / at flestr of nam." ÍF 2:192.

When explaining the verse in his edition of the saga, Sigurður Nordal stated that it was “very doubtful that Egill would have intended this kenning to be ambiguous, since such a play on words would have been risky in the circumstances.”²⁶ Nordal seems not to have fully appreciated Egill’s position. Following Arinbjörn’s declaration that he and his men are prepared to resort to arms in order to protect Egill, Eiríkr must choose between allowing Egill to go free or else losing his most faithful supporter and a large company of men along with him. The exiled king knows that little will be left of his power base if Arinbjörn turns against him, so in the circumstances the threat to Egill is negligible as long as he does not provoke Eiríkr too blatantly. In fact one could claim that it is not the poem that saves Egill’s neck but Arinbjörn’s determination to defend him, with violence if necessary, against the king’s henchmen. Given that the power ratio is in Egill’s favor, he can even allow himself a little gentle mockery of the king, though he must do so with circumspection so as not to upset the delicate situation between Arinbjörn and his monarch.²⁷

Judging from the foregoing, the use of ambiguous phraseology seems to be closely linked to power relations in *Egils saga* and sets its stamp on all dealings with the kings of Norway in the text. When men speak to kings, they do so in a particular manner, at times adapting the truth or even telling outright lies. The implication is that one must address the monarch with care and avoid telling him the truth unless one can be sure that he will not take revenge. This is apparent, for example, when Hárekr Hildiríðarson asks the king for permission to speak his mind (chapter 12). The king’s power over life and death makes telling the truth a risky venture, but the use of ambiguity allows one to speak one’s mind in a covert manner, or *yrkja fólgið*, “say things in a deliberately veiled way,” as Snorri puts it.

The above attitude to the discourse, so evident in *Egils saga* and present to a lesser degree in both *Snorra Edda* and *Heimskringla*, is perfectly consistent with the complex society described in the previous chapter. Men had to be conscious of their relative status when choosing their words in the field of the royal court—and no

26. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “. . . það er því mjög vafasamt, að Egill hafi ætlazt til, að þessi kenning væri tvíræð, enda hefði slíkur leikur að orðum verið hættulegur, eins og á stóð.” ÍF 2:192; interpretation of stanza 19.

27. On this ambiguity in *Höfuðlausn*, see Hermann Pálsson, “Athugasemd um Höfuðlausn,” *Íslenzk tunga* 3 (1961–62): 70–71.

doubt also in other fields of thirteenth-century society. The exercise of power and the struggle to acquire it are thus evident even at the level of social discourse. Some things could be said, others were better left unsaid, but those who *kunna mála mjöt of manna sjöt*, i.e. know how to tailor their words in company, namely the poets, were skilled in encoding their messages so as to be understood by those in the know.

Jakobson's communication model explains how important it is for the receiver to know something about the sender of the message if he is to understand it properly. We will now take the step of assuming that *Egils saga* was written either by Snorri Sturluson or by a person or persons in his immediate entourage. This will allow us to gain a deeper insight into the meaning of the saga.

Snorri's Dealings with Sighvatr and Sturla

As we have already discovered, conflict between brothers is one of the central issues of *Egils saga*. This applies not only to the friction between Egill and Þórólfr, which has been brought to light in the preceding chapters, but also to the internecine strife among the sons of King Haraldr Finehair. By the time Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri toppled his brother Eiríkr Bloodaxe from the throne, the latter had already slain two of his other brothers, Óláfr and Sigurðr (chapter 58). This is the substance of the kenning in stanza 29 of the saga, which Egill recites when Eiríkr and Gunnhildr deprive him of Ásgerðr's legacy:

Land spirit, the law-breaker
has forced me to travel
far and wide; his bride deceives
the man who slew his brothers.
Grim-tempered Gunnhild must pay
for driving me from this land.
In my youth, I was quick to conquer
hesitation and avenge treachery.²⁸

Egill addresses the *landalfr*, "land spirit," perhaps the god Þórr, telling him that *lögbrigðir*, "the law-breaker," that is, King Eiríkr,

28. Scudder (2004), 114. "Lögbrigðir hefr lagða, / landalfr, fyr mér sjölfum, / blekkir bræðra sökva / brúðfang, vegu langa; / Gunnhildi ák gjalda, / greypt's hennar skap, þenna, / ungr gatök ok læ launat, / landrekstr, bili grandat." ÍF 2:165.

who has unlawfully deprived him of Ásgerðr's inheritance, has *lagt fyr mér langa vega*, "forced [him] to undertake a long journey"; in other words banished him from Norway. The king's *brúðfang* or bride, that is, Queen Gunnhildr, *blekkir* (deceives) this *bræðra sǫkkvir*, "destroyer of brothers"; in other words Eiríkr is identified as the enemy of his own brothers. Egill says that "*ák Gunnhildi at gjalda þenna landrekstr*" (Gunnhildr must pay for driving me from this land), for *greypt's hennar skap* (she is grim-tempered). He adds that he knew how to conquer hesitation and repay treachery in his youth.

The stanza is interesting for two reasons: first, it specifically mentions both in the accompanying prose and in verse that King Eiríkr was a fratricide; and second, the theme of enmity between brothers is linked to the figure of a wife. In the first half of this book I have demonstrated that this very subject is the hidden theme of Egill's story. Enmity between brothers was generally condemned, not least in thirteenth-century Icelandic society, which may explain why such an effort was made to conceal the animosity between Egill and Þórólfr in the saga. Evidence of such condemnation has already been cited, such as people's reaction to Sturla Sighvatsson's attack on his uncle Þórðr at Hvammur, or Þórðr's words to Sighvatr on Palm Sunday in 1236, when the latter was preparing to usurp their brother Snorri's rule in Borgarfjörður.

Further evidence can be found in the phrase *að bera eigi gæfu* [or *giftu*] *til samþykkis*, "not always have the good fortune to agree with one another," used by the historiographer Sturla Þórðarson of the disputes between Snorri and Sighvatr and later of the bad blood between another set of brothers, Þorvarðr and Oddr Þórarinsson (pp. 425 and 671). The phrase also occurs in *Egils saga*, where it is ascribed to King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, in reference to himself and his brother Eiríkr Bloodaxe (chapter 64):

"I have heard that my brother Eirik and his wife, Gunnhild, both think you have thrown a stone that was too heavy for you in your dealings with them, Egil. I think you ought to be quite contented if I do not involve myself in this matter, even though Eirik and I did not have the good fortune to agree with each other."²⁹

29. Scudder (2004), 136. "Svá hefi ek spurt, at Eiríkr bróðir minn, muni þat

Animosity between brothers is regarded as *ógæfa*, “a misfortune,” and it is no coincidence that this phrase occurs in works attributed to authors of the Sturlungar clan, nor that it is found in texts composed after their family had endured a string of calamities, brought about in part by discord within their own ranks. As it happens, the phrase also occurs in *Laxdæla saga*, which has been linked to the Sturlungar clan as well.³⁰ The latter saga centers largely on quarrels between brothers and sons of brothers. Despite Óláfr pá’s sincere endeavors to avoid such conflict, Bolli eventually kills his cousin Kjartan at the instigation of his wife Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, and Kjartan’s brothers subsequently kill Bolli, egged on by their mother Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir. Halldór, Kjartan’s brother, says of this slaying (chapter 56):

“Besides, it was to be expected that she should greatly regret losing Bolli, because it is true that a man such as Bolli is a great loss, despite the fact that we kinsmen *did not have the good fortune* to get along together.”³¹

The Sturlungar family suffered much misfortune of this kind. Sturla Þórðarson the historiographer, for example, quarreled so violently with his nephew, Þorgils skarði, that, suspecting Þorgils of plotting against his life, he was almost party to his murder.

kalla, ok þau Gunnhildr bæði, at þú, Egill, munir hafa kastat steini um megn þér í yðrum skiptum; þætti mér þú vel mega yfir láta, Egill, at ek legða ekki til þessa máls, þó at við Eiríkr bærim eigi gæfu til samþykkis.” ÍF 2:198.

30. Peter Hallberg has argued that Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, nephew of Snorri and brother of the historiographer Sturla, composed *Knýtlinga saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. See Peter Hallberg, *Ólafr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, Knýtlinga saga och Laxdæla saga: Ett försök till språklig författarbestämning*, Studia Islandica 22 (Reykjavík: Heimspekideild Háskóla Íslands and Bókautgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1963). The phrase is also used by King Sverrir Sigurðson in *Sverris saga* (in *Flateyjarbók* (1944–45), 3:240) when he attends the funeral of his adversary and kinsman Magnús Erlingsson: “Yfir þess manns greftri stöndum vér nú, er góðr var og ástúðigr sínum mönnum, þótt vit frændr bærim eigi giftu til samþykkis okkar á milli . . .” (“We stand here now at the graveside of one who was kind and loving to his friends and kinsmen; though he and I, kinsmen, had not the good fortune to agree . . .”; Karl Jónsson, *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway (Sverrisaga)*, trans. John Sephton (London: David Nutt, 1899), 122).

31. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “Þat er ok eptir vánum, at Guðrúnu þykki mikit lát Bolla, því at þat er satt að segja, at eptir slíka menn er mestr skaði, sem Bolli var, þó at vér frændr bærim eigi giptu til samþykkis.” *Laxdæla saga*, ÍF 5:169 (emphasis added).

Porgils denied the accusation against him, declaring the intention of killing one's kinsman to be *níðingsverk*, "villainy." At this point the benevolent Óláfr hvítaskáld, brother of Sturla and uncle of Porgils, intervened, saying it would be *óhæfuverk*, "a despicable act," for Sturla to be party to the slaying of his nephew (pp. 598–99).

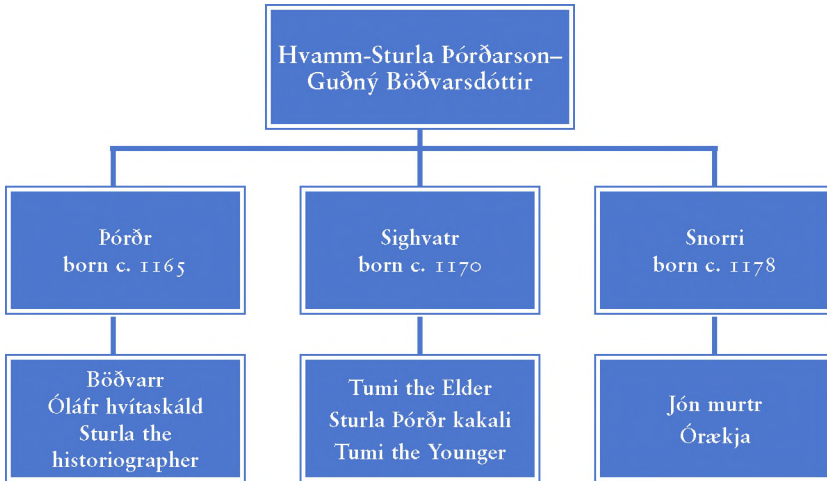
Nor was trouble ever far from the surface in Snorri's relationship with his own sons, in part due to his reluctance to relinquish his most profitable estates to them. Órækja Snorrason went so far as to launch a surprise attack on his father with an eighty-man force in order to demand the estate at Stafholt, which he claimed Snorri had promised him as a bride-price.³² Yet it is clear that loyalty between fathers and sons was considered the norm. This view was apparent in Órækja's behavior at the Alþingi some months earlier when he refused to back his friend and brother-in-law Kolbeinn the Young in a dispute against Snorri. Órækja "said he didn't think it right he should fight against his father," and so took up position with his men in Snorri's vanguard.³³

The internecine power struggles within the landowning field in Iceland, in which Snorri, his brothers, sons, and nephews were embroiled, contained an inherent contradiction. On the one hand kinsmen were at times forced to vie with one another in order to augment or maintain their status in the social space, yet on the other it was considered morally reprehensible to use violence against a close relative. It is not hard to see a connection between the tension that these conflicting demands must have generated and the structure and thinking behind *Egils saga*. In this context there is no inherent paradox in the fact that Egill apparently condemns Eiríkr's acts of fratricide in the above-cited stanza, while at the same time being in some way accountable for his own brother's death. The literary paradox is perfectly consistent with the paradox in real life.

One of the longest and in many ways bitterest feuds between brothers of the Sturlungar family was that between Snorri, on the one side, and his brother Sighvatr and Sighvatr's son, Sturla, on the other, already touched on in earlier chapters. It is noteworthy

32. See *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321, for Snorri's refusal to hand over Stafholt to Jón murtr, and 1:373–74 for Órækja's attack on Reykholt.

33. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:277. "... kvað sér eigi sama að berjast við föður sinn." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:361.



The Sturlusons and their sons mentioned in this chapter.

that the dispute should have revolved around a noble bride and a patrimony, the same two issues as those that underlie the disguised conflict between Egill and Þórólfr in the saga. The feud lasted with intervals for fifteen years, from the time Sturla Sighvatsson married Solveig Sæmundardóttir in 1223 to the deaths of Sturla and Sighvatr at the hands of two of Snorri's former sons-in-law in the battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238. Matters reached a climax on two occasions during this period; the first early in 1229 when Sturla was convinced that the attack on his home, which could have cost him his life, had been orchestrated by Snorri, and the second in Easter week, 1236, when Sturla and Sighvatr marched with an army to Borgarfjörður to seize Snorri's domain.

