

## CHAPTER 2

# The Fabric of the Text

The holy priest Jerome has said that every cleric must take care not to make the Scriptures conform to his own will, but rather to make his own will conform to the Scriptures.

—Maríu saga.<sup>1</sup>

Every work of literature is connected by threads both visible and invisible to other texts with which the author or his readers are familiar. Whether consciously or not, the author of a work of literature is constantly alluding to other texts to give his work depth, to link his words to some other context, or quite simply to save effort. This concept, known as intertextuality,<sup>2</sup> can be useful for helping us to understand works from the remote past by virtue of its assumption that the author could allude, directly or indirectly, to texts that were in existence when the work was composed and with which it is probable that the author and many of his readers would have been familiar. If we wish to comprehend the meaning given to the work, and that its contemporaries would have been able

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1. “Ok segir enn helgi Jeronimus prestr, at þat skal hverr kennandi varaz at sveigia eigi ritningar eptir sínum vilia, helldr sinn vilia til ritninga.” *Maríu saga: Legender om Jomfru Maria og hendes jertegn efter gamle haandskrifter*, ed. C.R. Unger (Christiania, 1871), 1:20.

2. The honor of coining the term goes to Julia Kristeva, who used it in the mid-1960s, for example in the article “Bakhtine, le mot, le dialogue et le roman” (*Critique* 23, 239 (April 1967): 438–65; trans. as “Word, Dialogue and Novel” in her *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

to read from it, it is in other words necessary to look to the other texts that existed in the same period.

Although the term intertextuality is relatively new, the phenomenon it describes is as old as literature itself. It was certainly in existence in the Nordic linguistic area by the time court poetry came into being. One of the defining features of this type of poetry is the construction of *kennings*, more or less elaborate circumlocutions often based on knowledge of pagan myth or heroic legend.<sup>3</sup> To understand the kennings, it is of course necessary to be familiar with the texts—whether oral or written, prose or poetry—that formed the heroic and mythological tradition of Norse paganism. Since skaldic verse would be incomprehensible without reference to these stories, we could perhaps call Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* among other things a handbook on the use of intertextuality.

Intertextuality need not apply exclusively to literary texts. Other written works, such as legal or religious texts, also come within its compass. We could indeed expand the concept of "text" as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida did when he defined the term in the notorious catchphrase: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("There is no outside-the-text").<sup>4</sup> He is not saying that the text is a closed phenomenon unconnected to external reality, but that every type of perception, experience, recollection, or presentation of reality can be regarded as a form of text. These phenomena are always in some sense constructed and thus never in unmediated contact with reality. By saying that there is no outside-the-text, Derrida means that our only access to reality is via the text, in this broader definition. Far from closing literary works off from reality, this concept in fact enables us to discuss their relationship with the various texts in existence (whether written, oral, visual, or social, etc.), without ever sacrificing the knowledge that they are texts and as such obey their own laws.

In the following discussion, this expanded definition of a text will be used to shed light on the way in which *Egils saga* might

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3. For a definition and discussion of the kenning see Bjarne Fidjestøl, "The Kenning System: An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis," in his *Selected Papers*, ed. Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. Peter Foote, The Viking Collection 9 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997).

4. Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1967), 227; trans. as *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 102.



have generated meaning in the minds of its author(s) and audience at the time of its composition. To achieve this aim, I will consider three types of text that all had an important place in the lives of lay chieftains and their followers in thirteenth-century Iceland: the laws; pagan myths as retold by medieval authors; and Christian writings, especially the Bible, in the latter case taking account not only of the texts themselves but also of their tradition of interpretation.

### The Laws of God and Men

The law plays a major role in the sagas about early Icelanders. Hardly a saga exists that does not involve some kind of legal wrangling. In some cases these litigious episodes can be long and involved, *Njáls saga* being the most obvious example, whereas *Egils saga*, in contrast, contains only two lawsuits. One arises in the wake of Þorsteinn Egilsson's dispute with Steinar Sjóðason, but Egill receives the right to adjudicate before it comes to court (chapter 84). The other takes place at the Gulaping in Norway, but the assembly is broken up before the case can be concluded. One might conclude on this basis that there is little point in combing the saga for material relating to the law. However, it should not be forgotten that at the time *Egils saga* was written two types of law were in force in Iceland: the law of the land, promulgated at the Alþingi, and the law of God, imposed by the Church on all Christians. The clergy had the duty of persuading the laity to submit to the authority of canon law, for example by encouraging them to adapt their own secular laws in line with ecclesiastical legislation. In practice, however, secular leaders were often uncooperative.

An examination of the sources reveals that canon law had been making its mark on Icelandic secular law since early in the twelfth century. The provisions of the Christian law section of *Grágás*, for example, mentioned in my introduction, are drawn largely from the edicts of the Catholic Church.<sup>5</sup>

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5. These were passed in the third or fourth decade of the twelfth century on the advice of Özzur, Archbishop of Lund. See *Grágás* (1992), x–xi; 34. See also *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (1980–2000), 1:51.

Shortly after the promulgation of the Christian law section in Iceland, Gratian, a monk and teacher in Bologna, undertook the collection and systematization of a vast number of resolutions, canons and regulations that had been decreed by the papacy since the dawn of the Christian Church. His intention was to solve the obvious contradictions in canon law, as is evident from the title he gave his work: *Concordantia discordantium canonum*. The work, usually known as the *Decretum Gratiani*, remained the legal textbook of the Church until Pope Gregory IX commissioned another jurist, Raymond of Peñafort, to collect all papal edicts from the time of Gratian onward in a standardized collection of laws, named *Liber extra*, which was to remain in force in the Roman Catholic Church from 1234 until 1918.<sup>6</sup>

The growth of ecclesiastical law went hand in hand with a revival in Roman law that in turn reflected a general renaissance of interest in classical culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It would seem to have been driven by historical necessity, for when the European monarchies began to consolidate their power in the twelfth century, a demand was created for more comprehensive and sophisticated legislation, the most obvious models for which were to be found in the classical past. Likewise the Church, which was wealthy and powerful in this period, enjoyed a greater sphere of influence than ever before and showed a new interest in secular affairs due to changed ideas of its role in the Christian community. If it was to strengthen its internal organization and exert even greater authority over the lives of laymen, the Church needed to systematize ecclesiastical law. In consequence the law became an increasingly powerful tool in the hands of the Church, especially in its power struggles with temporal leaders that set such a strong stamp on this period.

