



I ntercultural Political Models in *Egils Saga* and Other Literary Sources. A Philological Study¹

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Abstract

This article examines the way rulers are depicted in Icelandic literary sources such as Egils saga and some other literary sources belonging to medieval Scandinavia. We may presume that the construction and description of the image of Norwegian kings in that age, when Christianity had not totally replaced the Old beliefs in Iceland, are conclusive when attempting to better understand and analyze the mixed ideology of power in 12th and 13th century Norway and Iceland. Our aim is to explore the foundations of the political ideology of Early Medieval Norway, which were consolidated in the 12th and 13th centuries, when the authors and sources constructed an intercultural model of kingship based on the recently Christianized culture over which the influences of the old faith was overlapping.

Rezumat

Acest articol examinează modul în care conducătorii sunt descriși în surse literare islandeze cum ar fi Egils saga și alte surse literare aparținând Scandinaviei medievale. Putem presupune că descrierea și construirea imaginii regelui Norvegiei în acele timpuri, când creștinismul nu înlocuise total vechile credințe în Islanda, sunt concluzive în încercarea de a înțelege și de a analiza mai bine mixajul ideologic în Norvegia și Islanda secolelor al XII-lea și al XIII-lea. Scopul nostru este de a explora fundamentele ideologiei politice norvegiene medievale timpurii, care au fost puse în secolele al XII-lea și al XIII-lea, când autorii și izvoarele lăsate de aceștia au construit modele interculturale bazate pe cultura lor recent încreștinată, peste care se suprapuneau elemente ale credințelor păgâne.

Keywords: Egils saga; Christianity; paganism; models of kingship; interculturalism

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The main source of this article, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*² (“Saga of Egil son of Grímr the Bald”, *Egla* or *Egils saga*), belongs to the category sagas of the Icelanders – the first settlers of the country, *landnámamenn*, or of

¹ An earlier version of this work has been published as a subchapter of Costel Coroban, *Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland 1150-1250*, Cambridge Scholars Publishers, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2018.

² For the present research we have used the English translation by W. C. Green, *The Story of Egil Skallagrímsson*. Elliot Stock, London, 1893; and the one by E. R. Edisson, *Egils saga*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930).

biographical sagas of individuals according to some other scholars³, and is one of the most arty and monumental such sources. The saga was written roughly 1240⁴ or 1230, before the writing of the iconic chronicle *Heimskringla*⁵, but the oldest manuscripts of *Egils saga* date from the 14th century. Since the 19th century, it is strongly believed that the author of this saga is none other than Snorri Sturluson, and this was his first such work, even though there is no conclusive evidence to this⁶. Evidence for Snorri Sturluson's authorship consists in examples of intertextuality to *Heimskringla*, *Ágrip*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Sverris saga*⁷. In regards to some events that are presented in the source, *Egils saga* even parallels *Heimskringla* word by word. In other cases, it is not so facile to pinpoint to the source material, but once done so, intertextuality becomes evident. Unlike *Heimskringla*, *Egils saga* does not aim to be a historical record of the deeds of the Norwegian kings, yet it remains the most "historical" of the Icelanders' sagas as it reaches the level of details of many *konungasögur*⁸.

Many historical facts in *Egils saga* may be cross referenced to other sources, yet in regards to the life of its protagonist, Egill Skallagrímsson (who is thought to have lived circa 904-995), there is no historical evidence that confirms his existence. Thus, in the absence of a historical Egill, the source remains mostly a literary and fictional work of great value as illustrative for many parts of Norwegian and Icelandic culture. Its character of fictional work should not be considered a disadvantage for our research aims, as the period in which it was written was loaded with significant political events (the Civil War in Norway had not yet ended) so the saga offers a remarkable view of the ideology of power through its depiction of

³ Daisy Neijmann, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, Vol. 5 of *Histories of Scandinavian Literature* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 126.

⁴ Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: Johns Hopkins Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1957), 140.

⁵ Joseph R. Strayer (ed.), *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 11. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), 403.

⁶ Neijmann 124.

⁷ Philip Pulsiano, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 159.

⁸ Strayer 402.

power relation and rulership in reference to the period two centuries before.

It is noteworthy to remember that these Icelanders' sagas may be read as political declarations of the author. In the case of *Egils saga*, one immediate reason of the author was to reinforce the claim of his family over Borgarfjörður, as he lived and farmed at Borg⁹. This is only one example that supports the value of these sources for analyzing the political conceptions of the Icelanders in the 13th century. Another argument is the fact that *Egils saga* has mostly been analyzed from the points of view of aesthetics of Old Norse skaldic poetry or in relation to certain anthropological concepts¹⁰.

