

CHAPTER 3

What is *Egils Saga*?

Alas, Our Lady is lost and gone,
like the skull of Egill Skallagrímsson.
—Halldór Laxness¹

Sverrir Tómasson has shown that the prologues to early texts are particularly useful in helping us to understand the writers' own ideas about their works and their underlying purpose. He has also pointed out that one of the chief characteristics of the *Íslendinga-sögur*, or sagas about early Icelanders, is their lack of a prologue, the result being that the attitudes to their own works of those who compiled *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Gísla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, etc. remain shrouded in mystery.² Obviously, this influences how we interpret these texts, since it is in the nature of all communications, from the simplest messages to the most complex literary texts, that the receiver of the communication interprets it in light of what he believes to be the sender's intention. Since whoever composed *Egils saga* neither explains what he intended nor provides us with any idea of whether he believed the saga to be true or not, we must try to work out its function on the evidence

1. "Vor Frú er týnd og tröllum sýnd ásamt hausnum á Agli Skallagrímssyni." Halldór Laxness, *Innansveitarkronika* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1970), 10.

2. Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum*, Rit 33 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1988), 327–29.

of the text itself.³ To continue the analogy with archaeology, let us imagine that we have found an object whose purpose is unknown because those who made it have left behind no instructions for its use.⁴

In this context it is interesting to stop and wonder how we could even begin to understand the poems preserved in medieval manuscripts if Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a sort of manual in the interpretation and composition of skaldic verse, had not been preserved. I can well believe that there would have been ample room for doubt and misinterpretation, yet scholars would probably have succeeded little by little in decoding the language of skaldic verse, by analogy and conjecture, just as archaeologists have decoded the hieroglyphs of Egypt or cuneiform tablets of Sumer.

Naturally, the most obvious comparison for the *Íslendingasögur* is with the *konungasögur* or kings' sagas. There are many reasons for this, the principal being that the sagas about early Icelanders seem to have appeared in the wake of the extensive composition of kings' sagas that took place in Iceland from the end of the twelfth century onward.⁵ As the kings' sagas became less hagiographical and more secular in nature, they relied more on accounts of Icelanders' dealings with the relevant kings. Given that these accounts were probably most popular with their Icelandic audience, we can assume that the idea soon became established of writing a saga with an Icelander as the central character. It is difficult to say which of the sagas about early Icelanders was composed first or whether

3. The study of the *Íslendingasögur* as works of art is therefore much more difficult in this respect than, for example, that of Chrétien de Troyes's romances, whose prologues inform us about his views on what he is doing. See Jørgen Bruhn, "From Reference to Deferment: Exphrasis, Authority, and Fiction in Chrétien de Troyes," in *Negotiating Heritage: Memories of the Middle Ages*, ed. Mette Birkedal Bruun and Stephanie Glaser (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

4. Theodore M. Andersson, in *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (2006), 118, remarks on the saga: "What the author produced seems not to have been a known tradition but a tightly controlled and independently articulated version of a tradition."

5. See Vésteinn Ólason's overview of the literary background to the composition of the Icelandic Family Sagas in *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Mál og menning and Heimskringla, 1998), 38–62.

it has even survived, but it was probably largely concerned with relations between an Icelander and a king. Several sagas are possible candidates, among them *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* and *Egils saga*; the former because there are many indications that it already existed when *Heimskringla* was compiled, probably between 1220 and 1230, and the latter because its oldest manuscript fragments are copies believed to date from the mid-thirteenth century.⁶

These two *Íslendingasögur*, like so many others, resemble the kings' sagas in that they are structured as the stories of families. But instead of centering on royal dynasties, they are concerned with Icelandic settlers and their forebears and/or descendants. The *Íslendingasögur* also resemble the kings' sagas in that many of them preserve a number of skaldic stanzas. The role of the stanzas differs, however, between these two types of saga. In the kings' sagas the stanzas are more often used as a source for what is stated about events that purportedly took place, whereas in the *Íslendingasögur* the stanzas are more likely to have a role in the actual narrative.⁷ Let me illustrate this with an example from *Heimskringla* where "Hákonarmál," Eyvindr skáldaspillir's poem about King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, forms Snorri's source for his account of that king. It plays no other part in the development of the narrative, whereas the poem *Höfuðlausn* in *Egils saga* claims to eulogize Hákon's brother, Eiríkr Bloodaxe, yet contains pitifully little information about his feats. In fact, the recital of *Höfuðlausn* has the function in the saga of providing Eiríkr with a convenient reason to spare the poet Egill's life, despite the fact that he deserves execution many