The origins of the feud are vague. The brothers Snorri and Sighvatr were not brought up together, Snorri having been sent as a young boy to be raised at Oddi by Jón Loptsson, yet in spite of this most of the evidence seems to indicate that they were on good terms for much of their lives. Sighvatr was eight years older than Snorri and well established as a chieftain by the time Snorri entered the scene. Belligerent both on the battlefield and in the law courts, Sighvatr won great prestige from many of his actions as a chieftain in his twenties, such as his case against a client of Sæmundr of Oddi in 1198, of which it was said: "many men thought it quite a

novelty that any men intended to oppose the Oddaverjar in legal actions at the Þing.”³⁴

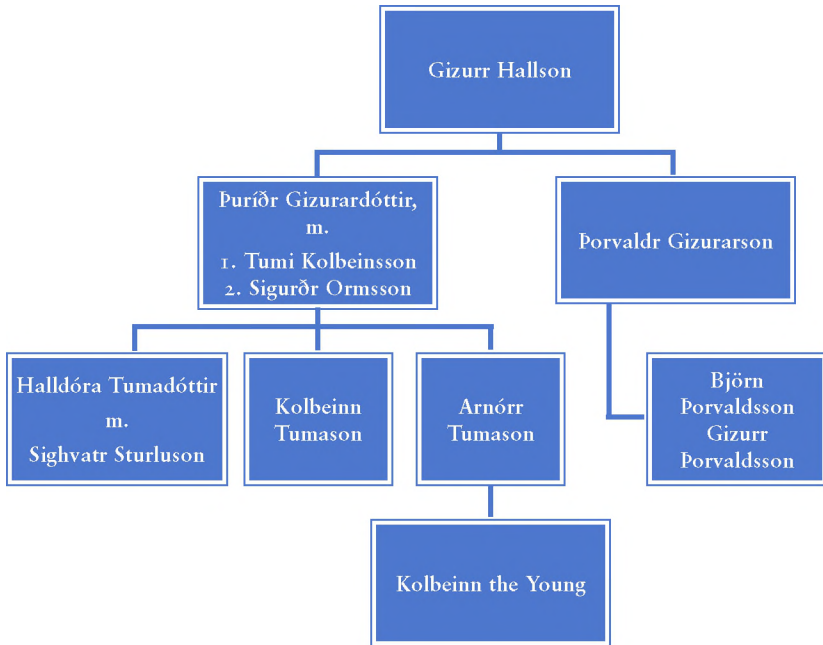
During the first years of the thirteenth century, however, Sighvatr and Snorri increasingly found themselves on opposing sides in major disputes as a result of supporting their respective chieftains. Snorri, for instance, was in the Oddaverjar force in 1199–1200 when they routed Sigurðr Ormsson of the Svínfellingar clan, who was married to Þuríðr Gizurardóttir, Sighvatr’s mother-in-law, who had previously been married to Tumi Kolbeinnsson. The historiographer Sturla Þórðarson states that Kolbeinn Tumason, Sighvatr’s brother-in-law, “liked this outcome little but Sighvatr liked it less.”³⁵ In the circumstances Sighvatr can hardly have been well disposed toward his younger brother Snorri who, in taking his first steps in the political arena, had played a prominent role in the case, summoning Sigurðr Ormsson to the spring assembly and participating in the killing of one of his men.

In spite of this, only two years later Snorri sought the support of both his brothers in his dispute with some Orkney merchants, and Sighvatr was keen to lend him his aid (pp. 210–11). By now Snorri was busy establishing himself as a magnate in the Borgarfjörður area, and his brothers’ support was strategically at least as important to him as the backing of the Oddaverjar clan. Þórðr was based relatively nearby on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, Sighvatr in the neighboring Dalir district, while the Oddaverjar lived much farther away, east of the river Þjórsá in the lowlands of southwest Iceland and separated from Snorri by the territory of the Haukdælir clan. It would not be long before the fragility of the truce between these two powerful southern groups became apparent, making it unlikely that the Haukdælir would be keen to smooth the path of any protégé of the Oddaverjar.

During this period Snorri received the gift of several *goðorð*, including one in the Húnavatnssýsla district of northern Iceland, located between the power bases of Sighvatr and his brother-in-law, Kolbeinn Tumason (p. 213). It was thus very much in Snorri’s interest to make sure of his relationship with his brother. This may

34. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:125. “. . . þótti það hin mesta nýjung ef nokkurir menn vildu deila þingdeildum við Oddaverja.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:187.

35. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:127. “. . . líkaði illa þessar málalyktir en Sighvati verr.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:190.



Sighvatr Sturluson's relationships by marriage.

explain why Snorri took part in the attack organized by Sighvatr and Arnórr Tumason against Bishop Guðmundr Arason in 1210, after Arnórr's brother Kolbeinn had fallen in battle against the bishop's supporters at Víðines. In this case Snorri sided with Sighvatr, but their elder brother Þoríðr refused to send any reinforcements, much to Sighvatr's fury. As a result Þoríðr felt that "their relationship was never again what it had been."³⁶

Although Snorri took part in the attack on Bishop Guðmundr, he seems to have attempted to arrange a truce between the warring parties. There is an exhaustive account of these events in *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* by Arngrímr Brandsson, which is later than Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* and ostensibly less reliable as a source. There it emerges that Snorri was not as implacably opposed to the bishop as Sighvatr and his brothers-in-law:

36. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:142. "... aldrei hafa orðið frændsemi þeirra slík sem áður." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:221.

Snorri Sturluson suggested that the bishop should show some mercy in this case, to save the lives of those who now had a sword at their throats, for there was much to be gained by this. So it came about by Snorri's entreaties that the bishop read the Miserere over them, saying however that they were no more truly absolved than before.³⁷

The affair concluded with Snorri inviting the bishop to his home at Reykholt where he ended up staying the whole winter, while Sighvatr and Arnórr Tumason took control of the bishop's see. Two years later Snorri was appointed to the highly prestigious office of lawspeaker at the Alþingi, having clearly benefited from his reputation as a mediator and his good relations with most if not all of the country's other magnates. He almost certainly enjoyed the support of his brother Sighvatr in this matter, as in others during this period, such as his dispute with the *allsherjargoði* Magnús in 1216. Even so, a somewhat critical note can be detected in Sighvatr's attitude to his younger brother in *Íslendinga saga's* account of the affair, where it is stated that in the resulting scuffle Sighvatr felt Snorri "had not held the position well before he came up."³⁸

As previously mentioned, it was as a result of this affair that Snorri's prestige "was at its height in this country," and there are no further reports of the brothers' dealings until Snorri returned from his visit to Norway in 1220.³⁹ By then he had promised King Hákon and Earl Skúli to try to persuade the Icelanders "to obey the Norwegian rulers," on the grounds that, excepting Sæmundr Jónsson of Oddi, there were "no greater men in Iceland," than himself and his brothers, and Snorri "claimed that they would be very much inclined to follow his advice when he reached home."⁴⁰

37. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Snorri Sturluson leggur til, að biskup geri nokkura linan á þeirra máli þeim til lífs, er nú reið sverð að svíra, segir þar mikið til vinnandi. Svo gerist fyrir bænir Snorra, að biskup les yfir þeim Miserere, segir þó allt eins, að þeir eru jafnlausir og áður." Arngrímur ábóti Brandsson, *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, in *Byskupasögur* (1953), 3: 271.

38. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:160. "... ekki vel hafa haldið stöðunni áður hann [Sighvatr] kom til." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:252.

39. "...gekk við mest hér á landi." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:254.

40. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Snorri latti mjög ferðarinnar og kallaði það ráð að gera sér að vinum hina bestu menn á Íslandi og kallaðist skjótt mega svo koma sínum orðum að mönnum mundi sýnast að snúast til hlýðni við Noregshöfðingja. Hann sagði og svo að þá voru eigi meiri men á Íslandi en bræður hans er Sæmund

Shortly after Snorri's homecoming, he found himself the object of major hostility among the men of the southern part of Iceland, headed by Björn Þorvaldsson. Björn, a member of the Haukdælir clan and married to Hallveig Ormsdóttir, niece of Sæmundr of Oddi, was based at Breiðabólstaður in the Rangá district in the South and reputed to be promising chieftain material. Björn's hostility stemmed from the fact that Norwegian merchants had killed his father- and brother-in-law, and he felt that Snorri "must have been selected by the Norwegians to oppose them, so that they could not [take revenge] for the slaying of Orm."⁴¹ Björn Þorvaldsson and his followers showed their enmity for Snorri in various ways, such as mocking his verses, as mentioned earlier, which drove Snorri to lend his support to Loptr, son of Bishop Páll Jónsson and nephew of Sæmundr of Oddi, in his dispute against Björn. The outcome of the affair was that Loptr killed Björn, causing two of the most powerful families in the country to clash. Once again, Sighvatr and Snorri found themselves on opposing sides, since Sighvatr was the friend and relative by marriage of Björn's father, Þorvaldr.

Sighvatr subsequently persuaded Snorri to withdraw his backing for the bishop's son Loptr, and it tells us something about the brothers' relationship at the time that Sighvatr was able to talk Snorri out of a course of action to which he seemed initially to have been committed. Here once again the brothers' nephew, Sturla Þórðarson, quotes Sighvatr's comment on Snorri:

Sighvat said that when they met, Snorri had an axe raised over his shoulder, so sharp that it looked as if it could slice anything at all; ". . . then I took a whetstone out of my pouch, and I rubbed it along the edge; and after that the axe was so much blunted that before we parted it shone upon me."⁴²

leið en kallaði þá mundu mjög eftir sínum orðum víkja þá er hann kæmi til." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:263.

41. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:172; translation slightly modified. "...mundi vera settur til af Noregsmönnum að standa á móti svo að þeir mættu engu eftirmáli fram koma um víg Orms." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:264.

42. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:179. "En Sighvatur segir að Snorri hefði öxi reidda um öxl svo hvassa að hann ætlaði að hvetvetna mundi bíta þá er þeir fundust. 'Síðan tók eg hein úr þússi mínu og reið eg í eggina svo að öxin er svo slæ að hló á móti mér áður við skildum.'" *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:269-70.

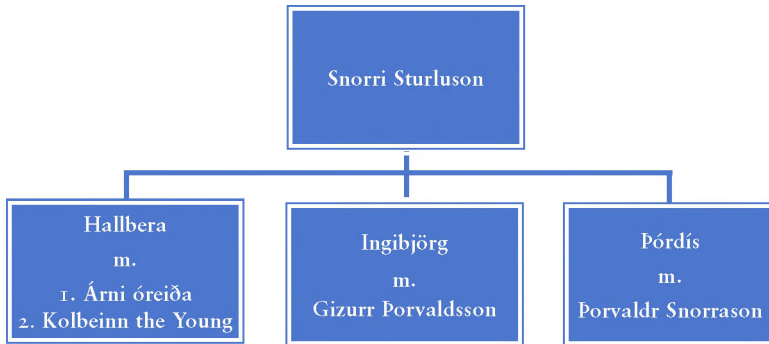
If the above metaphor is any indication, Sighvatr must have had a memorable way with words. For all that Snorri's determination to join in the quarrel between the Oddaverjar and Haukdælir families was like a sharpened axe, Sighvatr claimed that he had something up his sleeve that could blunt his younger brother's determination. The phrase *að taka úr pússi mínum*, "to take out of my pouch," may imply that Sighvatr gave Snorri some sort of financial bribe, but that need not be the case; he might simply be saying that he had the knack of bending Snorri to his will.

Not long afterward there was to be a dramatic change in this state of affairs. Two of Sighvatr's sons, Tumi and Sturla, were now of age to be put in charge of men and estates. Having himself moved north to Eyjafjörður, Sighvatr sent his son Sturla south to rule the Dalir region, making a pact at the same time with Þorvaldr Gizurarson that Sturla should marry Solveig Sæmundardóttir. As we saw earlier, Snorri was extremely put out by this, since Solveig represented both economic and symbolic capital. Nevertheless, he seems to have been willing to submit to his brother, for example allowing Sighvatr to dissuade him from executing the sentence on Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr that he had managed to push through the court. Þorvaldr had been sentenced "to full outlawry and all his goods and goðorð were confiscated,"⁴³ following a clash with Brandr Jónsson and Ingimundr Jónsson, Snorri's kinsmen and clients from Steingrímsfjörður. Sturla Sighvatsson, meanwhile, took it upon himself to assist Þorvaldr, and persuaded his father to mediate with Snorri. Sturla and Þorvaldr arrived in Reykholt the day after Sighvatr, and Snorri welcomed Sturla "as befitted such close relatives, but received Þorvaldr as if he were his friend only for Sturla's sake."⁴⁴ Þorvaldr's problems were solved for the time being.

Shortly afterward Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr asked for the hand of Snorri's daughter Þórdís, and the two men became friends as a result of the match. That same winter Snorri married his other daughter to Gizurr, son of Þorvaldr Gizurarson, the pre-eminent chieftain among the Haukdælir.

43. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "...sekur skógarmaður og sekt fé hans allt og goðorð." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:197.

44. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "...sem frændsamlegast en við Þorvaldi sem hann væri vin hans fyrir Sturlu sakir." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:287.



Meanwhile, Snorri himself entered into a partnership with Hallveig Ormsdóttir of the Oddaverjar clan, by which he assumed control of her fortune (p. 288) and thus significantly bolstered his own position. One of his sons-in-law was Þorvaldr Snorrason Vatnsfirðingr, the major power in the West Fjords; another was Gizurr Þorvaldsson, heir to the leadership of the Haukdælir clan in south-west Iceland.⁴⁵ Snorri was now in possession of large estates in the lands under Oddaverjar control and counted their leading men among his friends. He had effectively achieved at least part of the status he had originally hoped to gain either by marrying Solveig Sæmundardóttir himself or else marrying her to his son Jón. Yet the rise of Sturla Sighvatsson in the Dalir region posed a strategic threat to Snorri's sphere of influence, because the region controlled the routes north to the West Fjords.⁴⁶ Now, however, Snorri was in a position to put pressure on his nephew, a course on which he soon embarked in defiance of Sighvatr's attempts to dissuade him.

Snorri's first move, in 1224, was to make peace with his brother Þórðr, with whom he had quarreled over their maternal inheritance. Inviting Þórðr to visit him at home, "Snorri was very merry; he

45. On the importance of marriage, etc. in Sturlung Age society, see Auður Magnúsdóttir's book, *Frillor och fruar: Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120–1400*, Avhandlingar från Historiska Institutionen i Göteborg (Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, 2001), especially 47–97.

46. On this, see Helgi Þorláksson, "Sauðafell: Um leiðir og völd í Döllum við lok þjóðveldis" (1991).

said that the brothers should never fall out over a question of property.”⁴⁷ As Sturla Þórðarson reports it in *Íslendinga saga*:

But when matters began to go ill between Sturla and Snorri, then Snorri asked Þórð how long he intended to let Sturla Sighvatsson deny them their honor. In addition, he mentioned the Snorrunga-goðorð, which their father Sturla had owned; Sighvat alone had controlled this, and [given to Sturla] for his dowry.⁴⁸

In the summer of 1225 Sturla got wind of his uncles' claim on his goðorð and according to *Íslendinga saga* “thought that both Snorri and Þórð would encroach on his rights.”⁴⁹ From now on relations deteriorated among the kinsmen. When Snorri visited Þórðr at Hvammur that summer, it was widely rumored that Sturla was planning to ambush him on his way home. Þórðr felt compelled to provide Snorri with an escort to see him safely out of the district but in the event Sturla made no move at this time (p. 295).