Structurally, the saga is divided into 92 chapters which tell the story of the protagonist, who fulfills multiple roles: poet, hero, traveller, farmer, Viking, mercenary, husband and father. The narration begins with the grandfather of Egill, Kveldúlfur ("Night-wolf"), who possessed the ability to enter a battle rage that transformed him into a wolf but drained his powers (a gift that Egill inherited). The saga also sketches the emergence of Norway as a unified kingdom under King Haraldr hárfagri in the 9th century and provides ample details on "Viking and pagan" Norway¹¹. Other significant developments that are mentioned are the conflict between the Scottish and the English and the settlement of Scandinavia. The *locus* of the action changes continuously in the story, a testament to the author's broad historical and geographic knowledge, from Norway to Sweden, Denmark, Frisia, and Saxonia, then to England, Scotland, and finally to

⁹ Ibid. 403.

¹⁰ See, for example, Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1975); Jón Helgason, „Norges og islands digtning” in Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Litteraturhistorie: Norge og Islands* (Stockholm: Nordisk kultur, 1953), 3-179; Torfi Tulinius, *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2004); Theodore Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1260)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 102–118; Theodore Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200–1250)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 134–141; Arved Nedkvitne, “Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities” in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 25 (2000): 27–51; Paul Schach, “Was Tristrams saga the structural model for Egils saga?” in *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics and Literatures* 2, 1 (1990): 67–86.

¹¹ Strayer 402.

Iceland. Egill stands out as the hero of the story through his remarkable childhood, superb poetic talent and his battle-exploits around the Baltic Sea and the North Sea¹².

The term of *forn siðr* (the old way/custom/law) in opposition to *nýr siðr* refers to the influences of the Pagan faith, respectively, of Christianity, on the two corresponding political models. Given the fact that the events in *Egils saga* take place two centuries before it was written (namely, in the 12th century) and that it was written in Iceland, we may presume that the construction and description of the Norwegian kings in that age when Christianity had not totally replaced the Old beliefs are conclusive when attempting to better understand and analyze the *mixed ideology* of power in 12th and 13th century Norway and Iceland (note, 13th century Icelandic society was highly literate, on par with the most developed cultural centers in Europe¹³).

An important element of interest in *Egils saga* for our research purpose is the description of kings and their deeds and attributes. In sources such as *Islendingabók*, these came only as references to regnal years and there were very few neutral or supportive comments on the effort of Christianization of Iceland by King Óláfr Tryggvason. Overall, *Islendingabók* does very little in the sense of direct assessment of the Norwegian king's policies, and what can be deduced from it is obtained from what the saga omits to inform us. In contrast, *Egils saga* offers accounts of the activities of King Eiríkr blóðøx (c. 885 – 954), King Haraldr hárfagri (c. 850 – c. 932), King Æthelstan of England (c. 894 – 27 October 939) and their feuds with the Icelandic family of the Mýramenn; and, more notably, it includes a poem dedicated to Jarl Harald Eiríksson of the Orkneys (fl. 1190).

Since the description of Norwegian kings in Icelandic sagas is our concern here, a few general remarks on their image in Icelandic sagas shall follow. Because Iceland was not a monarchy, Kings appears as secondary characters in the sagas of the Icelanders. This does not imply that the

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ármann Jakobsson, "The rex inutilis in Iceland" in *Majestas* 7 (1999): 44.

Icelanders had no direct contacts with the kings of Norway¹⁴. We can assume that many prominent Icelanders had relatives in Norway, but what was of greater importance was that Icelandic skalds were the keepers of oral tradition and lore in Norwegian king's courts (*dróttkvæði*)¹⁵. In *Hallfreðar saga*,¹⁶ the monarch who appears is Óláfr Tryggvason. He is described through the eyes of his court poet, Hallfreðr, who experienced dilemmas adapting to the conversion to Christianity, and at one point became overly jealous on his wife's admiration for the King but regretted his feelings at the demise of the ruler¹⁷. After the death of Óláfr, the skald wanted to avenge him by killing Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson, but the recently deceased monarch appeared in his dreams and urged him to write a laudatory poem to the Jarl instead, as it befitted anyone to offer his service to the King, whoever he may be¹⁸. Here we see an example of the concept of an intercultural model of political rule. The champion of Christ, King Óláfr Tryggvason, remained faithful to the ideal of justice even after his death, becoming an embodiment of it.