6. The classical treatment of how to determine the age of the *Íslendingasögur* is in Einar Ólafur Sveinsson's *Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method*, Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series 3 (London: University College, 1958). A more recent overview can be found in Jónas Kristjánsson, "Var Snorri upphafsmaður Íslendingasagna?" (1990). Even more recently, a collection of articles on the subject shows how difficult and disputed this subject remains: *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, ed. Else Mundal (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2012).

7. Bjarni Einarsson, "Um vísur í íslenskum fornsögum," in *Mælt mál og forn fræði: Safn ritgerða eftir Bjarna Einarsson gefið út á sjötugsafmæli hans* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1987); previously published in English as "On the Rôle of Verse in Saga-Literature," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 7 (1974): 118–25. A more recent treatment of the subject is Heather O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10–77.

times over. The king's powerful retainer Arinbjörn has threatened an uprising if any attempt is made to kill Egill, and Eiríkr cannot afford to lose Arinbjörn's support at this delicate stage in his career (chapter 61).

The difference in the role of poetry in the sagas about early Icelanders, on the one hand, and the kings' sagas, on the other, suggests that we are dealing here with different genres. The veracity of the kings' sagas may be in doubt, but it can hardly be denied that the authors intended their audience to believe they were true accounts. Indeed, Snorri explains why skaldic stanzas are reliable sources in what is believed to be his prologue to *Heimskringla*:

At the court of King Haraldr there were skalds, and men still remember their poems and the poems about all the kings who have since his time ruled in Norway; and we gathered most of our information from what we are told in those poems which were recited before the chieftains themselves or their sons. We regard all that to be true which is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is [to be sure] the habit of poets to give highest praise to those princes in whose presence they are; but no one would have dared to tell them to their faces about deeds which all who listened, as well as the prince himself, knew were only falsehoods and fabrications. That would have been mockery, still not praise.⁸

The same cannot be said of the authors of the sagas about early Icelanders, or *Íslendingasögur*. Scholars have therefore speculated

8. *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, by Snorri Sturluson, trans. and ed. Lee M. Hollander (New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation and the University of Texas Press, 1964), 4. "Með Haraldi konungi voru skáld og kunna menn enn kvæði þeirra og allra konunga kvæði, þeirra er síðan hafa verið að Noregi, og tóku vér þar mest dæmi af því er sagt er í þeim kvæðum er kveðin voru fyrir sjálfum höfðingjunum eða sonum þeirra. Tökum vér það allt fyrir satt er í þeim kvæðum finnst um ferðir þeirra eða orustur. En það er háttur skálda að lofa þann mest er þá eru þeir fyrir en eigi mundi það þora að segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans er allir þeir er heyrðu vissu að hégómi væri og skrök og svo sjálfur hann. Það væri þá háð en eigi lof." *Heimskringla*, ed. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Sverrir Tómasson, 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1991), 1:1–2. On whether or not this prologue was written by Snorri, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar* (1988), 374–83.

that the poetry they incorporate may in fact serve the purpose of giving the audience the impression that the sagas are true accounts of the past.⁹ It would not then be of primary importance whether the poems and stanzas had been composed at the time the events are supposed to have taken place or later. This interpretation would fit in well with the idea that the sagas about early Icelanders are, as a literary genre, the offspring of the kings' sagas, and imitate the latter to the extent that both genres place skaldic stanzas and poems in the mouths of their characters.