That Iceland was no exception to this development can be seen from Bishop Guðmundr Arason's conflict with the lay chieftains in the first decades of the thirteenth century, and Bishop Þorlákr's earlier disputes with Jón Loptsson and other Icelandic magnates in

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6. I have based my account of the development and burgeoning of canon law in the Middle Ages on James A. Brundage's *Medieval Canon Law* (London: Longman, 1995). This section is based on chapter 3, 44–69.

the second half of the twelfth century.<sup>7</sup> The historian Sveinbjörn Rafnsson believes that the *Skriftaboð* of St. Þorlákr, an ordinance on confession, reveals influences from canon law that were not present in the Christian law section of *Grágás*, the implication being that the Icelanders kept a close eye on developments in this field.<sup>8</sup> Another historian, Stephan Kuttner, has demonstrated that Gunnlaugr Leifsson (died 1219), compiler of *Jóns saga helga*, must also have had considerable knowledge of ecclesiastical law, including innovations that were not in force in the days of Bishop Jón but had come into effect by the time the saga was written.<sup>9</sup> Such knowledge would have been essential not only for the government of the local Church, but also for chieftains in their dealings with the clergy.<sup>10</sup>

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7. See *Oddaverja þáttur*, in *Byskupa sögur*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), 131–54; *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* (ibid., vol. 2), 197, which relates how Þorlákr annulled the marriage of Þórðr Böðvarsson of Bær, a kinsman of Snorri Sturluson, citing the authority of divine law. Secular magnates were reluctant to recognize the bishop's judicial power in many areas that canon law placed under his jurisdiction. See *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:214.

8. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, "Skriftaboð Þorláks biskups," *Gripla* 5 (1982): 97–101. Rafnsson has written much that is informative on the influence of Roman law on Icelandic legal codes in the Commonwealth Age, including "Grágás og Digesta Iustiniani." In his article "Þorláksskriftir og hjúskapur á 12. og 13. öld" (*Saga* 20 (1982): 118ff.), Rafnsson draws attention to the fact that many of the points of contention about the relationships between men and women that arose between the Church and laymen in thirteenth-century Icelandic society play a prominent role in the *Íslendingasögur*.

9. Stephan Kuttner, "St. Jón of Hólar: Canon Law and Hagiography in Medieval Iceland," in his *The History of Ideas and Doctrines of Canon Law in the Middle Ages*, Collected Studies series 113 (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980). On Kuttner's article, see Peter G. Foote, "Formáli: Jóns saga Helga," in *Biskupa sögur* 1, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson, and Peter Foote, vol. 1, *Íslenzk fornrit* 15 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2003), ccxcvii–ccxcviii.

10. It was, for example, necessary for the election of a new bishop, as can be inferred from a letter of 1202, sent by Bishop Páll to the newly elected Guðmundr, where it says: "Guð hefir kosið þig til biskups og vér, og ertu fastlega kosinn að guðs lögum og manna svo sem á þessu landi má fullegast." *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:206–7. "God has chosen you as bishop, as do we, and you are truly elected according to the law of God and of men as certainly as this can be done in our country." *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 140–41. The case of Guðmundr the Good doubtless motivated men to ensure that they were well versed in ecclesiastical law, since attempts were made to remove Guðmundr on legal grounds, by sending envoys all the way to Rome to seek the Pope's advice on whether the bishop could be deposed. See Björn Þórðarson, "Magnús Gissurarson Skálholtsbiskup," *Andvari* 80 (1995): 47.



All this gives us reason to suppose that in the first half of the thirteenth century there was considerable knowledge of canon law in Iceland, principally among churchmen, of course, but also among the laity, as these laws would have had a significant bearing on their lives.<sup>11</sup>

A number of provisions from canon law were incorporated in the secular legislation of this period, no doubt with the support of laymen. In Snorri Sturluson's first term of office as lawspeaker in 1217, for example, a major innovation was introduced with the adoption of the "impediments of relationship," in line with a resolution enacted only two years earlier at the Lateran Council. This resolution permitted marriage between third cousins, where previously the impediment of affinity had been set at the sixth degree. Since marriage was an important instrument for forming alliances and reconciling warring clans, the leading Icelandic chieftains were inevitably bound by close blood ties, and so this change in the law would have had a major social impact, as indicated by its mention in the annals and also in *Grágás*, where it is associated with Bishop Magnús Gizurarson.<sup>12</sup> One illustration of what this change in the law meant for Icelandic chieftains is the marriage of Snorri Sturluson's nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson, to Solveig Sæmundardóttir of the Oddaverjar dynasty. This union could not have taken place before 1217 without special dispensation from the bishop on account of their being fifth cousins. The same is true of the match that Snorri intended for his son Jón murtr with Solveig's sister Helga.<sup>13</sup> Given that it was Snorri's

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11. A useful overview of the knowledge of canon law in medieval Iceland can be found in Sigurður Línal's article "Um þekkingu Íslendinga á rómverskum og kanónískum rétti frá 12. öld til miðrar 16. aldar," *Úlfjótur* 50 (1997): 241–73.

12. *Íslandske annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm (Christiania: Norsk historisk kildeskriftfond, 1888), 125 and 184; *Grágás* (1992), 34 and 111; *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (1980–2000), 1:51. A useful survey of these innovations in the laws can be found in *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenskt fornbréfasafn*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1857), 372–92.

13. On the affinity between Solveig and Sturla, see the genealogies in *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:46ff. Hvamm-Sturla's mother, Vigdís Svertingsdóttir, was the second cousin of Loptr, son of Sæmundr the Wise, and both were descended from Loðmundr Svartsson of Oddi. On the penalties for such marriages, see *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, vol. 1 (1857), 385.

duty as lawspeaker to announce this innovation at the assembly, he must have had some knowledge of ecclesiastical law, perhaps more than has often been acknowledged.<sup>14</sup>

It may come as a surprise that I should seek to identify the influence of canon law in *Egils saga*, given that the bulk of the narrative is set before the Christianization of the North. It must be borne in mind, however, that the saga was compiled by a Christian and, moreover, Egill's marital affairs appear extremely interesting in the light of ecclesiastical law. It was a universal rule in medieval canon law that a man was forbidden to marry his brother's widow. A clause from *Grágás* shows that this ban was in effect in Iceland at the time *Egils saga* was written, having almost certainly been present in the Christian law section of the code at the time of its promulgation in the twelfth century. It reads as follows:

It is major incest with an affine if a man lies with a woman—and it is the same even though he is married to her—when any son of a paternal uncle or closer kinsman of his has had her to wife or had a child by her or been found guilty of intercourse with her.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, it was forbidden for a man to lie with a woman who had previously been married to his brother, uncle, first cousin, or nephew. According to this, Egill would not have been permitted to marry his brother's widow had he been living under Christian law, a fact that must surely have been clear to the thirteenth-century audience of *Egils saga*. Admittedly, a contemporary of whoever composed *Egils saga*, Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), did permit recent converts to Christianity to enter into such marriages, but only providing the strictest conditions of affinity were adhered to, that is, that the brother had died without issue. But these

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14. On Snorri's knowledge of canon law, see my article "Guðs lög í ævi og verkum Snorra Sturlusonar," *Ný Saga* 8 (1996): 31–40.