With tensions gradually building up, Sturla made the mistake the following winter of abducting the widow Jóreiðr Hallsdóttir with the intention of marrying her to his client and kinsman, Ingimundr Jónsson. As it happens, she and her family were great friends of Þórðr Sturluson, who took on her case and handed it over to Snorri. At the 1226 Alþingi, Snorri had his son Jón proclaim “a case of raid against Sturla . . . there [was now a prospect of great strife] among them.”⁵⁰

The affairs of the Vestfirðir clans now became mixed up in this turmoil. The Vatnsfirðingar and Seldælir families had been embroiled in a vicious feud for more than a decade, ever since Þorvaldr Snorrason had Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson killed in 1213. As

47. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “. . . var Snorri allkátur og kvað þá bræður aldrei skulu á skilja um fé.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:199.

48. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:199–200; translation slightly modified. “En með því að heldur tók að fættast með þeim Sturlu og Snorra þá spurði Snorri Þórð hve lengi hann ætlaði að Sturla Sighvatsson skyldi sitja yfir sæmdum þeirra. En það mælti hann til Snorrungagoðorðs er átt hafði Sturla faðir þeirra en Sighvatur hafði einn með farið en fengið þá Sturlu til kvonarmundar.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:289.

49. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:206. “. . . þótti sem þeir Snorri [og Þórður] mundu báðir að honum setjast.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:295.

50. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:207; translation slightly modified. “. . . hernaðarmálum á hendur Sturlu. . . . Horfðist þá til hinnar mestu deilu með þeim.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:295.

Snorri was now Þorvaldr's father-in-law, Hrafn's sons could no longer look to him for assistance, so Sturla stepped into the breach and took over their affairs. From this it is evident that Snorri and Sturla clashed not only over the brothers' hereditary *goðorð* but also over the question of influence in the West Fjords.

Although Sturla was compelled to pay a fine over the Jóreiðr abduction affair at the 1226 Alþingi, the court failed to negotiate a settlement between Þorvaldr and the sons of Hrafn, or to reach a decision on Snorri's and Þórðr's claim to the family *goðorð* (p. 296). The following winter *Íslendinga saga* reports "great hostility between Sturla and [his kinsman Snorri]." ⁵¹ In the spring Snorri sent his son Jón to the Þórsnes assembly, where Þórðr took over the Snorrungagoðorð, which was "the hereditary *goðorð* of the Sturlusons; Jón took over two parts of this, while Þórð held the third. Sturla Sighvatsson did not like this at all and remained at home during this Þing." ⁵²

Now Sturla made his second mistake. In the summer of 1227, ignoring the advice of his household, he made an armed raid on Þórðr's home at Hvammur, during which several men were killed. He seems to have quickly realized that this was a bad move, ⁵³ and that winter a reconciliation was negotiated between him and Þórðr, whereby Sturla paid his uncle compensation despite vehemently denying that he had ever had any intention of killing him; yet another sign of the seriousness with which the intention to harm a close relative was regarded. Snorri's and Þórðr's support for Bishop Guðmundr also became involved in the case, with Þórðr seizing the opportunity to force Sighvatr and Sturla to allow the bishop to return to his see at Hólar.

A further attempt was made at the 1228 Alþingi to seek a settlement between Snorri and Þórðr, on the one side, and Sighvatr,

51. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:212. "...fæð mikil með þeim Sturlu [og Snorra] frændunum," *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:300.

52. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:212. "...er var erfðagoðorð Sturlunga og tók Jón [Snorrason] við tveim hlutum en Þórður hafði þriðjung. Þetta líkaði Sturlu Sighvatssyni allþungt og sat heima um þingið." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:300.

53. "Árni said later that it then seemed to him Sturla had suddenly seen how mistaken his whole expedition had been." *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:214. "Sagði Árni svo síðan að honum þótti sem Sturla sæi þá þegar missmíði á för sinni." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:302.

on the other, over the question of the hereditary *goðorð*, but neither side would make any concessions. Snorri's position had been bolstered by the fact that Kolbeinn the Young, leader of the Skagfirðingar faction, was now his son-in-law, and his elder brother Sighvatr's influence over him had dwindled. It was at this point that the following incident occurred at Reykholt:

One evening when Snorri was sitting in his bath, the talk was about the chieftains. Men said that there was no chieftain like Snorri and that no one else could compete with him, on account of his ties through marriage. Snorri agreed that his in-laws were not unimportant. Sturla Bárðarson, who had been standing guard at the bath, led Snorri to the house, and shot this half-verse over his shoulder so that Snorri heard it: "Eloquent man / you have the same kind of in-laws / as the ruler of Hleiðar in ancient times. / Injustice leads to no good."⁵⁴

Sturla Bárðarson was the son of Snorri's half-sister, but he was also related to Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and his sons. He had more-over lost a leg at Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr's instigation (p. 243), so he had good reason to criticize Snorri for abandoning his friendship with the sons of Hrafn in favor of Þorvaldr. Sturla's verse alludes to tales of Hrólfr kraki, which Snorri must have known well since he referred to them in his *Edda*. Hrólfr was a king of Denmark who held court at Hleiðar and was thus *Hleiðar stillir*, "moderator, i.e. king, of Hleiðar." He was betrayed by his son-in-law Hjörvarðr. Addressing Snorri as *orðvitr*, "the eloquent man," Sturla likens his position to that of Hrólfr, with the implication that it can be dangerous to rely overmuch on the backing of one's in-laws. He is also telling Snorri that he is behaving unjustly in his dealings with others. The most obvious interpretation would be that Sturla Bárðarson's sympathies lay at least partly with his namesake and

54. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:217. "Það var eitt kveld er Snorri sat í laugu að talað var um höfðingja. Sögðu menn að þá var engi höfðingi sem slíkur sem Snorri en þó mátti engi höfðingi keppa við hann fyrir sakir mægða þeirra er hann átti. Snorri sannaði það að mágar hans væru eigi smámenni. Sturla Bárðarson hafði haldið vörð yfir laugunni og leiddi hann Snorra heim og skaut hann fram stöku þessi svo að Snorri heyrdi: Eigið áþekkt mægi / orðvitr sem gat forðum, / ójafnaðr gefst jafnan / illa, Hleiðar stillir." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:305.

**Main events in the feud between
Snorri and Sturla Sighvatsson, 1223–1235**

- 1223 Sturla Sighvatsson marries Solveig Sæmundardóttir.
- 1224 Snorri claims the hereditary *goðorð* of the Sturlungar.
- 1226 Snorri takes control of the *goðorð*. Humiliation of Sturla.
- 1227 Sturla Sighvatsson's raid on Hvammur.
- 1229 The Þorvaldssons' raid on Sauðafell.
- 1230 *Friður góður á Íslandi*, "Peace reigns in Iceland." Deaths of Jón murtr and Hallbera.
- 1232 Sturla orders the killing of the Þorvaldssons.
- 1233– Sturla Sighvatsson's journey to Norway and Rome.
- 1235

kinsman, Sturla Sighvatsson, and that he felt Snorri was behaving overly harshly in his treatment of Sturla and Sighvatr.

The pace of events now began to intensify. Sturla sought reconciliation, asking Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr to mediate, but Snorri warned Þorvaldr against Sturla on the grounds of the latter's support for the sons of Hrafn and others who had suffered injustice at Þorvaldr's hands. Despite Sturla's attempts to negotiate a settlement, Snorri marched to the Dalir region with his brother Þórðr, Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr and an army of four hundred and fifty men, whereupon all the farmers of the southern Dalir region declared their allegiance to Snorri. Sturla now fled north to Miðfjörður, purportedly in the belief that his life would be in danger if he fell into Snorri's hands.⁵⁵

Immediately after this, Þorvaldr passed through the Dalir region on his way home from Reykholt and had no sooner reached the Vestfirðir peninsula than the sons of Hrafn attacked him and burned him to death inside the farmhouse at Gillastaðir on Berufjörður (pp. 307–8). The duty of avenging Þorvaldr fell to his sons, but also to Snorri, since Þorvaldr's youngest son Einarr was Snorri's

55. See Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr's comment when Sturla's confidants asked whether he would be left in peace if he returned home to Sauðafell (*Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:219): "I hardly expect he will be able to stay long in his bath." "Skammsæta ætla eg honum þá laug." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:306.

grandson. Accusing Sturla of having conspired against their father's life, Þorvaldr's elder sons refused his offer to negotiate a settlement with them on behalf of Hrafn's sons (p. 310). That winter messengers passed between Snorri and the Vatnsfirðingar brothers and in January 1229 Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson raided Sturla's home at Sauðafell. Sturla's life was saved by the fact that he was away from home at the time, but the brothers killed several members of his household and maltreated others, in addition to carrying off everything they could lay their hands on (pp. 311–14). The attack was considered an atrocity, not least because Sturla's wife and young children narrowly escaped violent treatment at the hands of the raiders.⁵⁶

Snorri was widely believed to have been behind the raid on Sauðafell, egging on the Þorvaldssons to avenge their father in an attempt to remove Sturla Sighvatsson from his path once and for all. This certainly seems to have been Sturla's belief. Snorri was also condemned for making light of the raid by composing a verse on the subject, which apparently betrayed sympathy for the Þorvaldssons. When Svertingr Þorleifsson, Sturla's neighbor and a kinsman of the Sturlungar, heard Snorri's verse, he composed a riposte in which he claimed that Snorri had plotted the raid on Sauðafell with the Þorvaldssons.⁵⁷

"Evil deeds spoil the peace," says Svertingr in his stanza. The Þorvaldssons would never have killed Þorbjörg Ysja, the old woman who died of the wounds she received during the attack, if Snorri ("Jón's father") had not ordered *ólmu Hnikars veðri*, "the furious storm of Óðinn," that is, the attack. Snorri had commemorated *mágs brennu*, "the burning of his son-in-law" (Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr, Snorri's son-in-law, was burned to death inside a house) *með kviðlingum*, "in ditties." Svertingr expresses the hope that Snorri's honor will diminish henceforth, *þverri þinn vegr Snorri* (pp. 315–19).⁵⁸

56. Guðrún Nordal discusses this raid in her *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (1999), 89–99.

57. "Felldit Ysju aldri, / ill verk friði spilla, / áðr nema ólmu réði / Jóns feðr Hnikars veðri. / Víst hefir minnst hið mesta / mágs brennu arngrennir, / þverri þinn vegr Snorri, / þingríks með kviðlingum." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:318.

58. See Jonathan Grove's discussion of this verse in "Skaldic Verse-Making in Thirteenth Century Iceland: The Case of the *Sauðafellsferðarvísur*," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 5 (2009): 110–13.

We shall never know whether Snorri plotted with the Porvaldssons or on the contrary urged them to pursue peaceful means of obtaining redress for their father's killing, since there is no evidence either way in the sources. But there are other possibilities; Snorri may have given the impression more or less unconsciously that he would not object if Sturla were eradicated. Perhaps he raised no objection when the sons of Porvaldr mentioned the possibility of a raid and consequently they misconstrued his attitude toward Sturla, unaware that despite their dispute he was not prepared to go as far as inciting men to kill him. While we can never be sure if Snorri was guilty of planning his nephew's murder, we do know that he suspected Sturla of wanting his own life, a suspicion that was mutual.

Shortly after this there was a hiatus in the hostilities between Snorri and Sturla, though they were soon to break out again in other circumstances. At this point it is worth pausing to consider which of them was more to blame. It should not be forgotten that our only source for these events is the historiographer Sturla, son of Þórðr Sturluson. If what he says can be trusted, it would seem that Snorri behaved more ruthlessly than Sturla in their dealings, though the latter lost his head when he decided to attack his uncle Þórðr at Hvammur. Snorri need not have invaded Sturla's territory with an army and assumed control of his *þingmenn*. Instead of resorting to violence he could have maintained good relations with his brother and nephew by pursuing the route of negotiation. Moreover, he does not seem to have made the slightest attempt to spare Sturla from gratuitous humiliation when he chose to summon the farmers to Sauðafell, Sturla's own home, in order to receive their oath of allegiance.

It is hardly a coincidence that the claim to the family *goðorð* should have arisen precisely when Snorri's plans for a marital union with Solveig Sæmundardóttir were disappointed, nipped in the bud by Sturla and Sighvatr. Control of the *Snorrungagoðorð* was not an obvious source of profit for Snorri, who already controlled a sufficient number of such chieftaincies to provide for both his sons. Moreover, Snorri only had a claim to a third of the *goðorð*, although in the event his son Jón acquired two-thirds, one of which was the third confiscated from Sighvatr. At this point Sturla Bárðarson appears to have been in the right when he accused Snorri

of behaving unjustly towards his kinsmen. If he had merely been concerned with increasing his prestige while keeping the peace with Sighvatr, he could easily have hit upon some compromise, but it seems neither brother was prepared to spare the other.

What caused this change in Snorri's behavior towards his brother after 1223? No doubt there were many factors. First, as chieftains the brothers had to create opportunities for their grown-up sons to exercise power, albeit preferably without impinging on their own spheres of influence. Accommodating this new generation necessitated an expansion into new territories and made it impossible for them to tolerate any erosion of their existing power base. Second, Snorri's status had undergone a significant change as a result of the honors that had been bestowed on him in Norway not long before, when he became a *lendr maðr*, "vassal," of the Norwegian crown, a type of symbolic capital that he no doubt regarded as strengthening his position in the social space. He was thus less easily influenced by his brother than before. Third, Snorri may have thought he was in a stronger position to subjugate his brother and nephew because their position in the field of religion had been compromised by their repeated attacks on the bishop of Hólar. Such behavior may have made people less willing to support them at the assembly or in their disputes with other chieftains. A fourth reason, and perhaps the weightiest, may have been that Snorri let his feelings get the better of him.

