

CHAPTER 7

Finally: The Birth of a Genre

The Catholic cause is championed in all the *Íslendingasögur*.

—Halldór Laxness¹

Many were grateful to Egill for his poetry.

—Snorri Sturluson

The investigation of *Egils saga* as a literary artefact almost eight centuries old has led to an analysis of the structure of the saga and the way in which it creates meaning. An attempt has been made to understand the society in which the saga originated and to compare the way it has been interpreted with what we know about the man who is most likely to have composed or commissioned it as well as the group of people who comprised its probable first audience. What, then, is the conclusion of this “archaeological excavation”?

First, it should be stressed that *Egils saga* is unquestionably the product of a sophisticated literary culture. It is a book born of other books, as is evident not least in the way the Bible and its tradition of exegesis have been used to endow the saga with both form and meaning. There is no doubt that the text relies to some degree on traditions of storytelling and poetry that partly originated in the pre-Christian era and survived, ostensibly through oral transmission, into the time the saga was composed. But it cannot be denied that this tradition existed in a society where laymen had appropriated the

1. “Hinn kaþólski málstaður er borinn fram í öllum íslendingasögum.” See Halldór Laxness, “Forneskjutaut,” in *Þjóðhátíðarrolla* (Reykjavík; Helgafell, 1974), 25.

instruments of the Church to record and order narrative and other human discourse. This appropriation is especially true of the group comprised by the chieftains in the first half of the thirteenth century. A splendid work of literature such as *Egils saga* could come into existence only because men had mastered the instruments available for processing the material that was in circulation, whether it was from the past or present, from abroad or from Iceland, in written, oral, or even pictorial form.

The methodology of considering the saga as an artifact that must be placed in its original context has made it possible to break free of the dichotomies that have hitherto dominated thinking about the medieval sagas. One is the dichotomy between oral transmission and literary culture, which appears to be more the invention of scholars than a useful conceptual tool for understanding the unique nature of medieval Icelandic literature.² It is thanks to literary culture that material from before the conversion of Iceland to Christianity, which survived in oral transmission, has been preserved for posterity. Furthermore, the literary culture set its own stamp on the form of the material as well as attitudes to it.

Another binary opposition has underpinned the way in which we approach medieval culture, that of pagan versus Christian. In fact, this way of thinking originated in the medieval period, for historians regarded the Christian conversion as a crucial watershed, signifying the difference in nature between themselves and their ancestors. This medieval idea should not be accepted uncritically, nor should we forget, when evaluating the historicity of early literature on the pagan period, that it was written by Christians.³

2. Gísli Sigurðsson, in *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition* (2004) and Margaret Clunies Ross (*Prolonged Echoes*, 2 vols., The Viking Collection 7, 10 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994-98)) have each in their own way attempted to break free of this type of thinking in binary oppositions, Sigurðsson by presenting various arguments for oral transmission in the sagas about early Icelanders and Clunies Ross by demonstrating how ideas and narrative motifs appear in continually shifting guise in medieval literature, as literary culture becomes established concurrently with the development of society.

3. Halldór Laxness expresses it as follows in "Forneskjutaut," in *Þjóðhátíðarrolla* (1974), 58: "Við megum aldrei gleyma því að allar fornþóðmentir okkar íslendinga eru samdar af kaþólskum mönnum. Heiðnir menn eru þar ekki til frásagnar." (We should never forget that all our ancient Icelandic literature was written by Catholics. Pagans did not get to tell their side of the story. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

Indeed, we must be extremely cautious about categorizing aspects of saga literature as either heathen or Christian. First, we must try to understand to the best of our ability what is meant when medieval works by Christian authors are concerned with pagans. The interest of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelanders in their pagan past was obviously motivated in part by practical reasons such as their close links with Scandinavia, especially Norway. It is doubtful that Icelanders would have considered themselves as a nation distinct from Norway in this period, since the concept of the nation had not yet developed its present meaning. Icelanders shared the same language as Norwegians, had important trading interests in Norway and sometimes other interests as a result of kinship or property in that country.⁴ The Archbishop of Iceland had his see in Niðarós (Trondheim), and Scandinavia, not least Norway, was an attractive destination for those who wished to win the sort of advancement that could not be achieved in Iceland. It is thus not unlikely that in honoring the memory of their ancestors who came from Norway or from Norse colonies in the British Isles, the Icelanders wished to cultivate their ties with their Norwegian contemporaries.