One could say that *Egils saga* appears to be historical in the thirteenth-century sense of the word; it tells the tales of long-ago men. Nevertheless, it is also an innovation in that previously the stories of men of such low social status had not been recorded, with the possible exception of the tales of the men of Hrafnista, Ketill hængr, Grímr loðinkinni, and Örvar-Oddr. Significantly, these examples belong to the *fornaldarsögur*, or legendary tales, a literary genre that was not subject to the same demand for veracity. The account in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* informs us that King Sverrir Sigurðarson referred to such tales as *lygisögur*, or "lying stories."¹⁰

This is not to imply that *Egils saga* is a *lygisaga*. It has a complex relationship with what Jesse Byock has called the "social memory" of medieval Icelanders, i.e. how memory of events and people was preserved and presented in socially significant form.¹¹ That does not make it any less a work of fiction. The word "fiction" is derived from the Latin *fingere* , "to make." Whoever created *Egils saga* gathered material, some of which was related to Egill but a

9. On this subject see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "The Prosimetrum Form 1: Verses as the Voice of the Past," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (2000).

10. See Baldur Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), 118–34 on the links between *Egils saga* and the legendary sagas of the men of Hrafnista. There is a reference to legendary sagas in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*, which is a part of *Sturlunga saga*: "En þessari sögu var skemmt Sverri konungi og kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemmtilegar." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:22. "These sagas delighted King Sverri who said such lying stories were very enjoyable." *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 2:44.

11. Jesse Byock, "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils saga*," *Scandinavian Studies* 76, 3 (2004).

great deal of which was unconnected to him.¹² From this diverse material narratives were invented and arranged in the admirable form analysed in an earlier chapter. Incorporated in this form were Egill's verses and poems—whether they were by Egill himself, by other poets, or original compositions by whoever composed the saga.

Leaving aside the question of whether the intended audience of the saga was expected to believe it to be true, a picture of the past has been evoked that must have been rich with significance. On the surface it is the tale of how the men of Mýrar settled in Iceland and established their influence in the Borgarfjörður region. It has been argued that the saga exaggerates the scale of Skallagrím's land-taking in comparison with older accounts.¹³ One does not have to study it for long to perceive that it contains a message about the risks inherent in serving a king, especially in its first section. This section also provides a strikingly realistic portrayal of the consequences for landowners and local leaders when a king becomes overlord of a country. This part must have had a peculiar resonance for Icelanders in the 1230s when Sturla Sighvatsson had promised to bring Iceland under King Hákon's sway.¹⁴

12. Bjarni Einarsson's research provides testimony to this in *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (1975). In his interesting book *Viking Poems of War and Peace: A Study in Skaldic Narrative*, Toronto medieval texts and translations 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), Russell G. Poole has argued that the stanzas Egill recites during his fight with Ljótr the Pale were part of a skaldic narrative poem that the author was working from (*ibid.*, 173–81). It should be pointed out that Poole's idea does not exclude the possibility that the same man composed the poem and later used it in his saga. The discovery made by Jesse Byock and his collaborators of the archaeological remains of a church at Hrísrú as well as of evidence of bodies being moved could be an example of another type of such borrowing. The remembered event is used because it serves the general purpose of whoever is composing the saga (Byock 2004; Byock, "Sagas and Archaeology in the Mosfell Valley" (2009)).

13. On this see Björn M. Ólsen's essay, *Landnáma og Egils saga*. See also Sigurður Nordal's preface to the saga in *Egils saga*, ÍF 2:1xx–xcv. Axel Kristinsson has taken up these theories, placing them in the context of political developments in Iceland in Snorri's day (see Axel Kristinsson, "Lords and Literature: Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28 (2003): 10; and further Axel Kristinsson, "Sagas and Politics in 13th-Century Borgarfjörður" (2002; accessed 2 September 2002, <http://tobias-lib.uni-tuebingen.de/volltexte/2004/1060/>).

14. *Sturlunga saga* (1988) (1:351) merely mentions that Sturla and Hákon "töluðu . . . jafnan" ("often talked together"; *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:266), but

Yet the longest section of the saga, the part devoted to Egill, is far too complex to be pinned down by such a simple political interpretation. Clearly, there is some kind of authorial agency involved, spinning the story's web from many more strands than the narrative in the first part of the saga. The main difference is that Egill's struggle with Eiríkr Bloodaxe is interwoven with hidden conflicts concerning his relationship with his family and also with the deity. These conflicts touch on the character of Egill; the reader's attention is constantly being drawn back to him and the riddle posed by his behavior.