Snorri's rise seemed inexorable in those years. He had secured the backing of the most important Icelandic dynasties through marital ties, thus augmenting his position to a considerable degree in the field of landowners and magnates in Iceland. His prestige was also high in the field of the royal court, thanks largely to his friendship with Earl Skúli, who had recently become the dominant power in Norway. In the field of religion he had taken care to stay on the right side of the line in the chieftains' squabbles with the church leaders, as well as to donate money assiduously to the Church, judging from the evidence of the *Reykjaholtsmáldagi* (Deed of Reykholt Church).⁵⁹ His status in this field was at any rate much stronger than that of Sighvatr or Sturla, for the reason just

59. The *Reykholtsmáldagi* is in *Heimskringla* (1991), 3:125–26.

mentioned. Perhaps he was so reckless in his pursuit of power that it came as a surprise when he met resistance where least expected, from his own brother Sighvatr, who would not suffer him to rise so high. Snorri may even have felt that Sturla had been deliberately played against him.

After the Þorvaldssons' raid on Sauðafell, Snorri did not have to wait long before suffering a variety of setbacks, and one could say that Svertingr Þorleifsson's wish that Snorri's honor should diminish now to some extent came true.

"Down with your honor, Snorri"

At the Alþingi of 1229 tensions ran high between the two powerful Sturlungar factions, one led by the brothers Þórðr and Snorri, the other by Sighvatr and Sturla. Other chieftains also turned up in force, some allying themselves with one or other of the factions, others trying to act as peacemakers. When the charges were announced, the sons of Hrafn were sentenced for the burning of Þorvaldr Vatnsfirðingr, and the sons of Þorvaldr for the raid on Sauðafell. Yet despite the potentially explosive situation, violence was averted.⁶⁰ This was probably due to the endeavors to keep the peace by many men such as Sighvatr, who quashed those who were *að skattyrðast*, "bandying words," thus preventing matters from getting out of hand. It may also have been significant that both Snorri and Sturla were incapacitated during the assembly: "Snorri was taken sick with erysipelas during the Þing and could not attend."⁶¹ Sturla had recently torn "a sinew in the back of his foot, so that he could scarcely stand."⁶²

A lull now ensued in Snorri's hostilities with his brother and nephew. According to *Íslendinga saga*, "peace reigned in Iceland" in

60. "Enmities among the men were avoided and they parted without any untoward happening." *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:234. "Við bárust vandræði með mönnum og skildust óhappalaust." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321.

61. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:233. "Snorri tók ámusótt um þingið og mátti hann ekki ganga," *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321.

62. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:232. "... sinarnar aftan í fætinum og mátti hann nær ekki stíga á fótinn." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:319.

the summer of 1230.⁶³ Sturla Sighvatsson claimed the compensation that had been awarded to him for the raid on Sauðafell but there was no further talk of the *Snorrungagoðorð* or of redress for the burning of Þorvaldr.

As it happened, Snorri was about to experience a series of setbacks. The first may seem minor but it was to have major repercussions. At the assembly of 1229 his legitimate son Jón murtr expressed a wish to marry Helga, the sister of Solveig Sæmundardóttir. As his bride-price he asked his father for the church estate at Stafholt. When Snorri was initially unwilling to oblige him in this, Jón decided to go abroad and join the Norwegian royal court, refusing to cancel his plans when his father later had a change of heart. The following spring Jón died in Norway of a wound received in a brawl. At the same time, Hallbera, Snorri's legitimate daughter, fell ill and was abandoned by her husband, Kolbeinn the Young. She died not long afterward and Kolbeinn then married Helga Sæmundardóttir. Hot on the heels of this event came the separation of Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Ingibjörg Snorradóttir, whose son had died in infancy.⁶⁴

Within a short space of time Snorri had lost both his legitimate children and two of his sons-in-law, who were among the most powerful magnates in the country. The result was a serious weakening of his position, for he could no longer depend on the support of the chieftains who held sway in his neighboring territories, nor did he have an obvious heir to his domain, and thus he could not ensure that it would remain undivided after his lifetime. This was bound to have political ramifications in the thirteenth century, since the loyalty of a chieftain's supporters depended to a large degree on his ability to ensure stability and continuity in the power structure.

How might Snorri have interpreted this sudden reversal in his fortunes? We can only speculate, as the sources are mute on this point, yet there does seem to have been a softening in his attitude at this juncture in the story. His relationship with Sighvatr and Sturla improved significantly following the verdict on the Sauðafell raid. It was during this period that Sturla enjoyed an extended visit to Reykholt, having copies made of the saga books, as already

63. "... friður góður á Íslandi." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:328.

64. These events are mentioned in *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:321–22; 1:329–30; 1:332–33.

mentioned, and relations between uncle and nephew were reported as *allkært*, “very friendly.”⁶⁵ Sighvatr even supported Snorri in his dispute with Ormr Svínfellingr at the 1231 Alþingi, although one could put various constructions on the words that Sturla Þórðarson attributes to Sighvatr when the latter went to Ormr and asked him to grant Snorri the right of sole arbitration: “Snorri has more than three hundred men; Sturla and I also have a considerable strength, and we will not break with Snorri *just at present*.”⁶⁶ The implication was that the brothers’ reconciliation would not last long.

Shortly afterward, in the last months of winter 1232, matters again took a turn for the worse. Snorri needed to consolidate his relationship with friends and family in view of the dispute that was brewing with his former son-in-law Kolbeinn the Young over the legacy of his daughter Hallbera. He therefore invited his brother Þórðr and his sons to a feast, together with Sturla Sighvatsson. Although he was aware that friction persisted between Sturla and the Þorvaldssons despite their reconciliation, Snorri needed their backing in his dispute with Kolbeinn. Consequently, he urged Sturla to grant the Þorvaldssons a truce so that they could pass through the Dalir district on their way from the Vestfirðir to Snorri’s home at Reykholt. Reluctantly, Sturla agreed (p. 334).

But Sturla did not keep the truce. When the brothers Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson rode past Sauðafell on their way to Reykholt, Sturla had them ambushed and killed. They had been making life difficult for his assembly supporters in the West Fjords, but it seems Sturla also felt it necessary to remove them in order to secure his own position in the region, as witnessed by his words about the elder brother Þórðr that “. . . no one who lived in Dalir could expect to attain power in the Vestfirðir as long as Þórðr was in Ísafjörður.”⁶⁷

65. *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:330; *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:243.

66. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:244; emphasis added. “Hefir Snorri meir en þrjú hundruð manna en við Sturla [Sighvatsson] höfum enn nokkurn afla og munum við ekki við Snorra skiljast að sinni.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:331.

67. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “. . . engi þyrfti sér ríki að ætla til mannvirðingar í Vestfjörðum sá er í Döllum sæti ef Þórður væri í Ísafirði.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:338. For an interesting discussion of the death of Þórðr Þorvaldsson and his brother Snorri, as well as their attack on Sauðafell, see Ármann Jakobsson, “Snorri and His Death: Youth, Violence and Autobiography in Medieval Iceland,” *Scandinavian Studies* 75, 3 (2003).

It is reported that “this event moved Snorri to fury,” yet he did not put up any obstacles to a truce with Sturla; according to *Íslendinga saga* this was because “he didn’t want to lose Sturla’s support at the Þing in the summer, in his cases against Kolbeinn ungi.”⁶⁸ As it happens, Snorri managed to negotiate a favorable settlement with Kolbeinn without coming to blows, acquiring ownership of half of all Kolbeinn’s chieftaincies while allowing him to continue to exercise power in them. In return Kolbeinn’s sister, Arnbjörg, was married to Snorri’s illegitimate son Órækja.

Crossing Boundaries

After Snorri and Órækja apparently sacrificed the friendship of their kinsmen for a marriage alliance with Kolbeinn the Young at the 1232 Alþingi, Sighvatr and his son Sturla avoided making any hasty move. They probably had no choice in the matter since that autumn they had received a letter from no less a personage than Archbishop Sigurðr of Niðarós, summoning them to Norway to answer for their repeated attacks on Bishop Guðmundr of Hólar. Sighvatr was old by this time, so Sturla alone went to Norway to “redeem them both.”⁶⁹ A modern reader will no doubt find it hard to understand why a powerful magnate like Sturla, then in the thick of a struggle to extend his authority, would have been prepared to abandon his dominion and family and undertake a dangerous journey in obedience to the archbishop’s summons. The explanation is that, in common with his contemporaries, Sturla believed the Church could influence the fate of his soul after death. If he were to have any chance of going to heaven in the next life, he needed to have his excommunication rescinded.

Sturla headed abroad, leaving his dominion in the care of his father Sighvatr. At this point the brothers-in-law Kolbeinn and Órækja began to harass Sighvatr, due to Kolbeinn’s belief that Sighvatr meant to suborn his supporters. Together, Kolbeinn and Órækja attacked Kálfr Guttormsson, Sighvatr’s main ally in the

68. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:259. “. . . hann vildi eigi missa liðveislu Sturlu á þingi um sumarið í málum þeirra Kolbeins unga.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:345.

69. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:262. “. . . leysa mál þeirra beggja.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:347.

Skagafjörður district, killing him and his son in spite of the fact that both were ordained priests. In doing so, Kolbeinn and Órækja violated an important ruling of canon law; a sin that could be absolved only by pilgrimage to Rome.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, Órækja also mismanaged the authority his father had entrusted to him in the West Fjords, ordering the killing of Oddr Álason, Sturla's best friend in the west, as a result of listening to slander (pp. 352–54), and thus earning Sturla's enmity a second time. He also plundered the lands under his uncle Þórðr's control, helping to weaken the relationship between Snorri and Þórðr, although when they were eventually reunited the brothers did manage to come to terms (pp. 372–73).

Kolbeinn the Young was to prove a troublesome ally to Snorri. A man of violent temper, he became angry with Snorri for harboring his enemies, and this culminated in a near clash between the two men's forces at the 1234 Alþingi. Órækja now chose to side with his father rather than his brother-in-law (p. 361), and Sighvatr, quick to spot an opening, made his peace with Kolbeinn and turned him against Snorri. The two men sent their henchmen south to raid Snorri's farm, as already mentioned. In the spring of 1235, when Kolbeinn the Young decided to undertake a pilgrimage to absolve himself of the killing of Kálfr and his son, he entrusted his authority to Sighvatr rather than to Snorri. No longer enjoying the backing of his brother-in-law, Órækja now sought reconciliation with Sighvatr, but this was slow to come about.

By the time Sturla Sighvatsson returned to Iceland, his status had undergone a significant change. His excommunication had been lifted and King Hákon had entrusted him with the task of bringing the Icelanders under his sway. Sturla began with his uncle and cousin, Snorri and Órækja. When Snorri got wind that an army was mobilizing in the north, he sent for Órækja, who gathered a force of six hundred men and rode south to rendezvous with his father:

Þórð Sturluson and Þorleif from Garð had then arrived at Reykjaholt. There were great plans: Órækja suggested they turn north with all the

70. On this, see Helgi Þorláksson, "Rómarvald og kirkjugóðar," *Skírnir* 156 (1982): 57.

strength they could muster, and many of the most eager among them urged this strongly. But Snorri was not ready for this move against his brother in the holy days of that season. They then decided to send their in-law Sölmund north with Orm Klængsson to sue for peace. And Órækja went to the Dales to halt his force.⁷¹

This was certainly the deciding moment in the internal conflicts of the Sturlungar clan. Belligerent men on both sides, probably members of the younger generation like Órækja and Sturla, were eager to resort to arms, while the older generation had other things on their mind, as already suggested. They were advancing in age and they had to consider whether they were ready to account for their actions before the Lord on the Day of Judgment. Snorri seems to have been mindful of this fact when he refused to attack his brother during Lent in 1236, in keeping with his earlier emphasis on maintaining peace with the Church. It would also explain why he did not put up any resistance when Sturla and Sighvatr invaded his territory on Palm Sunday that same year and took control. Instead he fled, first to Bessastaðir, then to the south-west lowlands.

Shortly afterward Sturla ordered the maiming of Órækja, which caused many of their kinsmen to turn against him, including Þorleifr Þórðarson, a *goði* in the south of the Borgarfjörður district, who was also a maternal relative of the Sturlusons. In spite of this Sturla managed to thwart an attempt by Snorri's friends to drive him out in the battle of Bær, which resulted in heavy losses. Snorri now felt he had no choice but to seek the help of his friend Earl Skúli in Norway. Given that Sturla had often acted with excessive violence in their disputes, Snorri's decision to abstain from fighting in the battle of Bær did not necessarily stem from cowardice and vacillation as has sometimes been suggested.⁷² It is fairly clear from *Íslendinga*

71. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:293. “Var þá kominn í Reykjaholt Þórður Sturluson og Þorleifur úr Gördum. Var þar þá ráðagerð mikil. Vildi Órækja að snúið væri á norður með allan afla þann er fengist. Voru þess margir fýsendur þeir er framgjarnir voru en Snorri var eigi búinn að fara að bróður sínum á þeim hátíðum er þá fóru í hönd. Var það þá ráð tekið að þeir sendu norður Sölmund mág sinn og Orm Klængsson að leita um sættir en Órækja fór í Dali að hnekkja vestur flokkinum.” *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:376.

72. See Sigurður Nordal, *Mannlýsingar*, vol. 1, *Frá Snorra til Hallgríms* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1986), 60. Similarly, Nordal gives short shrift

saga that Snorri did not want to fall into Sturla's hands. Indeed, he had good reason to fear such a fate, bearing in mind how Sturla had treated the Þorvaldssons, half-brothers of his nephew, despite having agreed to a truce.

Of Bastards, Canon Law and Norwegian Politics

Íslendinga saga records the following informative exchange between two aging chieftains at the 1232 Alþingi, on the subject of Kolbeinn's and Snorri's deal:

Þorvald Gizurarson asked Þórð Sturluson why he thought that the agreement had been reached so swiftly, when men had even left off negotiating.

"I can't explain that," said Þórð, "but I am afraid that my brother Snorri has shifted his allegiances—has sold the friendship of Sighvat and Sturla and taken up friendship with Kolbeinn; I am afraid that we brothers will endure very great misfortunes before this ends."