Another reason for celebrating the memory of the pagan settlers of Iceland was that the rule of the *goðar*, the system of government that was still in force when saga writing began to flourish around 1200, seems to have been legitimized by tales of the first settlers who claimed the land and parceled it out among their followers. An important aspect of the organization of society was thus believed to have originated in pagan times, but this did no harm, in fact quite the contrary, since the Christian view of history assumed that all races had a pagan past containing various things of practical value. This is evident in Continental ideas on the nature of kingship. As we have seen, the medieval ideal of kingship was derived from the Old Testament, for although the ancient kings of Israel were not Christian, they were the forerunners of the Christian kings. The story of the first generations of Icelanders thus conformed naturally

4. On the complex question of Icelandic national identity in the Middle Ages, see Sverrir Jakobsson, "Við og veröldin: Heimsmynd Íslendinga 1100-1400," PhD diss., University of Iceland, 2005, 328-52.

to the pattern of salvation history: noble heathens received the revelation of God's word and became Christian.

The concept of conversion is thus essential to the picture of the Icelanders' past that is evoked in the sagas. Indeed, one could say it was the axis around which everything else revolves. This is obvious in a work like *Heimskringla*, by Snorri Sturluson, in which the stories of the missionary kings, especially Saint Óláfr Haraldsson, who converted Norway and Iceland to Christianity, play a pivotal role and are thus accorded a disproportionate amount of space. So it is no coincidence that the sagas about early Icelanders, or *Íslendingasögur*, the prose narrative genre that many consider the pinnacle of those that were developed in Iceland during the Middle Ages, hardly ever deal with the period much after the conversion to Christianity in AD 1000. The chronology of the sagas begins with the settlement of Iceland, or events immediately preceding it, as in *Egils saga*, but the main narrative of many of the *Íslendingasögur* is set in the period around the conversion. This applies for example to *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*. Even when the conversion is not actually present in the saga, as in *Hrafnkels saga* or *Gísla saga*, or only occurs at the very end, as in *Egils saga*, it nevertheless shapes the narrative since the world that is being described is a world that is either preparing for or else in the throes of a religious conversion.

The ideas presented here about *Egils saga* demonstrate that this fact is vital if we are to understand the significance the saga would have had for an audience in the thirteenth century. Conversion could be described as the basic framework that elucidates the fate of the world in which Egill lived and his own individual story. Whether it is possible to read other sagas belonging to the same literary genre in a similar way will have to await further research. The study of this particular saga should nevertheless shed new light on our ideas about the genre as a whole, not least because *Egils saga* is unquestionably among its earlier representatives and undoubtedly the earliest of those that are considered classic. As such, it must have been highly influential in the development of the genre. The sagas that followed it made use of the fictional world it created, a picture of the past that was composed partly from the stories, characters and interpretational methods of the Bible, although it also owed a

debt to the remnants of the pre-Christian past that survived into the author's day in the form of stories or poems that the saga author adapted to the Christian world view, and to contemporary ideas about the soul. It is important to repeat the point that the fictional world of the Icelandic sagas was shaped and to a large extent invented in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, despite the echoes of the past that were preserved in the authors' material.

It is also significant that far from being smoothly seamless, *Egils saga* is packed with contradictions that are not overtly expressed but emerge in the development of the plot and behavior of the characters. Of course all storytelling, from ancient myths to modern soap operas, is characterized by its concern with hidden oppositions, expressing in narrative form the tension that exists between basic contending aspects of human life. The distinctive aspect of *Egils saga*—perhaps of all the sagas about early Icelanders—is that it takes place at a time of religious conversion. The conflicts at its core—the hero's superficial conflict with the king and underlying conflict with his father and brother—are contextualized by a structure that simultaneously shapes the historical view of the saga's author and audience and their ideas about human nature. Conversion produces a fundamental change, in the individual and in mankind as a whole, which we must take into account when trying to understand how the saga describes Egill's individual destiny, and also how it alludes to its contemporary world. We could say that by staging the binary opposition Christianity/paganism, the saga foregrounds the tension that exists in society and also in every individual, the tension between the desire to live in peace and a dark propensity to tyranny and violence. The conversion structure on which *Egils saga* is based enables the saga to tackle the preoccupation of all civilized societies: how to handle the beast in man. Egill is a man undergoing conversion, bestial in his wolfish nature but at the same time imbued with a soul that he transmutes into great poetry.

If *Egils saga* founds a genre, it is also a highly personal work, as is clear from the way the author sets out to pose riddles, entertaining himself and his audience with characters and events in such a way that all is not as it seems. But the saga is more than mere entertainment. The author's attitude to the ideology that underpins his narrative is also characterized by resistance that emerges

in his audacious play on the fundamentals of his faith and its chief symbols, and in his attempt to *yrkja fólgið*, “compose in a veiled manner.” Such playfulness is evident in the text at the point where the bones of a heathen Viking are buried under a holy altar, since burial is charged with the most powerful values of medieval Christian society.

Still more personal is the inner conflict that lies at the heart of *Egils saga*, providing its narrative drive, dictating its form and, ultimately, leaving a profound mark on the reader.