15. *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (1980–2000), 2:80. "Það er sífjaspell hið meira ef maður liggur með þeirri konu, og svo þó að hann eigi hana, ef bræðrungr hans hefir átta eða nánari, eða getið barn við og orðið sannur að legorði." *Grágás* (1992), 128. (This provision had long been established in canon law, and so there is no reason to suppose that it was not included in the Christian law section from the outset.)

conditions could not be fulfilled in Egill's case since Ásgerðr had already borne a daughter, Þórdís, to his brother Þórólfr.<sup>16</sup>

This knowledge adds an unexpected dimension to the conversation between Egill and Arinbjörn (chapter 56), referred to at the end of the last chapter. Not daring to admit that he wants to marry his brother's widow, Egill at first clothes his confession of love in cryptic verses, only afterward elucidating them on the grounds that "you can tell anything to a friend."<sup>17</sup> This is usually interpreted as shyness on Egill's part, an unwillingness to reveal sensitive feelings, but bearing in mind the above-cited law, it is conceivable that those living at the time of the saga's composition would have put a rather different construction on his behavior, even though they were aware that Iceland and Norway were not under Christian law in Egill's days.

Egill had received the *prima signatio*, or preliminary mark of conversion to Christianity, during his time in England. The sign of the cross made over him on that occasion gave his soul divine protection against the machinations of the devil and prepared him for baptism proper. The *prima signatio*, or prime-signing, effectively changed Egill's religious status: although not yet fully Christian, he had taken an important step toward Christianity.<sup>18</sup> He was in the same position as a catechumen awaiting baptism and, as such, subject to Christian laws that did not apply to Arinbjörn or his Norwegian contemporaries. Being a man of the old customs, that is, of pre-Christian culture, Arinbjörn evidently had no objection to Egill's marrying his brother's widow, whereas Egill's hesitation to propose may have been

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16. See Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Matrimonial Trials of Henry VIII* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), 14–15.

17. Scudder (2004), 104. "‘. . . seganda er allt sínum vin.’" ÍF 2:150. On the idea that it is possible to be frank with one's friend, and its roots in Christian medieval culture, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's article, "Sagnastef í íslenskri menningarsögu," *Saga* 30 (1992): 81–121.

18. On the status of prime-signed individuals in medieval theology, see J. Harris and T.D. Hill, "Gestr's 'Prime Sign': Source and Signification in *Norna-Gests þáttur*," *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* 104 (1989): 112–17. On the theological status of those who were prime-signed, see Åke Sandholm's exhaustive study *Primsigningsriten under nordisk medeltid*, Acta Academia Aboensis, seria A, Humaniora 29, 3 (Åbo: Åbo akademi, 1965), especially 65ff. See also Einar Molland, "Primsigning," in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingetid til reformationstid*, vol. 13 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1959), 443; and Joseph H. Lynch, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 73–74.



understood by the saga's original audience as the sign of awareness that his marriage to Ásgerðr would be wrong in the eyes of God.

Not only is Egill's religious status significant in this context, but it also has a wider significance for the saga as a whole and for its larger meaning, as will emerge in the course of this chapter. Tellingly, Egill's prime-signing is reiterated in the account of his death at the end of the saga. While editions of the saga tend to be based on the recension in *Möðruvallabók*, two other manuscripts of the saga, the Wolfenbüttel book and the seventeenth-century copy *Ketilsbók*, contain the following passage as a kind of epitaph on Egill in the chapter on his death. The wording is almost identical in both manuscripts:

No more valiant commoner is thought to have lived under the old rites than Egill Skallagrímsson. He had been prime-signed and never worshipped the heathen gods.<sup>19</sup>

There is every likelihood that this passage had formed part of the original saga and that the scribe of *Möðruvallabók*, who had a tendency to condense the texts he copied, chose to omit it. The fact that Egill's prime-signing is mentioned in the catalogue of his chief character traits at the end of the story implies that it is important. It also confirms an understanding of what *prima signatio* entailed, as prime-signed men seemingly promised not to sacrifice to the heathen gods.<sup>20</sup> Here again we see the care taken in setting up events in the saga. Sacrifices are referred to twice, in chapters 44 and 49, but Egill takes part in neither. On the latter occasion, when Egill's brother Þórólfr attends a sacrifice in Norway, the sequence of events has been so arranged that Egill cannot himself be present.<sup>21</sup> Neither can

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19. Og þykir eigi meiri afreksmaður verið hafa í fornum sið ótiginn, en Egill Skallagrímsson. Hann var prímsignður maður og blótaði aldrei goð. See Bjarni Einarsson, "Um Eglutexta Möðruvallabókar í 17du aldar eftirritum," *Gripla* 8 (1993): 51.

20. See Sandholm, *Primsigningsriten* (1965), 38–40. This description of Egill puts him among the "noble heathens" described by Lars Lönnroth ("The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 41, 1 (1969): 1–29) and indicates that Egill's prime-signing was more important than scholars have hitherto realized.

21. I have written before about Egill's prime-signing, for example in the article "'Mun konungi eg þykja ekki orðsnjallur': Um margræðni, textatengsl og dulda merkingu í Egils sögu," *Skírnir* 168 (1994): 109–33. In his 2001 book on *Sonatorrek*, Jón Hnefíll Aðalsteinsson criticizes my ideas about Egill's theological status, and I will address his criticisms below in a separate section on the poem.

the invocation of the land spirits against King Eirík Bloodaxe and the erection of a *níðstöng*, i.e. a pole with a horse's head on it, in chapter 59 be considered as a pagan sacrifice, since it is a magical harnessing of the power of the spirits and not a ritual of allegiance to the heathen gods.<sup>22</sup>

We cannot leave the legal aspect of Egill's marriage without pointing out that Christian law forbidding a man to marry his brother's widow directly contradicted Old Testament Mosaic law, which, in contrast, all but obligated an eligible man to marry his brother's widow (Deuteronomy 25:5). This practice, levirate marriage, was one of the laws that was to be changed by God's new covenant with his people on the coming of Christ.<sup>23</sup> Later we will discuss in more detail the view of history that underpins *Egils saga*, in which the Christianization of the Nordic countries is taken to reflect the watershed between the Old and New Testaments. Egill's prime-signing effectively places him in a liminal state between the old and new customs. The tension in the above-mentioned scene lies in the fact that Arinbjörn is entirely a man of the old customs. To him it is desirable that his friend should marry Ásgerðr, whereas the new customs prohibit such an act by a prime-signed man such as Egill.

This examination of legal texts, especially canon law, has revealed that Egill's desire to marry his brother's widow Ásgerðr was a contravention of the law at the time the saga was written. Various aspects of Egill's story therefore acquire new significance when viewed in relation to thirteenth-century Icelandic law, shedding unexpected light on the effort he makes to conceal his feelings for Þórólfr's wife and his reluctance to admit them when pressed. By marrying her he is in breach of a specific prohibition. This breach alerts one's curiosity to search the text for further clues that Egill's behavior might be construed as morally dubious by a thirteenth-century audience, since he had submitted to the laws of God when he received *prima signatio*.<sup>24</sup>

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22. Lönnroth, in "The Noble Heathen" ((1969): 25), remarks cogently on the different possible interpretations by thirteenth-century Christians of pagan characters such as Egill.