Þorvald then said: "It seems remarkable to me that Kolbeinn would marry his sister, legitimately born, to Snorri's illegitimate son. But the old saying is true, a man knows best what his own goods are worth."⁷³

The conversation is interesting for a number of reasons. For one, Þórð is of the opinion that Snorri has swapped his friendship with Sturla and Sighvatr in return for that of Kolbeinn. His prediction was to come true some time later when Kolbeinn and Órækja attacked Sighvatr during Sturla's absence abroad, and Órækja also took advantage of the chance to persecute Sturla's supporters in the

to the idea that Snorri's decision "að fara ekki að bróður sínum" (not to attack his brother) (*ibid.*, 65) was governed by piety.

73. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:260–61. "Þorvaldur Gissurarson spurði Þórð Sturluson hví hann ætlaði að svo skjótt mundi saman hafa gengið sættin síðan þeir gengu úr milli að fara. 'Eigi veit eg það,' segir Þórður, 'en uggj eg að Snorri bróðir minn muni gert hafa vinaskipti og selt vináttu Sighvats og Sturlu en tekið við vináttu Kolbeins er mig uggir að vér frændur munum mestan ófarnað af hljóta áður lýkur.' Þorvaldur mælti þá: 'Undarlegt þykir mér er Kolbeinn vildi gifta systur sína skilfengna hórkonusyni Snorra. En það er satt er mælt er að sjálfur veit gerst hverjum varningi verja á.'" *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:346.

West Fjords.⁷⁴ It seems likely therefore that Snorri was using his alliance with Kolbeinn to put further pressure on his brother and nephew, while simultaneously improving the position of Órækja, his only living son.

Does Snorri's behavior prove that he invariably sacrificed feelings such as fraternal loyalty to self-interest? Or that his pursuit of power and prestige, coupled with the desire to pass on the success of his efforts to the next generation, took priority over everything else? Snorri's volte-face would seem to suggest as much, but we must never forget that this is the historian Sturla Þórðarson's view of Snorri's behavior, placed in the mouths of his characters. We could put a quite different construction on Snorri's actions. Perhaps he felt Sturla Sighvatsson had put himself beyond the pale by ordering the killing of the brothers Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson, despite his promise to grant them a truce. Since Sturla had proved that he could not be trusted, Snorri may have felt it necessary to strengthen his and Órækja's position by making a deal with Kolbeinn before he could begin to improve his son's prospects. Órækja was one of two possible heirs; the other was his grandson Einarr Þorvaldsson, who was only a child at the time.

Another point worth noting in the chieftains' conversation is Þorvaldr's opinion that Órækja was an unworthy match for Kolbeinn's sister. Órækja was illegitimate, which placed strict limitations on his right to inherit from his father and thus made him a rather undesirable prospective son-in-law for chieftains of noble blood. This may explain why Snorri was even more reluctant to make the church estate at Stafholt over to Órækja than to his legitimate son, Jón murtr, leaving Órækja with little choice but to seize it more or less by force, as we have seen. The lack of a legitimate son or daughter must surely have presented a problem for Snorri, since the law differentiated between the rights of legitimate and illegitimate

74. It is also interesting that Þórðr seems to have predicted what was to happen much later, when Kolbeinn was instrumental in bringing about the death of Sighvatr and many other members of the Sturlungar clan. The historian Sturla quoted several other comments of this type by his father (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:290), and one cannot avoid the suspicion that this was a stylistic device; in other words, he used his father's gift of foresight as a literary motif in order to create suspense.

offspring, making it harder for him to pass on his property and power to the next generation.⁷⁵

Yet there were various ways to circumvent the problem. A concept in canon law known as *legitimatio per subsequens parentum coniugium* granted children born out of wedlock the same right to inherit as legitimate offspring, contingent upon their parents' subsequent marriage. The provision is found in the *Liber extra* of 1234, based on a papal edict promulgated sixty years earlier.⁷⁶ We know of a bitter dispute that broke out over this provision in England in 1235, when the Bishop of Lincoln tried to implement papal policy by securing recognition for this ruling in the secular law code. He met with strong opposition from the king and aristocracy who wished to limit the right to inherit as far as possible in order to prevent their territories from being divided up among multiple heirs. In the end the bishop was forced to back down and this particular provision of ecclesiastical law did not enter secular law in England until a much later date.⁷⁷

There are no records of such disputes in Iceland or Norway, nor can any equivalent provision be found in Icelandic or Norwegian law until the second half of the thirteenth century. Yet the dispute between Egill Skallagrímsson and Berg-Önundr over the inheritance of Egill's wife Ásgerðr Bjarnardóttir, described in chapter 57 of *Egils saga*, hinges on this very principle of *legitimatio per subsequens parentum coniugium*. Her parents eloped without permission, but after a reconciliation, the dowry of Þóra, Ásgerðr's mother, was paid out and it was agreed that Ásgerðr should be accepted as an heir (*til arfs tekin*). Konrad Maurer wrote about this case in *Egils saga* over a century ago, having spotted its similarity to the provision in the *Liber extra*. However, believing the saga to

75. After Snorri was killed, Gizurr Þorvaldsson regarded Helga, Snorri's full sister, and her husband Sölmundr as Snorri's heirs. He seems to have been justified in this view because they had to hand over Snorri's legacy to Órækja before the latter could lay claim to it. See *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:440 and 1:450.

76. *Liber Extra* 4, 18, 6, in Catholic Church, *Corpus iuris canonici*, Editio lipsiensis secunda, ed. Aemilius Friedberg (Leipzig: Ex officina Bernhardi Tauchnitz, 1879–81), 2:712.

77. For an account of this clash, see R. W. Southern, *Robert Grosseteste: The Growth of an English Mind in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 252–57.

be older than is generally agreed today, he attributed any similarity to coincidence on the grounds that the relevant article of canon law was not introduced into Icelandic law until the 1270s.⁷⁸ He was apparently unaware that the clause in question had been a bone of contention between clerics and nobles in England as early as the mid-1230s.

The extant sources do not mention any conflict over this provision of canon law in Norway or Iceland equivalent to that in England, yet it is highly probable that the Archbishop of Niðarós would have received a copy of the *Liber extra* in 1234 like other servants of the papacy, and tried to introduce the clause into Norwegian secular law, ordering the Icelandic bishops to follow his example. As lawspeaker, Snorri Sturluson would have been involved in introducing innovations in canon law into the secular lawcode in 1217. He was either still lawspeaker in 1234 or had only recently stepped down, and would therefore have been in a better position to know about this provision of canon law than almost any other Icelandic layman. Whether he or somebody in his entourage composed *Egils saga*, it is tempting to speculate that *legitimatio per subsequens parentum coniugium* was being discussed in the period, and that the case of Ásgerðr's inheritance is a reference to a thirteenth-century reality.

The likelihood of this canon being known in the entourage of Snorri is even greater in light of his friendship with Earl Skúli of Norway. If the provision would have been adopted into Norwegian law, there is a possibility that the earl could have used it to strengthen his political standing. Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* reports that when Andrés skjaldarband, a kinsman of the king, went missing on a pilgrimage to Rome, it emerged that the boy previously believed to have been Andrés' son was in fact the son of Earl Skúli. The earl recognized the boy, whose name was Pétur, took him into his home,⁷⁹ and would thereby have acquired a male heir if the law allowed him to legitimize Pétur. The saga makes no reference to canon law, but Skúli and Pétur were often

78. Konrad Maurer, *Zwei Rechtsfälle in der Eigla* (Munich: F. Straub, 1895), 114ff. See also Theodore M. Andersson's remarks on this court case in *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (2006), 112.

79. See *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (1945), 445.

in close proximity to the Archbishop of Niðarós, who endeavored to bring about a settlement between the earl and King Hákon. As just mentioned, the archbishop is bound to have had a copy of *Liber extra* in which the provision was found. At one mediation meeting, held in 1236 and attended by the bishop, Skúli laid down the conditions for his settlement with Hákon as follows: “it was decided in relation to the share of land allotted to him that his son Pétur should inherit it after him.”⁸⁰ But the king refused to countenance it: “But when the matter was raised before the king he denied it categorically, saying that none of his own offspring should inherit Norway unless he was of Queen Margret’s line.”⁸¹ Skúli’s wife, Ragnhildr, was still alive at this point, which means that legitimizing Pétur by marrying his mother and invoking *legitimatio per subsequens parentum coniugum* would have been difficult. Hákon ruled out the possibility that any children but those he fathered in wedlock could inherit his kingdom, an example that no doubt applied to others, including earls, who held their office from the king, as well as to royal vassals such as Snorri.

Snorri’s son Órækja arrived in Norway that very summer, a fact reported by Sturla Þórðarson in direct continuation of his account of the peace negotiations between King Hákon and Earl Skúli. A year later Snorri too arrived in Norway, where he stayed with Pétur Skúlason (p. 395). Men such as Skúli and Pétur (the latter of whom was specifically described as “a good and pious cleric”)⁸² would almost certainly have pursued every avenue to secure their legal rights. The canon-law provision would surely therefore have cropped up in conversation between them and their more legally-minded house-guests such as Snorri.

Could Snorri conceivably have been thinking of marrying Þuríðr Hallsdóttir, Órækja’s mother, in order to improve his son’s position? The sources do not even tell us whether Þuríðr was alive at this

80. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “. . . það væri skilið um þann hlut, sem honum væri skipað af landi, að Pétur, son hans, skyldi taka eftir hann.” *Hákonar saga* (1945), 463.

81. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “En er þetta var flutt fyrir konunginum, þá neitaði hann berlega þessu og sagði svo, að aldrei skyldi hans afspringi erfa Noreg nema sá einn, er kominn væri af ætt Margrétar drottningar.” *Ibid.*

82. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “. . . klerkur góður og trúmaður.” *Hákonar saga* (1945), 513.

point in the story, let alone whether Snorri was in a position to marry, given his cohabitation with Hallveig Ormsdóttir. This cohabitation does not seem to have constituted a legally recognized marriage, since Herdís Bersadóttir, Snorri's wife, was still alive when his partnership with Hallveig was established in 1223. According to the annals, Herdís died in 1233. Four years later Snorri and his son Órækja were both in Norway and so it is perfectly possible that they were considering a move towards legitimization.

If it is right that the pivotal case in the tale of Egill's hostilities with King Eiríkr is based on a thirteenth-century legal issue of major political importance, it is all the more remarkable that in reality, as in the saga, it was the king who was opposed to recognizing the right of an illegitimate son to inherit. It is tempting to see a connection between King Hákon's attitude and Snorri's opposition to him. If the adoption of this canon law provision into the secular legislation was vital to Snorri's and Órækja's interests, they may have been extremely unhappy at the king's refusal to give his consent. It may even have been one of the reasons why Snorri decided to return to Iceland, in direct contravention of the king's orders, just before Skúli led an uprising against Hákon and usurped the throne for himself. Perhaps Snorri saw a way of securing his own interests and the future of his son if Skúli was victorious in his struggle with Hákon. At any rate, Snorri clearly took a great risk by flouting the rules of the court and returning to Iceland against the king's express orders.

Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* has the following to say of Snorri's parting from Skúli:

When they were again all ready, Duke Skúli entertained them at a feast before they took their leave. There were few men then present at the conversation between Snorri and the duke. Arnfinnr Þjófsson and Óláfr hvítaskáld were with the duke, but Órækja and Þorleifr were with Snorri. Arnfinnr's story was that the duke gave Snorri the title of "jarl" and so Styrmir fróði wrote of "the anniversary of Snorri's secret jarldom"; but none of the Icelanders present admitted it was true.⁸³

83. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Og þá er þeir voru búnir hafði hertoginn þá í boði

The Arnfinnr credited as the source of this information was none other than the Skúli's marshal, who would surely have been in a position to know what he was talking about. Styrmir, meanwhile, was one of Snorri's chief confidants, as often emerges in the sources (p. 308), such as the occasion when Snorri ordered him to ride to the assembly and deputize for him as lawspeaker (pp. 328–29). Styrmir's words, which were presumably recorded in the Obituary of Viðey monastery, ought therefore to be regarded as a reliable source. The kinsmen Órækja, Óláfr, and Þorleifr had moreover good reason to keep quiet about Snorri's title as it would have further weakened Snorri's and their own case against King Hákon if it were proved that Snorri had accepted the title of earl from a rebel.⁸⁴

Snorri's earldom should be seen in the context of his assassination. If he had accepted the title, he would without doubt have appeared a "traitor" in the eyes of King Hákon, and indeed the king accused him of treachery in the correspondence he sent to Gizurr Þorvaldsson in the summer of 1241, which led Gizurr to attack Snorri and order his execution (p. 439).

In this context it is worth considering the stanza attributed to Egill in chapter 68 of *Egils saga*. His friend Arinbjörn has given him a "Yuletide gift, a silk gown with ornate gold embroidery and gold buttons all the way down the front," and Egill composes the following verse on the occasion:

From kindness alone
that noble man gave the poet
a silk gown with gold buttons,

sínu áður þeir tóku orlof. Voru þá fáir menn við tal þeirra hertogans og Snorra. Arnfinnur Þjófsson og Ólafur hvítaskáld voru með hertoganum en Órækja og Þorleifur með Snorra. Og var það sögn Arnfinns að hertoginn gæfi Snorra jarlsnafn og svo hefir Styrmir hinn fróði ritað: 'Ártíð Snorra fólgsnarjarls.' En engi þeirra Íslendingana lét það á sannast." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:430.

84. For the historicity of this passage, see Sigurður Nordal, *Mannlýsingar*, vol. 1, *Frá Snorra til Hallgríms* (1986), 75. Much has been written on the subject over the years. Sverrir Tómasson refers to the discussion in his opponent's speech at Ármann Jakobsson's doctoral defense ("Andmælaræður við doktorsvörn Ármanns Jakobssonar 1. 2. 2003," *Gripla* 14 (2003): 298–99), referring to articles by Nils Hallan ("Snorri fólgsnarjarl," *Skírnir* 146 (1972)) and Hermann Pálsson ("Hirðskáld í spéspegli," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992)).

I will never have a better friend.
 Selfless Arinbjorn has earned
 the stature of a king
 —or more. A long time will pass
 before his like is born again.⁸⁵

“*Drengurinn*, that is, Arinbjörn, gave the poet gladly and of his own free will a silk gown decorated with gold buttons. I will never make a better friend. Arinbjorn has ruthlessly won himself (*árnað*) *oddvita ríki*, a dominion worthy of a king. His like will not be seen again any time soon.” Words of gratitude to an eminent friend such as these are the sort of sentiments that Snorri would have borne toward Earl Skúli, who at that time was busy acquiring *oddvita ríki*, by declaring himself king in opposition to King Hákon.⁸⁶ Not only does the ceremonial robe described belong to Snorri’s own times rather than to the tenth century, but it is also a garment intended not for commoners but for the exclusive use of the leading members of society.⁸⁷ It was aristocratic attire, and one cannot help thinking it might be an allusion to the title of earl that Snorri himself had received and to the clothes that men of this rank would have worn at court.