This section can only be fully understood if the saga is read with close attention, in a manner that would have been familiar to those who practiced biblical exegesis or else knew how to interpret the meaning of a skaldic verse. In order to ascertain the meaning of *Egils saga*, the reader needs not only to be aware of Christian and heathen stories, but also to be receptive to the formation of meaning typical of both poetry of the old skaldic type and patristic interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

If the saga is read in this way, it becomes clear that its messages are more ambiguous and complex than they might seem on first impression, and moreover touch on issues that are apparently more personal. Moral issues such as conflict between brothers or between fathers and sons are deliberately pointed up by the presence of religious symbols or motifs embedded in the text. Yet remarkable are the efforts apparently made to divert the reader's attention away from these conflicts. The saga demands interpretation, but at the same time obstacles are placed in the reader's path. One must look out for minor details that point to the meaning, at the same time as constantly seeking to arrange the fragments to form a meaningful whole, in a manner similar to the way one dissects a skaldic verse and decodes its kennings. It does not seem too far-fetched to compare a three-hundred-page prose narrative to a stanza of only eight lines given that the same intellectual methods are used in their

Hákonar saga says straight out that Sturla "kvaðst til mundu hætta með konungs ráði ok forsjá ok eiga slíkra launa ván af honum sem honum þætti verðugt, ef hann fengi þessu á leið komit" (said that he would venture it with the king's advice and foresight and receive such reward from him as seemed worthy to him, if he managed to undertake this). *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, in vol. 3 of *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1945), 456.

interpretation. After all, these methods were used to interpret texts even longer than *Egils saga*, namely the Holy Scriptures.

There is no simple answer to the question: what is *Egils saga*? It is a description of past events that can be understood on a literal level, like the Bible, which also tells of characters and deeds in the remote past. But *Egils saga* also resembles the Bible in that it is open to a different kind of interpretation, an understanding that is to some extent *andligr*, “spiritual,” in the sense that Snorri gave to the word in the prologue to his *Edda*; that is, it recognizes higher religious truths.

It may come as a surprise to see such a deliberate parallel drawn between two such different types of text: a religious narrative and poetry composed according to skaldic meter. In the first chapter of this book I demonstrated how the structure of *Egils saga* is in many ways comparable to the arrangement of the *drápa*, or long poem, *Höfuðlausn*. The form of the saga is thus reminiscent of poetry. The poem *Sonatorrek*, moreover, invites us almost explicitly to equate poetry with the word of God. A poet who likens his art to the power of the Holy Spirit in the kenning *það berk út úr orðhofi mæðar timbur máli laufgað*, “I will . . . carry from my word-shrine / the timber that I build / my poem from / leafed with language,” is effectively saying that poetry and the word of God have much in common. This comparison is in fact far from unique in Icelandic medieval literature. The Evangelists were known as *guðspjallaskáld*, “gospel poets,” apparently due to the assumption that poetry is to some extent equivalent to the gift of prophecy. In this context it is worth noting that David, the poet of the Psalms, was often referred to as a *propheta*. He, like the Evangelists, was inspired by the Holy Spirit, who caused the rod to sprout leaves in the tabernacle of old where the Covenant was kept.¹⁵ In this sense they were poets.

Guess the Truth

If we are right in describing *Egils saga* as a riddle, its lack of a prologue is hardly surprising. After all, the function of a prologue is

15. On the *guðspjallaskáld* see Sverrir Tómasson, “Söguljóð, skrók, háð: Viðhorf Snorra Sturlusonar til kveðskapar,” *Skáldskaparmál* 1 (1990): 261. Further, Tómasson provides a useful discussion of the links between theology and metrics in the Middle Ages and how these links shaped attitudes to poetry in *Formálar* (1988), 180–89. Recently, the theologian Pétur Pétursson has explained verse 42 of *Völuspá*

to instruct the audience of a text on how to interpret it by informing its members what sort of text they are dealing with, whereas one must work out the solution of a riddle for oneself. Being spoonfed by the author would make it too easy. However, the author can conceal clues in the riddle itself. An example of this is the following verse, which used to be taught to children in Iceland:

Margt er smátt í vettling manns.
Gettu sanns, gettu sanns.
Þótt þú getir í allan dag,
Þá getur þú aldrei hans.¹⁶