23. According to H. A. Kelly, *The Matrimonial Trials of Henry VIII* (1976), 14–15, it was an almost universal rule in Christian law of the Middle Ages that men were not permitted to marry their brother's widow or divorced wife.

24. See, however, Else Mundal ("Torfi H. Tulinius: *Skáldið í skriftinni*—*Snorri*

### *Egils saga* and Pagan Myth

I now wish to examine *Egils saga*'s textual links with the pagan stories that would have been known in the first half of the thirteenth century, starting with the famous account in *Snorra Edda* of how Höðr the Blind killed his brother Baldr by shooting him with a shaft of mistletoe.<sup>25</sup> It so happens that we have an episode in *Egils saga* where Egill kills a man by throwing a spear at him. The man in question is one of the characters named Ketill who were discussed in the previous chapter. This Ketill bears the cognomen *höðr* (chapter 57), a term that might indicate that the man in question was from Haðaland, and that also crops up in a kenning in stanza 19 of the saga: *brynju Höðr*, meaning "warrior."<sup>26</sup> The cognomen and the fact that Ketill is run through with a spear inevitably remind one of the legend of Höðr the Blind's terrible deed. Ketill *höðr* is described as bearing a close resemblance to King Eiríkr Bloodaxe, and when Egill throws his spear it is stressed that *lítt var lýst*, "there was still little daylight"; a strong hint that Egill had actually intended to kill the king. This links the account in *Egils saga* even more strongly to the legend of Baldr, since the twilight that makes it difficult for Egill to distinguish between the two men can be seen as analogous to Höðr's blindness.<sup>27</sup>

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*Sturluson og Egils saga: melding*," *Maal og Minne* 2 (2005): 202), who rejects this interpretation, arguing that the author of *Egils saga* is careful to avoid anachronisms and this reading would have been interpreted as such by a thirteenth century audience. One can ask, however, whether a thirteenth-century Christian would not consider God's law as universal, and therefore not dependent on time and place.

25. See *Edda* [of Snorri Sturluson]: *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 46.

26. Hotherus is mentioned in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, where he is killed by Balderus, who covets his wife. On this see R. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1993), 155.

27. Haraldur Bessason identified what he calls "mythological overlays" in *Egils saga*. See "Mythological Overlays," in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson, Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), 273–92. See also Baldur Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), 95–109.



As Ketill höðr is mentioned nowhere else in the sources, it seems probable that he was invented for the purposes of the saga.<sup>28</sup> Ketill's role is to show that, like his father and uncle, Egill will stop at nothing in his dealings with the kings of Norway, but the character may also perform more than one function. His nickname recalls the tale of Baldr's killing, with its connotations of fratricide. Now, the fact that Ketill höðr falls victim to a spear rather than throwing it himself like Höðr in the legend would seem to weaken this interpretation, but it is reinforced by three elements that are common to both saga and legend: the nickname, the throwing-spear and the theme of blindness. These elements are so fundamental to each account that they would seem to provide ample evidence for those seeking a deeper meaning, especially if other elements in the text point in the same direction. At minimum it is clear the writer of *Egils saga* knew the story and exploited it.

Echoes of another heathen legend can perhaps be detected in the scene where Egill accepts compensation from King Athelstan of England for the death of his brother Þórólfr (chapter 55). The two men sit facing each other across a fire, each with a sword to hand. The prose prologue to the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* presents a similar image of King Geirröðr sitting by a fire opposite a disguised Óðinn. Long ago Óðinn had helped Geirröðr rid himself of an elder brother and become king in his stead.<sup>29</sup> These accounts share the motif of a drawn sword, for, like Egill, Geirröðr has partially unsheathed his blade. Furthermore, in each tale one of the characters has lost a brother while the other sitting opposite him has been instrumental in this loss. Þórólfr's death is the indirect result of Athelstan's appointing Egill to a different troop; the fatefulness of the order is highlighted in the saga by Egill's objection, which prompts an exchange among the king, Egill, and Þórólfr (chapter 54).

The famous description of Egill's appearance is introduced in the scene where he sits facing Athelstan, shortly after the death of Þórólfr (chapter 55):

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28. Bjarni Einarsson has shown that the author of *Egils saga* based his account of the killing of Ketill höðr on a similar incident in *Jónsvíkingasaga*. See his *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 147.

29. See *Grímnismál* in *Eddukvæði*, ed. Ólafur Bríem (Reykjavík: Skálholtsútgáfan, 1968), 148–62; trans. Carolyn Larrington as *The Poetic Edda*, Oxford World's Classics, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51–52.

Egil sat down and put his shield at his feet. He was wearing a helmet and laid his sword across his knees, and now and again he would draw it half-way out of the scabbard, then thrust it back in. He sat upright, but with his head bowed low. Egil had very distinctive features, with a wide forehead, bushy brows and a nose that was not long but extremely broad. His upper jaw was broad and long, and his chin and jawbones were exceptionally wide. With his thick neck and stout shoulders, he stood out from other men. When he was angry, his face grew harsh and fierce. He was well built and taller than other men, with thick wolf-grey hair, although he had gone bald at an early age. When he was sitting in this particular scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair. Egil had dark eyes and was swarthy. He refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn.<sup>30</sup>

The passage contains a number of interesting features. The alien nature of Egill's appearance is stressed: his chin is "exceptionally" wide, his neck so thick and shoulders so stout "that he stood out from other men." No less strange is Egill's behavior of raising and lowering his brows. Presumably there is some purpose in placing the depiction of Egill at this point in the narrative, bearing in mind that it is more common for characters in the sagas about early Icelanders to be described when first introduced.<sup>31</sup> While there are instances of a few details being added to the description of a person at the end of a saga or at a fateful moment in the character's life, these are comparatively rare, and the above-cited portrait of Egill

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30. Scudder (2004), 100. "Egill settisk þar niðr ok skaut skildinum fyrir fœtr sér; hann hafði hjálm á hofði ok lagði sverðit um kné sér ok dró annat skeið til hálsf, en þá skelldi hann aptr í slíðrin; hann sat uppréttr ok var gneypr mjök. Egill var mikilleitr, ennibreiðr, brúnamikill, nefit ekki langt, en ákafliga digrt, granstæðit vítt ok langt, hakan breið furðuliga, ok svá allt um kjálkana, hálsdigr ok herðimikill, svá at þat bar frá því, sem aðrir menn váru, harðleitr ok grimmligr, þá er hann var reiðr; hann var vel í vexti ok hverjum manni hæri, úlfrátt hárit ok þykkt ok varð snimma sköllóttr; en er hann sat, sem fyrr var ritat, þá hleypði hann annarri brúninni ofan á kinnina, en annarri upp í hárrœtr; Egill var svarteygr ok skolbrúnn. Ekki vildi hann drekka, þó at honum væri borit, en ýmsum hleypði hann brúnunum ofan eða upp." ÍF 2:143-44.