From his return to Iceland in the summer of 1239 until news was brought of Skúli’s downfall a year later, Snorri must have been under the impression that he held the rank of earl. By gambling on Skúli rather than Hákon, he must have believed he had significantly improved his own position, not least if he really did intend to

85. Scudder (2004), 146. “Sjálfráði lét slæður / silki drengur of fengit / gollknappaðar greppi, / getk aldri vin betr; / Arinbjörn hefr árnat / eirarlaust eða meira, / síð man seggr of fæðask / slíkr, oddvita ríki.” ÍF 2:213.

86. In his article “Konungsmenn í kreppu og vinátta í Egils sögu,” *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1999): 89–99, Baldur Hafstað discusses the possibility that Snorri may have had his friendship with Skúli in mind when he wrote *Egils saga*. Similar ideas are expressed in his book *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), 29–31.

87. Elsa E. Guðjónsson believes the description refers to a French ceremonial garment of the type known as a *bliaut*, presumably oriental in origin, which became fashionable in Europe in the twelfth century. She expressed this view in an interview with Ragnheiður Gyða Jónsdóttir in the programme *Þjóðarþel*, broadcast on Icelandic national radio on 17 February 1993.

legitimize Órækja by virtue of the same law that might possibly have enabled Pétur to become Skúli's heir.

The Aftermath of Örlygsstaðir

Snorri was still in Norway when news reached him of the deaths of Sighvatr, Sturla and three of Sighvatr's other sons. Kolbeinn the Young and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, close kinsmen of the sons of Sighvatr, had joined forces against Sturla Sighvatsson to put an end to his attempts to bring the country under the Crown and, consequently, under his own authority. They did so by killing Sturla, his brothers and many of his friends and relatives at the battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238.

Þórðr kakali, one of the two surviving sons of Sighvatr, was in Norway at the time, and Snorri sent a verse in which he refers to the fall of Þórðr's brothers.⁸⁸ Now that only two of the six brothers are still alive, the Sturlungar clan must accustom itself to hard terms (*afarkaupum*), in other words, they are now in a tight spot; a comment that no doubt applied equally to Snorri himself; both he and Þórðr were in an insecure position at home after the loss of their family and friends. On the other hand, it is not clear what Snorri means when he says of the Sighvatssons' fall that "rán vara lýðum launað laust" (men were not punished lightly for robbery). It is probably a reference to the widespread plundering perpetrated by Sturla and his men during the summer before the battle of Örlygsstaðir, for example in Gizurr Þorvaldsson's territory in Hvalfjörður. Gizurr told his men shortly before the battle that now it was time to "drive back this band of rovers"; probably a reference to the raids.⁸⁹

Here once again we encounter Snorri's tendency to express himself by inverting the meaning, though in this case the technique used is understatement rather than irony. When he says that the punishment for the plundering was not light, he is expressing the

88. "Tveir lifð Þórðr enn þeirra, / þá var æðri hlutr bræðra, / rán vara lýðum launað / laust, en sex á hausti. / Gerast svín, en verðr venjast, / vor ætt, ef svo mætti, / ýskelfandi, úlfar, / afarkaupum, samhlaupa." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:425.

89. *Sturlunga saga* (1970-74), 1:335. "... reka þessa óaldarflokka af sér." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:416; the plundering is described on p. 406.

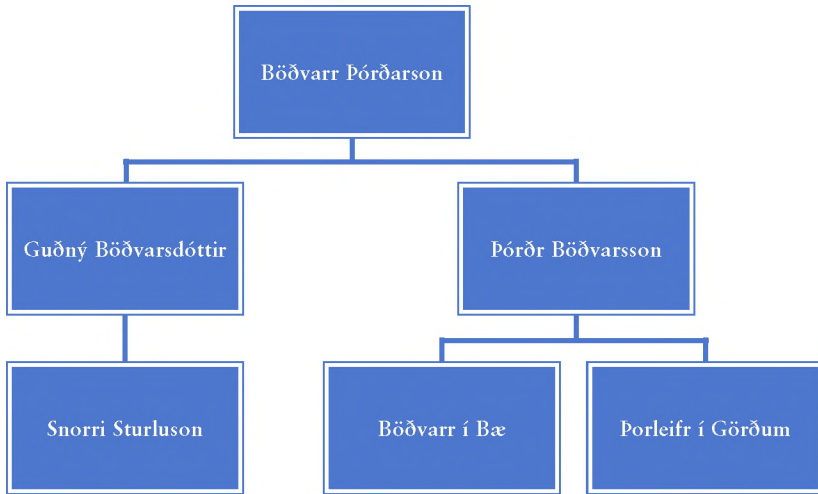
Main events 1235–1241

- 1235 Sturla Sighvatsson returns to Iceland after his pilgrimage to Rome and the meeting with King Hákon at which he undertook to bring the Icelanders under the Norwegian Crown.
- 1236 Sturla Sighvatsson assumes control of Snorri's dominion in Borgarfjörður. The battle of Bær. Snorri goes abroad.
- 1238 The battle of Örlýgsstaðir. The deaths of Sturla and Sighvatr.
- 1239 Snorri returns home to Iceland.
- 1241 The wedding of Tumi Sighvatsson and Þuríðr Ormsdóttir at Reykholt. Hallveig dies.

opinion that Kolbeinn and Gizurr had reacted far too harshly. Interestingly, when Snorri learns of the fall of his brother and nephew in Sturla Þórðarson's account, it is not said that he grieved the loss of the latter, only that he "thought the death of his brother Sighvatr a very great loss, as it was, although they had not always been given to agreement with one another."⁹⁰ No doubt Snorri still bore ill feeling toward Sturla for various wrongs, which have now been described.

Yet for all Snorri's sorrow at the death of Sighvatr and possible relief that Sturla was now out of the picture, he was faced with a difficult task on his return from Norway in 1239. To secure the backing of the Sturlungar and their kinsmen he needed to heal all the wounds of their recent internal strife. Þórðr Sturluson and his sons had reason to be suspicious of Órækja, who they felt had acted in a manner harmful to them, and various disputes were to arise between them during the few months that Snorri had left to live. Órækja even managed to become involved in a conflict with the brothers Sturla and Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, though they must surely have had some sympathy with him as they shared the stigma

90. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:345. "Þótti honum hinn mesti skaði eftir Sighvat bróður sinn sem var þó að þeir bæru eigi gæfu til samþykkis stundum sín á milli." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:425.



Snorri's relationship to Þorleifr í Görðum and Boddvarr í Bæ.

of illegitimacy, as well as his ambition and leadership qualities (pp. 433–37).⁹¹ The friends and former followers of Sturla and Sighvatr had even more reason to mistrust Órækja and Snorri, and to bear a grudge against them after all that had happened, not least Órækja's persecution of Sturla's supporters in the West Fjords.

The Sturlungar clan's long friendship with the Oddaverjar dynasty had also been damaged by the battle of Örlygsstaðir, in which Kolbeinn the Young had managed to compel most of the leading Oddaverjar to support him against Sturla. Snorri must have been at pains to remain on good terms with the family, since he owned a large farm and estates in Oddaverjar territory through his partnership with Hallveig Ormsdóttir. Moreover, Hálfðan á Keldum, one of the sons of Sæmundr of Oddi and a chieftain in the south country, was married to Snorri's niece Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir. Hálfðan had refused to send men to support Kolbeinn against his brother-in-law Sturla in the build-up to the confrontation at Örlygsstaðir, whereupon Kolbeinn had attacked and robbed him, a fact which no doubt led Snorri to identify Hálfðan as a potential ally against

91. See Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's informative article on the dispute between Sturla Þórðarson and Órækja, "Um Staðarhólmál Sturlu Þórðarsonar: Nokkrar athuganir á valdsmennsku um hans daga," *Skírnir* 159 (1985).

Gizurr and Kolbeinn (p. 402).⁹² Snorri was also busy consolidating the relationship between the Sturlungar and Oddaverjar by marriage alliances, arranging for one of Sighvatr's two surviving sons, Tumi, to wed Þuríðr Ormsdóttir, sister of Hallveig, Snorri's wife or partner (p. 433). He undertook to negotiate a compensation for Tumi's father, and had some communication with Gizurr Þorvaldsson, but Kolbeinn the Young seems to have sabotaged any chance of a settlement (p. 436).

During the hostilities with Sturla and Sighvatr it had become obvious how important it was for Snorri to have a good, solid relationship with his maternal relatives, who were *goðar* in Akranes and in the south of the Borgarfjörður district. Þorleifr Þórðarson, their main leader, was almost constantly in attendance on Snorri in his final years since they were neighbors and first cousins; Snorri's mother and Þorleifr's father were siblings. Þorleifr's disapproval of Órækja's behavior probably made life difficult for Snorri (p. 433), yet Snorri seems to have been eager to keep the family together in this period, as is evident from the way he reproached his nephew Sturla Þórðarson for quarreling with Órækja over control of Staðarfell in the Dalir region. That Órækja made an effort to come to terms with Sturla on the same issue may indicate that father and son were in agreement on this matter (pp. 436–37).

The Composition of *Egils saga*

Scholars have conjectured that Snorri may have written *Egils saga* in the period 1239–1241.⁹³ If this is correct, there are many elements in the saga that would fit in well with the context that has been described here: Egill was the common ancestor of the Sturlungar and

92. It was not until after Snorri's death that Kolbeinn made recompense to Hálfðan for the outrage (*Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:451).

93. For the argument that Snorri wrote *Egils saga* in the last years of his life, see Jónas Kristjánsson, "Var Snorri upphafsmaður Íslendingasagna?" *Andvari* 115, n.s. 32, 1 (1990): 103ff., and also Bjarni Einarsson, "Skáldið í Reykjaholti," in *Eyvindarbók* (Oslo, 1992). Two other scholars have disputed the idea that the saga was composed after the completion of *Heimskringla*: Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir, "Hvenær var Egils saga rituð?" in *Yfir Íslandsála* (1992) and Margaret Cormack, "Heimskringla, Egils saga, and the Daughter of Eiríkr blóðöx," in *Sagas and the Norwegian Experience* (1997).

the *goðar* who ruled in the south of Borgarfjörður; Snorri controlled Reykholt and had inherited the *goðorð* of the Mýrarmenn from his wife and children; the exaggeration of Skallagrím's land-claim and the description of his descendants' eminence in the region may have been intended as a reminder of the dominions held by Snorri and his kinsmen in Borgarfjörður.

The old ties of friendship between the descendants of Skallagrím and the Oddaverjar clan emerge in the saga in the account of Ketill hæng's land-taking. After avenging Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, Ketill sailed out to Iceland and claimed land at Rangárvellir in the south, and the Oddaverjar were among his descendants. Many of those who attribute the saga's authorship to Snorri have pointed to his strong ties with the Oddaverjar and the likelihood that he was commemorating those ties with the account of Ketill hæng's land-taking.⁹⁴

Kinship ties with leading men in the Dalir region of west Iceland were also important to Snorri, as he shared power there with his brothers and their heirs. These ties are mentioned in chapter 79 of *Egils saga* with the reference to the marriage between Óláfr pá Höskuldsson and Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir. In the following chapter the story of Einarr skálaglam, uncle of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, can be seen in the same light. Egill's friends were Oddaverjar on the one hand and men of Dalir on the other, and the saga mentions them in a favorable light that accords well with Snorri's political position during the months in question.

Nor should one forget the strong interest in literature exhibited by the chieftains of the old Vestfirðir quarter, particularly his nephews, Óláfr hvítaskáld and Sturla Þórðarson, whom Snorri was trying to rally to his cause. Both spent a great deal of time with Snorri during their formative years and were no less effective agents in the literary field than they were in the landowning field, to refer to the concepts of Bourdieu explored in an earlier chapter. Since an interest in literature was characteristic of Icelandic chieftains in the period, appealing to their memories of an old poet who was also in most cases their ancestor might have seemed a good way of fostering a sense of fellow feeling.

94. On this see Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 88–89.

One of Sturla Þórðarson's stories indicates that the memory of Egill was very much alive in Snorri's time. When describing Snorri's decision as a young chieftain to move from Borg to Reykholt, Sturla includes the following story:

There was a man named Egil Halldórsson, of the Mýramen. He was a homeman of Snorri's when Snorri was making these plans. Egil dreamt that Egil Skallagrímsson came to him and was frowning greatly. He said, "Does our kinsman Snorri intend to leave this place?"

"So men say," said Egil.

"If he means to leave, then he does ill," said the dream-Egil, "for men had seldom been able to lord it over us Mýramen when we prospered, nor need he now scorn this land."⁹⁵

Egill then speaks a verse which implies that Snorri cannot bear comparison with his ancestor.⁹⁶ He is a lily-livered coward whose "blood is white as snow" and, unlike Egill who claims "a sharp sword won me lands," Snorri does not acquire wealth through deeds of arms. If this story is not pure fabrication by Sturla Þórðarson, it would suggest that the memory of Egill gave his descendants an incentive to maintain their position in thirteenth-century society.⁹⁷ They owed their prestige in part to the generations of settlers, and the ruthless Viking who was also a skilled poet may have lived on in their tales as a symbol of the toughness needed to hold one's own in society. Perhaps he embodied the qualities a man required to be a successful *goði* or *þingmaðr* in thirteenth-century Iceland.

95. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:131. "Maður hét Egill Halldórsson. Hann var af Mýramanna langfeðgum. Hann var heimamaður Snorra þá er hann var í þessum ráðbrotum. Egil dreymdi að Egill Skalla-Grímsson kæmi að honum og var mjög ófrýnlegur. Hann mælti: 'Ætlar Snorri frændi vor í brott hédan?' 'Það er satt,' segir Egill. 'Það gerir hann illa,' segir draummaðurinn, 'því að lítt hafa menn setið yfir hlut vorum Mýramanna þá er oss tíngaðist og þurfti hann eigi ofsjónum yfir þessu landi að sjá.'" *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:212.