Turns such as these could be considered a minor motif of the conflict with Norwegian kings in the Icelanders' sagas. Another example is *Kormáks saga*¹⁹, where the skald Kormákr Ögmundarson maintains amicable relations with kings Hákon the Good (v. 920-961) and Haraldr gráfeldr (Grey-cloak, d. 970), even though they had been rivals and enemies²⁰. This minor motif may possibly be explained by a reality of the time, the Icelanders' need of maintaining good relations with the multiple claimants and rivals to the throne of Norway, a task often made very difficult due to a large number of pretenders to the position of King.

¹⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas" in *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002): 145–160.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁶ This saga is part of the *Flateyjarbók* collection.

¹⁷ Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend" 148.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ See Lee M. Hollander (ed.), *The Sagas of Kormák and The Sworn Brothers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

²⁰ Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend" 148.

In *Egils saga*, the image of the monarch is a negative one²¹, because the kings were in conflict with the family of Egill, the Mýramenns. Notably, Egill's ancestor, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson had fallen victim to King Haraldr hárfagri's betrayal and ill treatment. The nephew, Egill, had a feud against King Eiríkr blóðøx. Some have attempted to challenge this negative general perception by pointing out to the fact that Egill Skallagrímsson was not the typical hero who evinces perfect attributes²². Indeed, Egill was often portrayed as impudent, ruthless, savage, and, at best, undiplomatic; his deeds are often the target of the author's irony; furthermore, the saga tells us that in the end, the hero made peace with King Eiríkr blóðøx after the king offered Egill the chance to write a laudatory poem about him; also the other prominent kings featured in the saga, King Hákon (brother of Eiríkr blóðøx), appears as a just and beneficent king²³. Ármann Jakobsson introduced an interesting discussion by assigning the independent-minded and easily-offended Egill to the mentality of the farmer, while arguing that his friend, Arinbjörn, belonged to the mentality of the courtier²⁴.

While King Eiríkr blóðøx's reputation in view of the author was saved owing to the monarch's appreciation of fine skaldic poetry, the irreconcilable "tyrant" and traitor of *Egils saga* remains the father of Eiríkr, King Haraldr hárfagri. This negative description is in contrast to the general historical reputation of King Haraldr hárfagri, who is hailed as the unifier of the kingdom of Norway, and as the one who contributed significantly to the spread of Christianity in Scandinavia²⁵. In *Islendingabök*,

²¹ Gudmund Sandvik, *Hovding og konge i Heimskringla* (Oslo: Akademisk forlag, 1955); Baldur Hafstað, "Konungsmenn i kreppu og vinátta i Egils sögu" in *Skáld- skaparmál* 1 (1990): 89-99; Vésteinn Ólason, "Jórvíkurför i Egils sögu: Búandkarl gegn konungi", in *Andvari* 33 (1991): 46-59; Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære. Studier i islændinge- sagaerne* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993); Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, "Primum caput. Um höfuð Egils Skalla-Gríms- sonar, John ffá Salisbury o.fl." in *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997): 74-96; Jesse L. Byock, "Egilssaga og samfélagsminni," in Guðmundur J. Guðmundsson, Eiríkur K. Björnsson (eds.), *Íslenska sögupingjá 28.-31. maí 1997, Ráðstefnurit 1. Ed.* (Reykjavik: Sagnfræðistofnun, 1997): 379-389.

²² Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend" 148.

²³ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Stale Dyrvik, *Norway: A History from the Vikings to Our Own Times*, (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 23-24.

King Haraldr hárfagri was commended and at the same time “held responsible” for the colonization of Iceland, for having driven the people out of Norway through his forceful conversions²⁶. According to Ármann Jakobsson, *Egils saga* is responsible for King Haraldr hárfagri’s renown as a tyrannical monarch because:

“King Haraldr hárfagri is depicted in terms of a 13th-century monarch who holds the whole of his kingdom as his personal property, allocating it to his servants as fiefs. He collects taxes from all of his population, and declares himself the owner of all lakes and the sea. Scholars have tended to take this at face value, perhaps owing to an inclination to believe everything written by the presumed author of *Egils saga*, Snorri Sturluson [...] The power attributed to King Haraldr in *Egils saga* is, however, far beyond credibility for any Viking ruler of the 9th century. Contemporary evidence offers in fact no firm proof that King Haraldr ever even existed.