Here, instructions on how to find the solution have been concealed in the wording of the riddle. What is found in the mitten is “sand” and whoever composed the riddle uses the fact that the genitive of sand in Icelandic (*sands*) is generally pronounced the same as *sanns*, the genitive of “truth.” Thus *gettu sanns*, “guess the truth,” sounds the same as *gettu sands*, “guess sand.” Snorri refers to such homonyms with more than one meaning as *tvíkent*, and says of them: “Reiði er ok tvíkent; reiði heitir þat, er maðr er í illum hug,—reiði heitir ok fargörvi skips eða hross” (*Reidi* also has two meanings. It is called *reidi* [wrath] when a man is in a bad temper, the gear (*fargervi*) of a ship or horse is also called *reidi*), adding: “These distinctions can be made use of in poetry so as to create wordplay [*ofljóst*], which is difficult to understand, if it is a different distinction of meaning that has to be taken than the previous line seemed before to indicate.”¹⁷ This old child’s riddle thus employs a stylistic trick that would have been familiar to the author of *Egils saga*, which Snorri calls *at gera ofljóst*, that is, to say things in a deliberately ambiguous manner.

(“Sat þar á haugi / og sló hörpu / gýgjar hirðir, / glaður Eggþér”) with reference to the traditional portrayal of David in Celtic Christianity. See, Pétur Pétursson, “Völuspá, dómsdagur og kristnitakan á Alþingi,” *Glíman* 2 (2005).

16. There’s many a small thing in a mitten. / Guess the truth, guess the truth. / You can guess all day / But you’ll never guess it.

17. *Edda*, trans. and introd. Anthony Faulkes, Everyman Classics (London: Dent, 1987), 155. “Þessar greinir má setja svá í skáldskap, at gera ofljóst, at vant er at skilja, ef aðra skal hafa greinina, en áðr þykki til horfa en fyrri vísuorð.” *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, vol. 1, *Introduction, Text and Notes* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research and University College, 1998), 109.

To conclude this section of the book, I will consider whether there might be something similar afoot in an incident that is recorded right at the end of *Egils saga*, namely Einarr skálaglamm's gift of a shield to Egill (chapter 81). Einarr is a late arrival in the saga and his stay is brief. The chapter seems to serve the purpose of providing a respite for the audience after the major crises preceding the composition of *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*, and the presentation of the shield is therefore reported in a light-hearted tone. Egill, who is an old man at this stage, is sought out by the young poet Einarr Helgason and they talk of poetry together. "They both took great delight in the discussion," reports the author, one of the rare occasions when he gives us a direct insight into Egill's feelings. Afterward, the author narrates an event in Einarr's life that is known from other sources but that he here adapts to his own ends.¹⁸

Earl Hákon Grjótgarðsson has given Einarr a precious shield which Einarr presents to Egill when he visits Borg, whereas in the account of the same incident in *Jómsvíkinga saga* there is no mention of Egill and the shield has a very different fate. The following description of the shield is worth noting: "Hann var skrifaðr fornsögum, en allt milli skriptanna váru lagðar yfir spengr af gulli, ok settr steinum" (It was adorned with legends, and between the images it was overlaid with gold and embossed with jewels).¹⁹ This means that people and scenes from traditional stories were depicted on the shield as was the custom in the past. The use of the verb *að skrifa* deserves special attention here. As I pointed out in the introduction to this book, the word *skript* had a variety of meanings in medieval Icelandic. Of course, the modern meaning was already current: that is, something that had been written, script. But *skript* could also mean the cavity in which the bones of a saint rested under an altar, or the confession of sins to a priest and promise of atonement. Finally, it also meant "picture," as in this example.

The sentence from *Egils saga* quoted above relates how legends were depicted on the shield. The word *skriptir* is used of these tales. Could this account conceivably be intended to serve another

18. See Bjarni Einarsson's discussion of this incident in *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 106–14.

19. Emphasis added.

purpose beyond entertaining the audience? Could the author be exploiting the ambiguity of the word *skript* to *gera ofljóst*—say something in a veiled fashion—as Snorri described? Could he be hinting that the old stories he has been telling us are like *skriptir*, that is, told for the purpose of doing penance for some sin?