96. "Egill kvað vísu: Seggr sparir sverði að höggva. / Snjóhvítt er blóð líta. / Skæröld getum skýra. / Skarpr brandr fékk þar landa, / skarpr brandr fékk mér landa." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:212.

97. On this see Robert J. Glendinning, "The Dreams in Sturla Þórðarson's Íslendingasaga and Literary Consciousness in 13th Century Iceland," *Arv* 29–30 (1973–74).

If this was the case, Snorri or whoever composed the saga may have taken the character of Egill, as it had survived in more or less reshaped legends about him, and had also been associated with his poetry, and made him the protagonist of a work closely related to the kings' sagas that were being written during those years. Yet although related to *Heimskringla* and other comparable works, this saga nevertheless differed from them in centering on a family of Icelandic settlers instead of on the Norwegian royal dynasty. Snorri, along with many of his Icelandic contemporaries, was well versed in the ideology underpinning royal authority, which was based in part on Old Testament stories of the Israelite kings. Snorri probably became acquainted with these stories in his boyhood at Oddi and later on his visits to Norway. *Egils saga* is composed against this ideological background, but serves the same purpose for him and his kinsmen in the west of Iceland as the kings' sagas did for kings. To use Bourdieu's terms, it defines the social status of the group to which Snorri belongs.

In the same way that *Hallfreðar saga* defines its troublesome poet protagonist first and foremost as a royal retainer, as discussed earlier, *Egils saga* defines the status of the men of Mýrar as authority figures in their home district. Their relationship with Norwegian royal authority is more complicated, however. Egill's family's attitude toward kings is ambivalent: on the one hand they are drawn to the court as a place where they can improve their status, and on the other they know the court exposes them to the risk of suffering at the hands of an unjust king. With his violent temper, Egill does not hesitate to rebel against the king, who acts illegally toward him.

Snorri was himself in rebellion against royal authority at this time, having disobeyed the king's prohibition to leave Norway in 1239. From the evidence of the sources this seems to have marked a turning point in his relations with royalty. Previously he had been made a vassal and even sent his son to stay long-term at court; he was himself bound by the laws of the royal court. The sense of oppression that informs *Egils saga's* account of the Norwegian kings becomes more comprehensible if we assume that the saga was composed in the period 1239–1241, after Snorri had irrevocably committed himself to supporting Earl Skúli.

The same applies to the saga's allusions to innovations in canon law, if it is correct that the lawsuit over Ásgerðr's inheritance is a

“court drama” based on the provision *legitimatio per subsequens parentum coniugium*. As we have seen, this provision seems to have been little known before 1234, but both Snorri’s circumstances and those of Earl Skúli make it likely that they might have discussed the provision during the last years of their lives.

In view of this it is interesting that *Egils saga* stages both Egill’s grief at the death of Böðvarr and also his reconciliation with his younger son Þorsteinn, of whom the saga states “Egill unni honum lítið” (Egill was not very fond of him) (chapter 82). No doubt Snorri endured great sorrow over the loss of Jón murtr, which left him with only his illegitimate son Órækja to rely on. The saga’s account of how Egill comes to the aid of Þorsteinn in his dispute with Steinar Sjóðason could be interpreted as a kind of promise on Snorri’s part to support Órækja, his younger son, despite the bad blood between them in the past.

A Peace Offering to the Sturlungar

Snorri’s political goal in the last years of his life seems to have been to sustain the authority that the Sturlungar and their kinsmen wielded in the Vestfirðir and western districts of Iceland. To achieve this he had to overcome the internal strife that had caused rifts in their ranks over the preceding decade. At the same time Snorri needed to secure the future of his son and grandson. Many aspects of *Egils saga* fit in well with this context, dealing as it does in a covert way with a tragic conflict between close kinsmen and imbuing it with a religious significance. The saga displays an attitude to the Norwegian kings that is likely to have been shared by Snorri and his supporters in that period, while at the same time implying that royal authority was to some extent legitimized by Salvation history. Yet above all the saga is concerned with ancestor of the Sturlungar and many of their close relatives and allies, a master of the art that was so highly prized among these people, that of poetry. Let us consider what reason a work of this kind might have been compiled in Snorri’s entourage.

As shown in the first section of this book, *Egils saga* is a finely wrought piece of narrative and poetic art, a treasure of the sort that was not uncommonly associated with peace agreements in the

Middle Ages. An obvious example would be the gold-inlaid spear that Snorri gave his brother Sighvatr as a peace-offering when they made a joint decision on the compensation to be set for the killing of the Þorvaldssons (p. 349). Peace agreements were often sealed with a banquet, and this necessitated the arrangement of entertainments to last over several days. It is quite possible that *Egils saga* was written to be read aloud on an occasion of this kind, a banquet attended by all those Snorri wished to reconcile and rally behind him in the coming years. As such it would be in keeping with what we know of medieval culture, both in Iceland and elsewhere in Europe.⁹⁸ Contemporary examples can be found in other countries of complex works of literature believed to have been composed as gifts or entertainments at aristocratic nuptials. It has been argued, for example, that the verse romance *Erec et Enide*, by Chrétien de Troyes, was composed to celebrate the wedding of Geoffrey (died 1186), one of the sons of King Henry II of England.⁹⁹ The evidence we have from the sagas about the circumstances of saga entertainment suggests that they were composed and delivered at festive occasions.¹⁰⁰ The parallel with the romances of Chrétien is made even more relevant by the fact that in the first decades of the thirteenth century many French romances, among them several by Chrétien, were translated at the behest of King Hákon of Norway.¹⁰¹

98. On gifts in the Middle Ages, see two anthologies: *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi et al., Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 188 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht and Brill, 2003) and *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context*, ed. Esther Cohen and Mayke B. de Jong (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

99. Geoffrey was half-brother of Marie de Champagne, whom Chrétien served. See Joseph Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 8–11 and 62–64.

100. See Lars Lönnroth's remarks in "Old Norse text as performance," *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009): 53: "The impression one gets from sources such as these is that saga entertainment as well as poetic recitals are particularly associated with festive occasions in aristocratic surroundings, usually in the presence of kings, earls, chieftains and high officials." For a discussion of literary performance in a general medieval context see J. Harris and K. Reichl, "Performance and Performers," in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012).

101. See Torfi H. Tulinius, "Writing Strategies: Romance and the Creation of a New Genre in Medieval Iceland," in *Textual Production and Status Contests in Rising and Unstable Societies*, ed. Massimiliano Bampi and Marina Buzzoni (Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2013).

We know of at least one wedding feast in Iceland in the period 1239–1241 that would fit the bill, since it sealed the peace treaty of the Sturlungar clan as well as a strengthening of the alliance with the Oddaverjar: that of Tumi Sighvatsson and Þuríðr Ormsdóttir. Tumi was one of Sturla Sighvatsson's two surviving brothers, whom Snorri had set up in the world by arranging for him to take over the manor at Sauðafell formerly owned by his father and brother. This shows how important it was to Snorri to achieve a full and sincere reconciliation with his kinsmen and their followers. Þuríðr was the sister of Hallveig, Snorri's wife or partner, and Snorri hosted the wedding feast himself at Reykholt in the spring of 1241.

The story of Egill Skallagrímsson, ancestor of Tumi, Snorri and most of their supporters, would have been singularly fitting both as gift and entertainment at a banquet of this kind. It must have been very entertaining for all its recipients, but was also charged with a deeper meaning that would have been accessible to those whose intellect Snorri respected, those capable of interpreting cryptic skaldic verses and perceiving the allegorical meaning that underlay the literal surface of the text.

Snorri's purpose in composing *Egils saga*, or having it composed, would thus have been to justify his own and his kinsmen's authority, as well as rallying his family behind him in the difficult conditions in which the Sturlungar and their supporters in west Iceland found themselves after the battle of Örlygsstaðir. The decision to model Egill's life story on that of King David becomes more understandable in this light.¹⁰² As King David was seen as the predecessor of all European kings and a justification for royal power, narratives written about the ancestors of these kings tended to allude to his story in the Bible.¹⁰³ Given that David was not merely a king but a poet

102. See Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (1996), 388–96. On David as the predecessor of kings and poets, see H. Steger, *David rex et propheta: König David als vorbildliche Verkörperung des Herrschers und Dichters im Mittelalter nach Bilddarstellung des achten bis zwölften Jahrhunderts*, Erlanger Beiträge zur Sprach- und Kunstwissenschaft 6 (Nuremberg: Carl, 1961).

103. A good example can be found in *Sverris saga* (in *Flateyjarbók* (1944–45), 3:151), where the prophet Samuel, who anointed David, visits Sverrir in a dream: “Þá mælti sjá hinn gamli maðr við Sverri: ‘Lát mig sjá hendr þínar,’ sagði hann. Hann þóttist fram rétta báðar hendr. Síðan smurði þessi maðr hendr hans og mælti svá: ‘Smyrist ok helgist hendr þessar til hatrs óvinum ok móttstöðumönnum at stjórna mörgum lýðum.’” “And the old man said, ‘Let me see thy hands.’ And Sverri

as well, he would have seemed an obvious figure for comparison with Snorri's ancestor Egill. In Pierre Bourdieu's terms, *Egils saga* is defining reality in the context of contemporary ideology and in the interest of Snorri and his entourage.

If this hypothesis about the genesis of *Egils saga* is right, then the saga is a work of art with a social function (wedding entertainment and peace offering rolled into one).¹⁰⁴ Western medieval culture yields numerous examples of works of art that to a modern eye appear to be mere depictions of reality, whether imagined or factual, yet contain an allegorical meaning that would presumably have been obvious to the artist's contemporaries. A good example is Jan van Eyck's famous *Arnolfini Portrait* of 1434, ostensibly a simple portrayal of a mercantile couple in their prime, in their rich but unostentatious home.¹⁰⁵ The modern viewer may take it for granted that a couple of this sort would want a portrait of themselves and commission a famous painter for the task. Yet this would be to overlook much that is odd about the picture and lends it a deeper significance. The art historian Erwin Panofsky argued that the picture is to be interpreted on an allegorical, no less than a worldly, level, and was, moreover, intended to serve a specific social function.¹⁰⁶ The artist has loaded the picture with symbols connected to the sacrament of marriage: the merchant is holding the bride's hand in his left hand while raising his right to swear an oath, as canon law dictated should be done during the wedding ceremony; the fruit on the window sill is a well-known symbol for the purity of Man before the Fall; the statue of St. Margaret on the bed-post is a reference to the patron saint of childbirth; the dog is a common symbol of wifely fidelity, and the mirror, decorated with

stretched out both his hands towards him. And the man anointed them, saying, 'May these hands be sanctified and made strong to hate foes and opponents, and to govern much people.'" Trans. John Sephton in *Sverris saga* (1899), 12.

104. It is in this wider meaning that I believe the saga's relationship to social memory must be understood. Memory is invoked and recreated to serve a purpose in the present.

105. See the information page of the National Gallery, London, on *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434, Jan van Eyck), accessed 6 November 2014, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>.

106. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 201–3.

ten scenes from the Passion of Christ, symbolizes the purity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The additional fact that husband and wife are depicted in their bedroom makes it clear that the picture is loaded with symbols relating to the Christian idea of marriage. As Panofsky points out, contemporary canon law did not stipulate the presence of a priest at a wedding ceremony, a fact that may explain why the painter has included himself and another figure in the mirror: they were the witnesses to the marriage. Van Eyck's signature on the wall above the mirror, *Johannes de Eyck fuit hic*, is confirmation that he was present at the ceremony and that it had taken place. The picture of the Arnolfini couple is therefore not merely a double portrait, it is a declaration that their wedding has taken place and that it is charged with the symbolism of Christian ritual, albeit a "disguised symbolism," as Panofsky calls it. Although the painting dates from around two centuries later than *Egils saga*, it is tempting to see it as analogous to the saga. The reality mediated by the picture seems tangible and material but is in fact composed of allegorical symbols alluding to another world. Moreover, both picture and saga have a social function.¹⁰⁷

Public and Private Penance

If Snorri Sturluson composed *Egils saga*, he was not merely a witness to the events with which the saga is concerned beneath the surface; unlike van Eyck, he was also a participant in these events. The saga may have had a social function like the picture of the Arnolfinis but it may equally have been the personal expression of a penitent sinner.

In chapter 3 it was suggested that the story in *Egils saga* of the shield that "skrifaðr var fornsögum" [was adorned with legends] could be an example of a common literary topos known as ekphrasis, that is, a description of a work of art, embedded in a text, that sheds light on the surrounding narrative. The word *skript*, which occurs in

107. Panofsky's reading of the Arnolfini portrait has been criticized by Jan Baptist Bédau, "The Reality of Symbols: The Question of Disguised Symbolism in Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini Portrait,'" *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 16, 1 (1986), notably his concept of "disguised symbolism," which is particularly relevant for the present reading of *Egils saga*.

this description in reference to legends, would then be ambiguous, with a play on its additional meaning of “confession,” and therefore an example of *ofljóst*, “wordplay.” The implication would be that the saga is a confession. This is not the only reason for supposing that the saga might be linked to the idea of confession: the discovery of the bones under the altar at Hrísrú, the repeated allusions to the Virgin Mary who has mercy on those who repent of their misdeeds, and the fact that the entire saga is structured as the story of a sinner undergoing the process of conversion all have a bearing on this interpretation.

Snorri lived in an age when the Church’s campaign to influence the life of every individual, whether layman or cleric, was at its height. The church authorities had become far more rigorous in their adherence to canon law on impediments to matrimony, priests were subjected to more stringent discipline, and the demand from the leaders of the Church for control of ecclesiastical properties had become increasingly strident. Most striking of all, however, were the changes that had taken place in the Christian community’s attitude and recommended response to sin, changes that had led to innovations in canon law that were approved and implemented during the very period of Snorri’s eminence in Iceland, in the first third of the thirteenth century.