This foundation myth probably originated in the 13th century, and certainly flourished during the following centuries [...] Most Family Sagas are not very explicit, but nevertheless appear to take their cue from *Egils saga* and depict King Haraldr as a ruler on a grand scale, who permits no opposition and drives kings, earls and magnates from his realm. *Laxdæla saga* (4), *Eyrbyggja saga* (3-5), and *Gisla saga* (3, 16-19) give same version of history, probably influenced by *Egils saga* (11-12). In *Laxdæla saga*, though, the emigration of the Laxdælir is not due to the king’s excessive harshness, but rather to the fact that he wanted to be the sole ruler of his state and control all honours (4). In younger sagas, such as *Svarfdæla saga* (210), *Harðar saga* (3), *Bárðar saga* (106-7) and *Grettis saga* (4-19), the myth is perpetuated”²⁷.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 149.

These observations of the Icelandic scholar support the premise of our study, that the foundations of the political ideology of Early Medieval Norway were consolidated in the 12th and 13th centuries and that authors and sources from this period constructed models of kingship based on their 12th or 13th century recently Christianized culture over which the influence of the *forn siðr* was overlapping. Jón Viðar Sigurdsson argues that sagas which describe events taking place centuries before they were written (*fortíðarsögur*), such as *Egils saga*, may be considered relevant and trustworthy historical sources, for identifying elements in regards to the ideology of power. In the historian's opinion, these sources reflect the main ideas of the ideal qualities of rulers, even though they may never yield fully conclusive notions on this subject²⁸. Conversely, contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) are thought to be reliable sources because they were written two to seven decades after the events had taken place and, possibly, the authors may have been reproached by witnesses to the events if they had changed the truth²⁹.

The first category, *fortíðarsögur*, may be considered historical literature in the contemporary understanding of the term, yet their authors could be considered "retellers and commentators" rather than "novelists"³⁰. History and literature are often interchangeable. The sagas still reflect the main features of the society, still paint the social realities of the times quite accurately, even if the names of the characters and some other elements may not be true:

"Fictional conversations or characters do not automatically imply that the social structure of these sagas is invented. The difference between history and literature is often small, sometimes consisting of no more than the fact

²⁸ Jón Viðar Sigurdsson, 'Kings, Earls and Chieftains. Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland C. 900–1300.' In Gro Steinsland, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian Beuermann (eds.), *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes*. (Brill: Boston, 2011), 96-97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

that the writers of literature use invented names, unlike the writers of historical accounts.”³¹

Continuing his debate on the historicity of the sagas, Jón Viðar Sigurdsson introduces the concept of the *continuity* of society. If indeed there existed continuity between the society of 13th century Iceland, when many sagas were written, and 9th and 10th century Norway, then the sagas may be regarded as worthy sources³². The same historian considers that evidence is sufficient to assume that a high level of continuity truly existed in Norwegian and Icelandic societies between the 10th and 13th centuries, identifying as break-points to earlier or later social order the changes brought about by Christianization, and respectively, the political developments of the 14th century³³. In conclusion, we can assume that sagas such as *Egils saga* may be trusted to reveal us the main rules of the “political game” throughout that period:

“If we accept that there existed a general knowledge about the Norwegian kings in Old Norse Society, it is hard to argue that the saga authors could have equipped the rulers with more qualities than they actually had had. Their audience would have resented it [...] Finally, we must however also be careful not to overestimate the value of the sagas about the distant past as sources. They contain obvious examples of the present, and thirteenth-century ideology is forcing its way into descriptions of the past”³⁴.

It is useful to reflect on the image of King Haraldr hárfagri bearing in mind the above remarks. Exercising such a strict, tyrannical control over Norway as the King is depicted in the sagas may have been possible in the later rule of King Hákon Hákonarson, or during the reign of King Magnús lagabœtir, when the consolidation of the kingdom had made it possible. Historians opine that King Haraldr hárfagri, who came from the region of

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

Opplandene (the upper lands of Østlandet) and Vestfold, was unlikely to have begun his conquests in Østlandet and that, regarding the tight control the sagas say he exercised over the country, that was also actually unfeasible for the King in 9th century Norway given that there was no bureaucratic apparatus to permit the ruler to hold such an influence. More probably, he exercised control through local small independent chieftainships so indeed the King was responsible for beginning the process of the unification of the country³⁵.