It would be no more than an interesting idea, were it not that so many other aspects of the saga refer to the same field of signification, such as the many examples of women who apparently refer to Mary the Merciful. Furthermore, the word *skript* is brought to mind again at the end of the saga in the account of the finding of Egill's bones and explanation of his theological situation. The poet's bones in the *skript* could be a symbol of the work itself: the old stories of the poet Egill and his ancestors are the *skript* or confession of the person who compiled them.

Some will no doubt find this reading excessively modern for a medieval text. I have suggested that the text is based primarily on the "free play of language" and that the work is "self-referential," to use ideas from modern literary theory. However, I have demonstrated here that the play on language has an analogy in the poetic tradition of the author's own times, and that quite a few examples of such wordplay can be found in the verses attributed to Egill in the saga.²⁰ The same applies to the technique of embedding an object in the text and describing it in order to provide clues as to how the narrative as a whole should be interpreted. This technique, deriving from classical rhetoric, was known as "ekphrasis" when applied to an object of art, as in the case of the shield, and examples of ekphrasis can be found in works translated into the Norse language in the thirteenth century.²¹

20. A nice example of wordplay in Egill's poetry can be found in Jón Helgason's article, "Ek bar sauð," *Acta philologica scandinavica* 23, 1 (1955). There Helgason argues that the phrase "ek bar sauð" (I carried a sheep) in verse 42 that Egill recites after the slaying of Ljótr the Pale could be rephrased as "bark á" (ek bar á), and thus can be changed into the word *barka*, "throat." The meaning of the last line of the verse then becomes clear: "Jaxlbróður lét ek eyða / ek bar sauð með nauðum" can be interpreted as "I was forced to use my teeth to cut his throat."

21. On this rhetorical trick see Michael J. Putnam, *Virgil's Epic Designs: Ekphrasis in the Aeneid* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1998). *Alexanders saga*, which was translated from the Latin in the mid-thirteenth century, tells of a similar shield to the one Einarr skálaglammi gave to Egill: "Skjöldr hans [Darij konungs] var sjöfaldur á þykktna, en lagður allur utan með gulli. Þar voru skrifaðir á frændur

Thus it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the author of *Egils saga* might have known of this device, since he seems to have been as well versed in rhetoric as he was in so many other fields.²²

If *Egils saga* is a riddle, and the stories of Einarr skálaglamm's shield and the finding of Egill's bones at Mosfell are intended to point us to the right solution, the saga and its poems would occupy a position not dissimilar to the Old Testament's tales of historical characters and their poetry. The thirteenth-century Norwegian text *Konungs skuggsjá* has this to say of them:

And if one has received the God-given spirit of a perfect understanding, he has a gift of such a nature that, when he hears a few spoken words, he perceives many words of thought. But David did not himself gloss the Psalter for the reason that he wished to leave to others the task of expressing all those thoughts which came up in his mind, when he wrote the Psalms as they duly unfolded. Thus all do who speak words that ought to be interpreted: they proceed with the discourse as planned and begun, and leave to others the task of expressing in words what is in their thoughts.²³

og foreldrar Darij konungs og stórvirki þeirra, risarnir, er fyrst gerðu stöðulinn Babel eftir Nóafldð á velli þeim, er Sennaár heitir, en þar eftir tungnaskipti, o.s.frv." (His [King Darius's] shield was sevenfold in thickness and its surface was all inlaid with gold. It was adorned with the kinsmen and parents of King Darius and their great deeds, the giants who first raised the tower of Babel after Noah's flood on the plain named Shinar, followed by the division of tongues, etc.); see Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis*, *það er Alexanders saga mikla eptir hinu forna kvæði meistara Phillippi Galtei Castellionæi, sem Brandur Jónsson ábóti sneri á danska tungu, það er íslensku, á þrettánda öld*, ed. Halldór Laxness (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1945), 38.

22. In an illuminating article about *Egils saga*, the American scholar Laurence de Looze points out that the account of the finding of the bones can be interpreted as a *mise en abyme* of the saga as a whole. *Mise en abyme* denotes any stylistic device by which part of the work contains at the same time some sort of declaration about the work as a whole. Ekphrasis is an example of *mise en abyme*. De Looze believes that Egill's skull is intended as a *mise en abyme*, that is, a symbol for the work as a whole, a work of literature that endures the passing of time although all else has vanished. This reading greatly enhances the understanding of *Egils saga's* kinship with modern literature, although it does not attempt particularly to understand the saga in its contemporary context. See Laurence de Looze, "Poet, Poem and Poetic Process in *Egils Saga* Skalla-Grímssonar," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 104 (1989).