These new attitudes to sin were the fruit of work by twelfth-century theologians, foremost among them Abelard (1078–1142) who lived exactly a century before Snorri. He taught that true penitence mattered more than any act of atonement; divine grace manifested itself in the internal changes that took place in the individual who repented his sins. It was thus the task of his priest, and of the Church as a whole, to precipitate the desired change in the sinner. The best way was to persuade him to “wash away his sins with tears of penitence,” allowing good will to prevail through God’s grace.¹⁰⁸

This view spread throughout Christendom in the twelfth century in conjunction with the improved education of the clergy, not least

108. Much has been written on this subject. A good overview can be found in Jean-Charles Payen, *Le motif du repentir dans la littérature française médiévale des origines à 1230*, Publications romanes et françaises 98 (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 54–75.

the highest officials of the Church who increasingly studied at cathedral or monastic schools in cities such as Lincoln or Paris. Among them were at least two bishops of Skálholt, Þorlákur Þórhallsson and Páll Jónsson, contemporaries and acquaintances of Snorri. Indeed, this view of penitence appears widely in Icelandic writings from around 1200 onwards. A good example is the following passage from the *Icelandic Homily Book*: "True penitence is judged not in years but in terms of bitterness of mind. For God does not demand an equally long period of penitence so much as consider the extent to which the penitent's heart is purified."¹⁰⁹

Such ideas soon became so pervasive that they led to important changes in religious practice and resulted in amendments to canon law at the great Lateran Council of 1215, two of which are relevant to this discussion.¹¹⁰ The first concerned the new obligation for all Christians to perform confession at least once a year. This provision is thought to mark a turning point in the history of Catholicism, whereby the role of confession, and consequently that of the father confessor, became far more central than before.¹¹¹

In his work on the history of attitudes to sexuality in Western culture, the French philosopher Michel Foucault pointed out that people must have found it an outrageous imposition to have to confess their sins to a priest every year and reveal to him their innermost thoughts.¹¹² This new provision is thus bound to have met with opposition, although it would necessarily have been muted

109. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Sönn iðrun dæmist eigi að vetratölu, heldur beiskleik hugarins. Því að Guð heimtir eigi jafnmjög lengd tíðarinnar sem hann virðir, hve mikill hreinleikur gerist í hjarta iðrandans." *Íslensk hómiliubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 88.

110. A handy survey of Abélard's ideas and their impact can be found in C. Casagrande and S. Vecchio, "Péché," in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 882–84.

111. Manuals were written for confessors to train them to listen to the confessions of sinners and to pose questions that would help people achieve the spiritual state necessary for experiencing true penitence. See John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval handbooks of Penance: A Translation of the Principal "Libri Poenitentiales" and Selections from Related Documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

112. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 60 (trans. Robert Hurley as *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980)).

since the Church was in a position to compel people to perform this sacred duty. Its teachers could bar an individual from receiving the Eucharist if they knew that the person in question had sinned without confessing.

The canon on the obligation to confess was promulgated in Iceland in 1224, only nine years after the Lateran Council, in the so-called Ecclesiastical Edict of Magnús Gizurarson, the fifth clause of which was clearly influenced by the Lateran resolutions. It explicitly forbids “participation in the Easter service by anyone who has not gone to confession or who is conscious of concealing a major sin of which he is guilty.”¹¹³ Equally interesting is what the bishop decrees in the same clause: “Public confession is to be offered for a public sin and private confession for a secret sin.”¹¹⁴ Another of the resolutions of the Lateran Council was that confessors were to observe confidentiality about those who confessed their sins to them. This confidentiality entailed allowing the penitent sinner to atone for his or her deeds in such a manner that the sinful behavior would not become public knowledge, a matter that would have had particular relevance for the leading figures in society. It was crucial for this group to ensure that their reputation was unharmed, in order to prevent any weakening of their position vis-à-vis their peers or subordinates. One could speculate that the provision had been included for their sake, although it did not apply if men committed their sins in public. In that case their act of penance was to be visible to all.

An example of public penance from the Icelandic sources is Sturla Þórðarson’s account of his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson’s pilgrimage to Rome to do penance for his own and his father’s attacks on Bishop Guðmundr and his followers (p. 351):

In Rome Sturla received absolution for all his deeds and his father’s, and gave himself up to severe punishment. He was led barefoot to all the churches in Rome and whipped before most of the cathedrals. He bore that manfully, as was to be expected; many people stood

113. “Banna berlega í formæli páskadagsþjónustutekju hverjum þeim er eigi hefur til skrifta gengið eða sér veit á hendur leynda stórhuti,” *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol. 1 (1857), 436–37.

114. “Bjóða bera skrift fyrir bera synd og leynda skrift fyrir leyndan lost”; *ibid.*

near and marveled, striking their breasts and bewailing that such a fine man was so grievously treated. No one, woman or man, could keep from tears.¹¹⁵

The humiliation suffered by the sinner in this instance was not only painful, both physically and mentally, but public. Such a thing can hardly have seemed desirable to proud men like these who were jealous of their honor on every level and prepared to defend it with force if necessary. Perhaps the most remarkable demonstration of the power the Church had over men's minds in this period is that so many of those whose lives impinged most closely on Snorri's traveled south to Rome at some point to perform similar acts of penance. In addition to Sturla, this is true of all three of Snorri's sons-in-law, Þorvaldr Snorrason, Kolbeinn the Young Arnórsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson; and even of Snorri's own son, Órækja. All had committed mortal sins that could be absolved only by the authority of the Pope, whereas lesser sins could be absolved by a bishop or even an ordinary priest.¹¹⁶

Given the nature of the matter, the sources are inevitably silent on *leyndar skriptir fyrir leyndan lqst*, "private confession for a secret sin," especially if the sinner in question was not compelled to undertake a pilgrimage as penance. This need not mean that such sins were not committed, however, nor that the sinner was absolved from doing penance for them.

As has emerged, Snorri was always careful to keep his peace with the Church, but he was certainly not without sin; he was ruthless in his dealings with Sturla Sighvatsson, so harsh in fact that many thought it likely he had urged the sons of Þorvaldr to attack Sturla in the raid on Sauðafell. If Snorri was guilty—whether directly or indirectly—of conspiring against the life of his nephew, he may have needed to atone for the fact, and as the sin was hidden, his penance may well have been performed in private.¹¹⁷

115. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:266. "Sturla fékk lausn allra sinna mála í Rómaborg og föður sins og tók þar stórar skriftir. Hann var leiddur á millum allra kirkna í Rómaborg og ráðið fyrir flestum höfuðkirkjum. Bar hann það drengilega sem líklegt var en flest fólk stóð úti og undraðist, barði á brjóstið og harmaði er svo friður maður var svo hörmulega leikinn og máttu eigi vatni halda bæði konur og karlar." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:351.

116. See the above-cited article by Helgi Þorláksson, "Rómarvald og kirkjugóðar" (1982), 57.

117. In my article "Guðs lög í ævi og verkum Snorra Sturlusonar," *Ný Saga* 8

Confession and the Duty to Atone

Given the society Snorri lived in, it is not unlikely that pressure was put on him to atone in some way for the outcome of his dealings with Sighvatr and Sturla. It is interesting in this context to read what the *Icelandic Homily Book* has to say on penance and the confession of sins:

Confession is to be made for sins that are committed in thought or word or deed. . . . When a person goes to confession, it shall be carefully investigated in what way or by what chance he has committed that which he believes he has done. He is then to be offered a penance for what he has done or what he is capable of. He is to be encouraged to admit to his wrongful thoughts or unworthy words as well as to his actions. If he is ignorant or cowardly in his confession, the priest is to impress upon him what are accounted faults or crimes, and if he has done such things he must admit to them. God desired our confession so that He would know the correct reason why He should pity us. Confession heals and purifies and grants forgiveness for our faults. All hope of forgiveness lies in confession. Confession is an act of mercy and a help for sick men. It provides special healing for our strength through penitence, when we cannot be helped in any other way except by confessing our sins. For this reason Solomon said of the confession of sins: "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." (Proverbs 28:13).¹¹⁸

(1996): 36–37, I argue that Snorri may have been compelled to atone for his part in the attack on Sauðafell in order to retain his office as lawspeaker in 1232.

118. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Játning er gjörandi af syndum, þær er fremjast í hugrenningu eða í máli eða í verki. . . . Þá er maður gengur til skrifta, þá skal vandvirklega að grafa, með hverjum hætti eða af hverjum atburð hann hefir framið það, er hann telur sig gjört hafa. Skal síðan bjóða honum skrift að því er hann hefir til gjört eða hann er til fær. Fýsa, að hann segi til rangra hugrenninga og ónýtra orða svo sem til verka. Nú er hann svo fáfróður eða ódjárfur í skriftagöngunni, þá skal kennimaðurinn inna fyrir honum, hvað annmarkar eru eða glæpir, en hann verður við að ganga, ef hann hefir slíkt sótt. Guð fýstist játningar vorrar, að hann hafi rétta sök til þess að vorkynna. Játning græðir og hreinsar og gefur líkn annmörkum. Öll von líknarinnar stendur saman í játningunni. Skriftarganga er miskunnarverk og hjálp sjúkra manna. Einkalækning er hún öflum örum með iðrun, er eigi megum annan veg hjálpast, nema vér játim syndum örum. Þaðan af sagði Salómon frá játningu syndanna: 'Eigi mun hjálpast sá, er felur syndir sínar, en sá, er játir og fyrilætur þær, mun fá miskunn.' (Prov. 28.13)." *Íslensk bómiliubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 87–88.

We do not know the intended audience of the *Homily Book*, which was composed around 1200 as we have already seen. Presumably it cannot have been exclusively for monks or else the homilies would have been in Latin. They were probably aimed at laymen too, perhaps those who lived in monasteries. Whether Snorri ever heard this particular sermon or not, it gives a clear idea of the hope of salvation offered to people in his environment, to chieftains no less than to the common populace. It is thus almost certain that Snorri would have had to ask himself whether he had sinned “in thought or word or deed.” If he bore any blame for the Sauðafell raid or for any other action against his brother and/or nephew, he would have needed to atone for it by confession and penance.

The homily cited here is of particular interest because it was intended to be delivered at the beginning of Lent, a time of year described as follows by the *Icelandic Homily Book*: “Now the season is at hand when we have every need, dear brethren, to take thought for our affairs, because this time will be of most help to us if we can bring ourselves to perform useful and worthwhile deeds.”¹¹⁹ It is instructive to consider Snorri’s reluctance to fight against his brother Sighvatr in Lent 1236 in light of this. If he had already atoned for his putative wrongs toward Sighvatr and Sturla, he would doubtless have been unwilling to commit new sins and thus jeopardize his chance of receiving the Eucharist at Easter, which was then imminent. For, as already mentioned, priests had the power to bar people from taking communion, something that was not only a great disgrace, especially for chieftains, but would make it even harder ultimately to win God’s forgiveness.

If Snorri had committed sins during the hostilities that dominated his life between 1223 and 1238, *Egils saga* may have been written as a sort of atonement. The writing of the saga could then be said to have served two purposes; confession of a sin, and atonement through the creation of an artistic masterpiece. Someone highly educated in the scholastic and poetic arts, such as one of the priests Snorri kept around him, would have been just the sort of reader to have the

119. Trans. Victoria Cribb. “Nú er komin tíð sú að höndum, er vér eigum alla nauðsyn til, góðir bræður, að leiða huga ráð vort, fyr því að sjá stund veitir oss mesta hjálp, ef vér færum oss til gagns og nytja.” *Íslensk hómilíubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 157.

required knowledge of the biblical context and the circumstances of Snorri's own life, which would enable him to understand the saga's allusions. A man of this kind would also have had training in teasing out the allegorical meaning suggested by details of the narrative, especially if he was equally conversant with the language of skaldic poetry, as is likely for anybody belonging to Snorri's household.

This conjecture could, for instance, explain the manner in which Egill's responsibility for the death of Þórólfr is conveyed in *Egils saga*. As has been explained, it is hinted at indirectly, yet textual links with the biblical figure of King David provide an analogue that sheds light on Egill's position. David ordered his men to retreat so that Uriah would be left exposed, whereas Þórólfr himself advanced in front of his men. Egill was not there to protect him because the king had ordered him to a different position. Although not as guilty as David, Egill was accountable nonetheless, and thus he was punished, like David, by the loss of his son.

Likewise, Snorri's responsibility for the raid on Sauðafell may have been indirect. He did not necessarily urge the sons of Þorvaldr to attack Sturla; perhaps he merely failed to prevent them. He may simply have been guilty of giving mixed messages, because "in thought" he was furious with Sturla, and never more so than at the time of the Sauðafell raid. According to *Íslendinga saga*, "that winter there was also much suppressed hostility among the men of Reykjaholt and the men of Sauðafell."¹²⁰ Anger is one of the deadly sins, and if Snorri felt anger toward his nephew, and perhaps also toward his brother, he was guilty of sin, and the greater his responsibility for the attack on Sturla, the more heinous his sin.¹²¹

120. *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), I:223. "... um veturinn voru dylgjur miklar með Reykhytlingum og Sauðfellingum." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), I:310.

121. Anger is frequently described as a capital sin in medieval writings. The following is from *Íslensk bómíliúþók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 87: "Átta eru höfuðlestir, þeir er eigi má auðveldlega alla forðast. Fyrst er talin matvísi að fylli kviðarins, annar löstur er hórdómur, þriðji torveldi hugar, fjórði er ágirni, fimmti hégómleg dýrð, sétti öfund, sjöundi reiði, átti skeitun og dramblæti. Sú er drottning allra illra hluta. Fyr hennar sakar fell af himni dásamleg skepna englanna." (There are eight capital sins, which cannot all be easily avoided. The first is counted gluttony in filling the stomach, the second sin is lechery, the third distress of mind, the fourth is avarice, the fifth vainglory, the sixth envy, the seventh wrath, and the eighth vanity and pride. Pride is the queen of all evils. It led to the fall from heaven of the most magnificent of the angels. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

Snorri's fortunes underwent a sudden reversal after the raid on Sauðafell, most notably in the death of both his legitimate children by his marriage to Herdís Bersadóttir of Borg, one from misadventure in Norway, the other from illness. Snorri may well have interpreted such tribulations as divine retribution for his ruthless treatment of Sturla and Sighvatr. Indeed, it is not implausible that an ambitious man like Snorri might have viewed his lot in terms of the story of David, who like Snorri was a leader of men and a poet, but lost his first-born son as punishment for engineering the death of Uriah. David, the symbol of the penitent sinner, may also have been Snorri's model in this matter.