31. Examples include the descriptions of Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga*, Gunnarr and Njáll in *Njáls saga* and Grettir in *Grettis saga*.

must be regarded as atypical, by virtue of its position and presentation. Its position underlines the fact that this is a pivotal moment in Egill's life. It is as if the reader is being invited to see the character afresh, after being immersed in his story for so long. The emphasis on Egill's face, meanwhile, draws attention to the inner man, the presentation serving to enhance still further the reader's impression that Egill is an enigma. What thoughts or feelings cause his face to twitch with rage? The reader must have been meant to ponder this question, but he does not receive answers except perhaps by allusion to other texts.

Just as the lot of Geirröðr improved with the death of his brother, so Egill's lot improves on Þórólfr's death; he now becomes his father's sole heir and is able to marry Ásgerðr.<sup>32</sup> The textual links with *Grímnismál* have the effect of drawing attention to the parallels between Óðinn and Geirröðr, on the one hand, and Athelstan and Egill, on the other, hinting at the disposal of a brother that is analogous with Höðr's act of fratricide.<sup>33</sup>

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32. *Grímnismál* is not the only early work in which Óðinn is connected with fratricide. The same is true of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. Here again it is striking that the conversation of the hero with the one responsible for his brother's death is juxtaposed with a drawn sword. On this, see my article "Hervarar saga og þróun erfðaréttar á þrettánda öld," *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 53, 3 (1992), as well as a more detailed discussion of the theme of fratricide in this saga in my book *The Matter of the North* (2002), 73–114.

33. A third link with heathen texts could be mentioned here, i.e. with Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. *Gylfaginning* tells of Váli, one of the sons of Loki Laufeyjarson, who is turned into a wolf and made to tear apart his brother Narfi, whose intestines are then used to bind Loki in punishment for having tricked Höðr into slaying Baldr (*Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (2005), 49). Váli also avenges Baldr's death by killing Höðr (*Eddukvæði* (1968), 83; *The Poetic Edda* (1996), 8). The name Váli appears in chapter 79 of *Egils saga*, in the account of the settler Ketill gufa. By this stage in the story Egill has returned home from his final voyage abroad but the death of his son Böðvarr has not yet been mentioned. Ketill gufa settles in Þorskafjörður, marries Ýrr, daughter of Geirmundr heljarskinn, and has a son called Váli. In the edition on which this study is largely based he is actually called Vali, but in Finnur Jónsson's edition of the saga the name is Váli, and I have gone with this spelling (see *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar nebst den grösseren Gedichten Egils*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Halle: Niemeyer, 1894), 254). Like Ketill höðr, this Váli is recorded nowhere else. In fact, it seems that whoever composed the saga knew sources that attribute other children to Ýrr but make no mention of Váli. It is therefore difficult to see why he is mentioned here, unless with the intention of continuing to play on the theme of fratricide. Perhaps the intention is also to remind the reader of the



The description of Egill by the fireside also has textual links with the Bible, as will be explored below, but first we must tease out further allusions to tales of pagan origin. The battle of Vínheiðr corresponds in many details to the battle described in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, which is probably among the earliest of the legendary sagas, perhaps even earlier than *Egils saga*. It was compiled from disparate source material, including old poems, one of which, “Hlöðskviða,” is believed to be very early.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of whether *Hervarar saga* already existed in its extant form when *Egils saga* was composed, there are many indications that the legendary saga’s account of the battle of Dunheiðr was the model for the battle of Vínheiðr. The most serious proponent of this argument was Lee M. Hollander.<sup>35</sup> The place-names Dunheiðr and Vínheiðr are strikingly similar; both heaths are identified by monosyllabic words ending in the same consonant. In both accounts the battlefield is staked out with hazel rods and the battle puts an end to the ravages of an invading army, and both heaths are located near a forest with a strongly built fortress not far off. To avoid bloodshed the locals have offered the invading army gold, although *Egils saga* differs from *Hervarar saga* in that here the gold has merely been offered as a delaying tactic while the English army is being mustered.

Hollander regarded these similarities as sufficiently striking to indicate a relationship between the two sagas. In brief, his hypothesis was that the *Egils saga* author borrowed from *Hlöðskviða*, which is unquestionably older than either saga, but that some version of *Hervarar saga* must already have been in circulation. This can be deduced from Saxo Grammaticus’s account of the same events in his

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fate of fratricides, in which case the position of this account in the story would be significant, as will be shown later.

34. On *Hervarar saga* and its links with *Egils saga*, see my *The Matter of the North* (2002), 73–114 and 251–56 respectively.

35. See Lee M. Hollander, “The Battle on the Vin-heath and the Battle of the Huns,” *Journal of English and German Philology* 32, 1 (1933): 33–43. The account of the battle of Vínheiðr is in chapters 52–54 of *Egils saga*. The battle of Dunheiðr is described in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, translated by Christopher Tolkien as *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise: Saga Heiðreks Konungs ins Vitra* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), 52–58.

*Gesta Danorum* of around 1200, which relied heavily on Icelandic informants and their “store of historical treasures.”<sup>36</sup>

Hollander’s hypothesis is supported by further evidence. In a version of *Landnámabók* that is not indebted to *Egils saga*, Þórólfr Skallagrímsson is said to have fallen in Vindland or Wendland, on the eastern Baltic, rather than in England.<sup>37</sup> Stories may have existed of Þórólfr’s fall in the east as well as of his demise in England, but whoever composed *Egils saga* chose to stage his death in the realm of King Athelstan.<sup>38</sup> He seems to have been well informed about English history and aware that the aristocracy rebelled against their monarch. The fraught relationship between the king and nobles who hark back to a time when the monarchy was weaker is, of course, one of the themes of *Egils saga*, notably its first section.

Other parallels can also be detected between *Egils saga* and *Hervarar saga*. Both sagas contain comparable accounts of two brothers separated by a considerable age gap. Their father invites the elder son to a feast while excluding the younger. The latter turns up anyway, in defiance of his father’s ban. In both cases the younger son protests against the preferential treatment given to his brother; to cite Egill (chapter 31): “Á ég þar slíkt kynni sem Þórólfr’s” (They’re just as much my relatives as Þórólfr’s). Yet there is an important difference between the accounts. In *Egils saga* the tone is comical since the younger brother is only three years old. Although he ignores his father’s prohibition, he is welcomed by the host, his maternal grandfather, and this dissipates the tension. The account in *Hervarar saga*, on the other hand, takes a tragic turn when the younger brother, Heiðrekr, has the misfortune to cast a

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36. See Hollander, “The Battle on the Vin-heath,” (1933): 39–40. Saxo’s comments on Icelandic sources can be found in *Gesta Danorum*, Book 5, 1–9; trans. Peter Fisher as *The History of the Danes: Books I-IX*, ed. H. E. Davidson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 5.

37. See *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 95, footnote. See also Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 248–49. In the introduction to his edition of *Egils saga* (1933, xxxii), Sigurður Nordal makes light of this, suggesting that “Vindland” may be a scribal error for “Vínheiði.”