23. *The King's Mirror: Speculum regale* (1917), 276. "... og er sú náttúra að

At least three points here can be applied to *Egils saga* and the saga author's attitude to his text. First, the saga does not say everything but relies instead on the *skilningarandi*, "spirit of understanding," that God has given to his audience so that they may "þekkja mörg orð hugrenningarinnar [frá] fáum orðum varanna" (know many words of the train of thought [from] few words from the lips). Second, here we have yet another analogy with David. It is not unlikely that the author of *Egils saga*, like David, expects his audience "að skýra með orðum alla þá hluti, er [höfundurinn] hugði með sjálfum sér skýringuna" (to explain with words all the things that [the author] had the explanation for in his own thought). Third, the existence of other texts besides the Holy Scripture is assumed, since authors expect their audience to gloss their words, that is, interpret the text in the way that we have here been trying to interpret *Egils saga*. The last point is particularly significant as it proves that at the time *Egils saga* was composed there was an assumption that it was possible to compose texts understandable on an allegorical level.²⁴

þeirri gjöf þar sem guð hefir fullan skilningaranda gefið að sá er hann heyrir fá orð varanna þekkir hann mörg orð hugrenningarinnar. En því glósaði eigi Davíð sjálfur psaltarann, að hann vildi öðrum það starf ætla að skýra með orðum alla þá hluti, er hann hugði með sjálfum sér skýringuna þá er hann ritaði rétta framgangsæðu upphafðra sálma. Og svo gera allir þeir er þá æðu hafa í munni er glósa þarf, þá ætla þeir öðrum það starf að skýra það með orðum er þeir hafa í huga sér meðan þeir gera framgangsveg upphafðrar æðu," *Konungs skuggsjá* (1955), 167.

24. Theodore M. Andersson took a rather decisive stand against the possibility of reading the sagas about early Icelanders using the methods of biblical exegesis in "Ethics and Politics in Hrafnkels Saga," *Scandinavian Studies* 60, 2 (1988): 293, where he says: "The discussion of meaning is confined to the tradition of scriptural exegesis and is difficult to document in vernacular literature. One German survey of literary exegesis a few years ago concluded that, with the possible exception of The Romance of the Rose, there is no evidence that deeper meaning was incorporated in vernacular fiction until the fourteenth century . . . This conclusion seems to suggest that the audience listening to medieval narrative were not listening for meaning. And yet a few medieval writers like Chrétien de Troyes and Gottfried von Strassburg use words that seem to mean 'meaning,' about their own works and the works of others . . . But they never specify a meaning or propose an understanding of their text." Here Andersson is rather dismissive of the fact that authors like Chrétien and Marie de France urge their readers to dig deeper and look for a more profound meaning in their tales, although it is true that they do not reveal what this meaning is. Indeed, quite a different stance has been taken by Walter Haug in his writings on medieval romance: "The exegetical idea of a revelation of meaning by interpretation is thus alluded to but then placed in a completely different perspective. This shift of

This does not necessarily mean, however, that *Egils saga* was intended as an allegory. Whoever composed it knew that form of expression, but was more playful in his use of it than is to be expected from someone solely intent on giving a spiritual meaning to the story told. Coming back to the point made in the beginning of this chapter, the absence of a prologue in *Egils saga* makes it difficult to discern the intention behind the saga. However, it definitely has many characteristics of the work of fiction as understood in the modern sense of the novel. This appears not only in the way the material is shaped to give it meaning but also in the playfulness and ironic distance with which that same meaning is handled.²⁵

perspective heralds the new literary form of the fictional romance, with its own way of representing and communicating meaning: *conjointure* thus ultimately refers to the Arthurian model and implies an awareness that the meaning lies in the structure itself." Walter Haug, *Vernacular Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: The German Tradition, 800–1300, in its European Context*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 29 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 104.

25. For a recent discussion on the relationship among form, fictionality, and exphrasis in the development of the particular aesthetics of medieval romance in the late twelfth century, see Jørgen Bruhn, "From Reference to Deferment" (2008).