To offer an example of how the sagas treat King Haraldr, in the aftermath of his visiting various regions of the country and attending banquets given by local rulers, the King is informed by a faithful man, Hárek, that Throlf Skallagrimsson (the brother of Egill), whose banquet Haraldr had just attended, had actually been planning to raise an army against the King. Throlf even confessed to the King that because of his tyranny the whole country lacked only the courage and the opportunity to get rid of him. When King Haraldr was landing his fleet to join the feast held by Throlf, the local yeomen-soldiers were discouraged when they witnessed the mighty ships of the King. Next, the plotters allegedly attempted to assassinate the King in his sleep or drunkenness, but they failed in this as well because the King kept an extensive guard³⁶. It is remarkable that the author describes Throlf, the local leader, as an equal of King Haraldr hárfagri:

“...in a man like Thorolf that he thinks himself above everyone; he wants not for strength and comeliness; he keeps a guard round him like a king; he has wealth in plenty, even though he had but what is truly his, but besides that he holds others' property equally at his disposal with his own. Thou, too, hast bestowed on him large grants, and he had now made all ready to repay them with ill”³⁷.

³⁵ Dyrvik 24.

³⁶ *Egils saga*, chapters 11-12.

³⁷ *Egils saga*, chapter 12.

Both King Haraldr and Thorolf appear as great feudal lords in the above fragments, and it seems as if Thorolf had many vassals or sworn men. Discussing the assigning of relations of vassalage to 9th century Norway by the author of the saga appears as an anachronism unless we trust that Snorri Sturluson was better informed of the realities of feudalism on the continent, which was rather likely, but he was most likely referring to *hirðmen* or housecarls³⁸. Continuing the above account from *Egils saga*, Hárek advised King Haraldr that he should keep Thorolf near him and “let him be in thy guard, and bear thy standard, and be in the forecastle of thy ship; for this duty no man is fitter. Or if thou wilt have him to be a baron, then give him a grant southwards in the Firths, where are all his family: thou mayest then keep an eye on him, that he make not himself too great for thee”³⁹. Hárek appears to be wishing the best for King Haraldr, but then he asked that he and his brother be given the chieftainship of Thorolf’s region, the Hálogaland. Ármann Jakobsson calls this model of an aristocrat that is well-behaved to the King in spite of his tyranny the “chivalric vein of a faithful noble who welcomes the king to his home”⁴⁰. One trait of King Haraldr hárfagri that is repeated in this small story is the King’s ability to not let anger take control of his actions. Haraldr became extremely angry when he witnessed the magnificence of Thorolf’s banquet and when Hárek imparted him his thoughts on Thorolf’s betrayal, but in both situations the king did not lose his temper and behaved perhaps wiser than expected. Yet, the same Hárek remarks that Thorolf had just gone north in order to avoid meeting the retinue of the King because he was “too wise”⁴¹. This is another example where Thorolf, the brother of Egill, evinces qualities that are usually specific to Kings (in contrast, his brother appears rash and undiplomatic at times).

³⁸ For a discussion on how the concept of feudalism was not adopted in Scandinavia and how it was understood in High Medieval Norway see Erik Opsahl, „Bastard Feudalism or Sub-Vassalage In Medieval Norway?” in *Collegium Medievale* 4, 2 (1991), 178-214.

³⁹ *Egils saga*, chapter 12.

⁴⁰ Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 153.

⁴¹ *Egils saga*, chapter 12.

To conclude, not all depictions of King Haraldr hárfagri are negative in the sagas though. For example, in *Vatnsdæla saga*⁴², the protagonist chooses to fight on the side of the king at the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, for which he was richly rewarded and treated with great reverence and with the gratitude of Haraldr, after which a soothsayer advised him that if he should seek his fortune in Iceland, he would become prosperous. This is one of the rare examples where the main reasons of the family's migration to Iceland do not reside in the tyranny of King Haraldr hárfagri. The same saga tells us that the descendants of the protagonist, the people living in the *Vatn* valley in northern Iceland, maintained amicable relations with the King of Norway while at the same time they were able to keep their independence. Thus, Haraldr hárfagri appears as a strong king that is magnanimous to those loyal to him but unforgiving towards his enemies⁴³.

⁴² A family chronicle that relates the story of Ingimundur, son of Norwegian chieftain Keill Raum. See Richard L. Harris, "The proverbs of *Vatnsdæla saga* and the sword of Jokull" in Robin Waugh, James Weldon (eds.), *The hero recovered. Essays in honor of George Clark* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2010): 150-169.

⁴³ Jakobsson, "Our Norwegian Friend" 150.

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