38. On this, see Sigurður Nordal’s introduction to his 1933 edition of *Egils saga* (xxxii) and Alastair Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburh* (London: Heinemann, 1938). Symeon of Durham mentions Weondune as one of the names for the location of the battle. It has certain similarities with Vínheiði (Nordal, 1933, xliii).

stone into the darkness towards the sound of voices, thereby killing his elder brother Angantýr.<sup>39</sup>

The obvious difference between the two accounts is that, unlike *Heiðrekr*, Egill does not cast a stone into the darkness during the childhood episode. However, long afterward Egill throws a spear into the dusk, killing Ketill höðr (chapter 57), an incident that contains multiple allusions to the theme of fratricide, as I have already demonstrated. The elements from *Hervarar saga* that are lacking in the narrative of Egill's childhood antics are nevertheless present in *Egils saga*; they simply occur elsewhere in the story at a point where again hints are being made at the theme of fratricide, through Ketill's cognomen.

Yet another clue to the relationship between the two sagas is the phrase *þýjar barn*, "child of a slave woman," found in one of the stanzas of "Hlöðskviða."<sup>40</sup> This is closely related to the compound *þýborinn* found in stanza 25 in *Egils saga*. I have not been able to find the word *þýborinn* anywhere else in the corpus of Icelandic saga literature.<sup>41</sup> Significantly, it has close links with the main theme of *Hervarar saga*, that is, the rebellion by those who feel they have been deprived of their birthright against those who have usurped their position. It is also a prominent issue in *Egils saga*; suffice it to mention the sons of Hildiríðr, the rebellious English nobility, and Egill's own disputes with Berg-Önundr and King Eiríkr over Ásgerðr's inheritance.

The two sagas could be said to deal with a similar issue: the predicament of illegitimate sons who do not enjoy the same treatment as their legitimate siblings. Moreover, both link this theme,

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39. I base my account here on Guðni Jónsson's edition of the saga, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, in vol. 2 of *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. (Reykjavík: Íslendingaútgáfan, 1950), 25. As far as I know this motif is not found anywhere else in the saga literature.

40. *Ibid.*, 58.

41. Johann Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske spog*, vol. 3 (Christiania: Norske forlagsforening, 1892), 1060, cites only examples from *Egils saga* and the Norwegian laws. It is also used in the short biography of Snorri goði, which is not a saga; see *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzk fornrit* 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), 185. Most of the examples recorded in the card index of the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, published by the Arnarnaganaean Commission in Copenhagen, are from Norse legal terminology (the laws of Frostaping and Gulaping). The rest come from *Egils saga* and *Hectors saga*.



which was a pressing matter in Icelandic society in the first half of the thirteenth century, with another issue that was also under debate: the right of younger sons to inherit versus that of the elder.<sup>42</sup>

### *Egils saga* and the Bible

We have seen how the relationship between younger and elder brothers is a central concern of *Egils saga*. It even emerges in the difference between the first part of the saga, where Skallagrímr has to take a back seat in the narrative until his elder brother's story is concluded, and the second part, where Egill steals the limelight more or less from the start. Now I would like to consider how the saga draws on its audience's putative knowledge of Bible stories, and suggest clues as to the best way to solve the enigma of Egill.

In one of his lectures on psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud discusses humor with the help of the following illustration. Two partners have amassed a fortune from shady business dealings, and, having evaded the clutches of the law, now live a life of luxury like high-society figures. To celebrate their success, they decide to commission a famous artist to paint their portraits, and once the paintings are finished, they hold a lavish dinner party to which they invite the most influential art critic in the city. They show him the portraits and ask his opinion. After studying the works for a while he points to the gap between them and asks, "But where's the Saviour?"<sup>43</sup> Freud reminds his readers that Christ was crucified between two thieves; thus the art critic was implying that the two businessmen were no better than thieves, but he did so in a disguised manner by alluding to the Bible. Here we have a type of intertextuality that consists of alluding to a context that is not obviously connected to the topic of discussion.

When we read *Egils saga*, a tale set almost entirely before Iceland's conversion to Christianity, it hardly crosses our mind as twenty-first-century readers to look for references to the Bible. Although in the last few decades scholars have done much to bring it to our

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42. See *The Matter of the North* (2002), 98–106.

43. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1960), 74–75.

attention that the various disciplines of the Church were known and studied in Iceland both before and during the composition of the sagas, the question of the influence of Christianity on people's mental habits during the Icelandic Commonwealth has not been fully explored yet.<sup>44</sup> The problem is not limited to Iceland. European sources tell us little about the religious notions or practice of the laity until well into the thirteenth century, even in countries where Christianity had long been established, such as England and France.<sup>45</sup> It is therefore difficult to say how prominent the teachings of the Church and stories from the Bible would have been in the minds of the saga authors, assuming they were laymen.

The text of the Bible used by the Catholic Church in this period was St. Jerome's Latin translation, commonly known as the Vulgate. This text was not entirely consistent with the Bible familiar to Christians today, nor had it yet achieved a fixed form. Moreover, it tended to be augmented with commentaries by the Church Fathers. The crucial point, however, is that the Vulgate was in Latin and therefore inaccessible to any but those who had undergone religious training.<sup>46</sup> There is no evidence that the Bible was translated in its entirety into the vernacular anywhere in Western Europe before the late thirteenth century, from which time Bibles are extant in French and German. The first English Bible did not appear until a hundred years later, and scholars believe that no translation of the entire Bible into Icelandic existed before the Reformation in the sixteenth century. In the twelfth and first half of the thirteenth centuries, however, translations of certain parts of the Bible began to proliferate, particularly the Pentateuch, Samuel, Kings, the Book of

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44. Noteworthy attempts have been made by Régis Boyer, *La vie religieuse en Islande: 1116–1264 d'après la Sturlunga saga et les sagas des évêques* (Paris: Singer-Polignac, 1979); Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, Viking Collection 11 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1999); and Arned Nedkvitne, *Lay Belief in Norse Society 1000–1350* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009).

45. On the religious habits of the laity in the Middle Ages, see Guy Lobrichon, *La religion des laïcs en Occident XIe–XVe siècles*, La Vie quotidienne, (Paris: Hachette, 1994). See also André Vauchez, *Les laïcs au Moyen Age: Pratiques et expériences religieuses* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1987).

46. On the Bible in the Middle Ages, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

Psalms and the Gospels. These translations have been preserved in a group of manuscripts known collectively as *Stjórn*, covering from Genesis to the end of the second book of Kings, and *Gyðinga saga*, a translation of the Books of the Maccabees from the Apocrypha. The dates of these translations vary, although the oldest part of *Stjórn* may have been in existence when *Egils saga* was being composed in the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from direct translations, the Bible was accessible to laymen ignorant of Latin in the form of vernacular sermons and homilies, prayers, and religious poetry based on Bible stories.<sup>48</sup> References to the Bible also turn up in the speeches of secular leaders, as has already been mentioned and will be returned to later. All this is as relevant to Iceland as it is to other Western European countries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Also included among the sacred writings in the Middle Ages was the Apocrypha, which is little read today. Finally, it must not be forgotten that pictures of incidents and personages from the Bible would have decorated the churches Western Europeans, including Icelanders, attended regularly, becoming engraved in their consciousness.<sup>49</sup> The Bible *Egils saga* may allude to was thus not a single text but many, in the broadest sense, if we accept pictures and even religious rites as texts. The Bible was thus absolutely central to the culture of this period, not only in the form of books or words but also in the complex “web of significance” that we call culture.<sup>50</sup>

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47. On the Bible in Norse translation in the Middle Ages, see Ian J. Kirby, *Bible Translation in Old-Norse* (1986). For a recent statement on the possible age of the oldest part of *Stjórn*, see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “Prose of Christian Instruction,” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 344–45.

48. Ian J. Kirby has published an extensive collection of Bible quotations that he has found in Icelandic and Norwegian religious writings from the Middle Ages. See his *Biblical Quotation in Old Icelandic-Norwegian Religious Literature*, 2 vols., Rit Stofnunar Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi 9–10 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1976).

49. On Icelandic church decoration in the period under consideration, see Hörður Ágústsson, *Dómsdagur og helgir menn á Hólum: Endurskoðun fyrri hugmynda um fjalirnar frá Bjarnastaðahlíð og Flatatungu*, Staðir og kirkjur 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1989).

50. For a definition of culture as a “web of significance,” see Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Definition of Cultures,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5:



Various commentators have pointed out parallels between certain aspects of *Egils saga* and the Bible. In an essay entitled “Lúkas í Sonatorreki” (Luke in “Sonatorrek”), Halldór Laxness pointed out that the *góði vilji* or “good will,” with which Egill claimed to be awaiting Hel or death in the last stanza of *Sonatorrek*, testifies to a peculiarly Christian notion of free will.<sup>51</sup> It occurs in the words the angels say to the shepherds in the Gospel of St. Luke (2:14): according to the Vulgate translation they announce peace to men who are of good will. From this, Laxness concluded that the poem must have been composed by a Christian at some point after the conversion, rather than by the heathen Egill.

In his book on *Egils saga*, Bjarni Einarsson drew attention to numerous parallels between the account of Jesus healing the daughter of Jairus and Egill’s healing of Helga Þorfinnsdóttir.<sup>52</sup> It is one of the many pieces of evidence presented by Einarsson to argue that the author of the saga was principally working from contemporary literary sources—notably among them Biblical narratives—rather than from oral traditions about the historical Egill of Borg. Hermann Pálsson also pointed out various correspondences in the wording of *Stjórn* and *Egils saga*, and urged a systematic analysis of the influence of early Bible translations on Icelandic saga literature.<sup>53</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that the Bible was not merely a single text or, rather, collection of miscellaneous texts: it also came with a particular tradition of interpretation. In the Middle Ages it was common practice for people to read a deeper meaning into narratives of events in religious writings and other texts. This method of reading developed early in Christianity, though

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“Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.”

51. Halldór Laxness, *Yfirskyggðir staðir: Ýmsar athuganir* (Reykjavík: Helgafell, 1971), 40ff.

52. Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 259–61.

53. Hermann Pálsson, “Tveir þættir um Egils sögu,” *Andvari* 104 (1979). Pálsson points out, for example, that the saga’s description of Þórólfur Skalla-Grimsson at the battle of Vinheiðr was probably borrowed from the description in *Stjórn* of Goliath before his fight with David. This is particularly interesting, given that Egill’s story seems to have been modeled on the story of King David (see below).

the Church Father Origen was the first to systematize it.<sup>54</sup> Gradually the teaching evolved that four levels of meaning could be identified in the Scriptures: the *sensus historicus* or *literalis*, that is, the historical or literal meaning, and the three levels of spiritual meaning or *sensus spiritualis*: (1) the *sensus allegoricus* or *typologicus*, which connects the narrative to Christian history; (2) the *sensus tropologicus* or *moralis*; and finally (3) the *sensus anagogicus*, connected with eschatological matters.<sup>55</sup> Although the methodology was developed by commentators on the Bible, it also influenced how people understood texts by pagan classical writers. At the beginning of the twelfth century, for example, Bernardus Silvestris wrote a Christian elucidation of the first six books of Virgil's *Aeneid*, using a similar method of interpretation.<sup>56</sup> Exegetical techniques were such an inextricable part of the tradition of medieval education, and indeed of all medieval thought, that it was inevitable they should color the first literary

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54. Formative studies of this discipline are to be found in the books of Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols., Théologie 41–42, 59 (Paris: Aubier, 1959); and Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941; 3rd ed. rev. 1983).

55. On the systematic search for allegorical meaning in texts during the Middle Ages, see the useful survey by Stephen A. Barney, "Allegory," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Scribner's, 1985), 1:178–88. One can also read about the four levels of meaning in an article by Gudrun Lange, "Andleg ást: Arabísk-platónsk ást og 'integumentum' í íslenskum fornþekknunum?" *Skírnir* 166 (1992): 101. It should be mentioned that Bjarni Guðnason argues that the author of *Heiðarvíga saga* intended his readers to grasp the spiritual meaning of the saga, interpreting it as a Christian story carrying a message about peace. Guðnason, however, is content to distinguish between the literal and spiritual meaning without attempting to analyze the three types of spiritual meaning. See, for example, *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu*, *Studia Islandica* 50 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1993), 16–17. See also Alison Finlay's article "Interpretation or Over-Interpretation?: The Dating of Two Íslendingasögur," *Gripla* 14 (2003), in which she refutes much of what Guðnason claims in his book.

56. On this and other aspects of biblical exegesis and its influence on medieval writers, see Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara á miðöldum*, Rit 33 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1988), 190–92, and especially 252–54 on Bernardus Silvestris. Another interesting account of exegetical methods and their influence on Icelandic saga literature can be found in an article by Gerd Wolfgang Weber, "Intellegere historiam: Typological Perspectives of Nordic Prehistory," in *Tradition og historieskrivning: Kilderne til Nordens ældste historie*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Acta Jutlandica* 63, 2, Humanistisk serie 61 (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1987).

works in the vernacular after 1100.<sup>57</sup> Chrétien de Troyes, for instance, in the prologues to his verse romances of the second half of the twelfth century, exhorts his readers to seek a deeper meaning by paying particular attention to the way the material is organized.<sup>58</sup>

The possibility of uncovering the spiritual meaning of a narrative did not preclude the apparent realism or plausibility of the events told. On the contrary, the first level of interpretation, or the *sensus litteralis*, concerned the events as they were supposed to have happened and as recorded by narrative. They needed therefore to be believable.

Icelandic saga writers working at the beginning of the thirteenth century must surely have been aware that Holy Scripture was to be understood on an allegorical level. Countless examples of this type of interpretation can be found in the *Icelandic Homily Book*, believed to date from around 1200. There is also an extensive list of allegories in the Bible in the Old Norse world history *Veraldar saga* from around the same period.<sup>59</sup>

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57. This emerges, for example, in a survey of French literature by Michel Zink, *Introduction à la littérature française du Moyen âge*, Références 500 (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1993), 109: "Il ne faut donc pas s'étonner que le Moyen Age ne se soit pas contenté d'interpréter l'Écriture, le monde et la littérature selon l'allégorie, mais qu'il ait aussi produit en abondance des œuvres littéraires destinées à être lues en fonction de leur sens second." This attitude is controversial, however. It is worth reading the arguments for and against in D. Bethurum, *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1958-1959* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). Among the opposing arguments assembled there is the idea that a type of reading based on the methods of biblical exegesis places constraints on the interpretation of secular literature. This argument does not apply to my attempt at interpretation here, however, since the use of these methods actually opens up countless new levels of meaning in the saga, not all of which are religious (see below).

58. On Chrétien's attitude to the art of narrative, see Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 362.

59. See James W. Marchand, "The Allegories in the Old Norse *Veraldar Saga*," *Michigan Germanic Studies* 1, 1 (1975). In a review of an earlier Icelandic version of this book, Else Mundal (2005), 201, rejects the Christian interpretation of *Egils Saga*, maintaining that it is only legitimate to interpret a text in such a way if the text itself contains an explicit invitation to do so. The examples from the *Homily Book* as well as the list of allegories from *Veraldar saga* both prove the contrary. The different books of the Old Testament do not contain such invitations. The interpretations are extratextual, in a similar way I propose for *Egils saga*.



As for laymen, Snorri Sturluson's prologue to his *Edda* implies an awareness of allegorical readings when it says of heathen thinkers: "But they understood everything with earthly understanding, for they were not granted spiritual wisdom" ("earthly" could also be rendered here by "literal").<sup>60</sup> These words signify that Christians were able, through the power of revelation, to uncover a higher or divine truth behind the obvious sense, a capacity denied to pagans, who could only understand the overt meaning.<sup>61</sup>

When considering *Egils saga's* relationship to Christian texts, it is necessary to bear in mind what I have said about biblical exegetical methods relying primarily on intertextuality. The search for one of the three types of spiritual meaning must be carried out with reference to the texts of the Old and New Testaments and their authoritative commentaries. The presence of obvious allusions to these texts in the saga can then presumably be taken as an indication that the audience is supposed to search for a hidden meaning in the narrative.

One of the incidents in the narrative is so singular that even those who are most adamant in believing that *Egils saga* is based

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60. *Edda*, trans. and introd. Anthony Faulkes, Everyman Classics (London: Dent, 1987), 2. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 4: "En alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu, þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin."

61. On the prologue to *Snorra Edda* and the reflections of European theologians of the twelfth century on the status of their pagan forebears, see Ursula and Peter Dronke, "The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background," in *Sjöttú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni, 20. júlí 1977* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1977). *Íslensk hómilíubók* (the *Icelandic Homily Book*), believed to date from around 1200, is an inexhaustible source of examples that confirm these ideas were well known in Iceland at the time *Egils saga* was composed. The sermon "Resurrectio domini" describes how the resurrected Christ met his disciples at Emmaus and "explained to them the sacred writings, which had been written about himself" (rakti fyrir þeim helgar ritningar, þær er of hann sjálfan vóru skrifaðar) (*Íslensk hómilíubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 105). According to this view, biblical exegesis originated with Christ, who taught his disciples to read the signs of his own coming in the books of the Old Testament. Later in the same homily it is stated that Jesus ate "with his disciples and imparted to them the wisdom to understand the Scriptures" (með postulum sínum, og þá gaf hann þeim skynsemi til að skilja ritningar) (ibid., 106). Here the spiritual understanding to which Snorri refers is revealed to them.

on true events have nevertheless doubted its veracity.<sup>62</sup> This is the episode where Egill kills Rögnvaldr, the young son of King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr. Egill has recently dispatched his greatest foe, Berg-Önundr, and the saga implies that he has lost control of himself (chapter 58): “Egil was so furious that no one dared talk to him.”<sup>63</sup> It is at this point that the king’s son gets in his way and is killed.

The same applies to Rögnvaldr as to Ketill höðr: his existence is recorded in no other source but *Egils saga*. Moreover, before Rögnvaldr is introduced, the birth of Haraldr gráfeldur (Grey-Cloak), also a son of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, has already been mentioned in the saga. When his grandfather, Haraldr Finehair, gives the boy his name he announces that he will become “king after his father” (chapter 58).<sup>64</sup> Three years after Haraldr Grey-Cloak’s birth, Haraldr Finehair dies and conflict arises between Eiríkr and his brothers. According to *Egils saga*, Egill kills Rögnvaldr at the time when Eiríkr is busy removing his own brothers from the scene (chapter 59). Consequently, Haraldr Grey-Cloak cannot be more than four years old when Egill kills his brother. This would make Rögnvaldr the elder son of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, and since the saga describes him as *hið fríðasta mannsefni*, “a promising and attractive lad,” it is highly unlikely that Eiríkr and Haraldr would have passed him over in preference for a younger brother who was then only a small child. The most plausible explanation for this contradiction in the internal logic of the saga is that Rögnvaldr never existed, either historically or in oral tradition, but was created to fulfil the needs of *Egils saga*.

If this is right, we should pause and consider whether there might not be something more going on here; whether we ought perhaps

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62. Pétur Benediktsson (“Hvers vegna orti Egill Höfuðlausn?” *Helgafell* 5 (1965)) regards the account of the killing of Rögnvaldr Eiríksson as highly dubious on the grounds that the account of Egill’s visit to York would be more credible if he had not killed Rögnvaldr, since Eiríkr would have been far more likely to spare Egill’s life if the latter had not killed his son.

63. Scudder (2004), 118. “Egill var nú allreiðr, svá at þá mátti ekki við hann mæla.” ÍF 2:170. This is one of the very few moments in the text when Egill’s inner states are described.

64. Scudder (2004), 113. “. . . konungr [. . .] eptir fōðr sinn.” ÍF 2:163–64.

to be reading a symbolic or allegorical interpretation into the episode. Various other details in the account of Rögnvaldr's death would support such a view. For example, he is the thirteenth man on board ship when he is killed. Numbers are much in evidence in *Egils saga* and appear to be important. Groups are commonly made up of eight, twelve, sixteen or thirty men, but Rögnvaldr's case is the only example in the saga of a group numbering thirteen. When the thirteenth man is moreover a king's son, Christ naturally springs to mind; he had twelve disciples, was the son of God, and sailed on Lake Genesareth with his disciples, a common subject of illustration in medieval times (Figure 1).<sup>65</sup>

Even Rögnvaldr's name, signifying "maker of destiny," could be taken as a reference to the Son of God.

The question we must ask is whether Rögnvaldr is intended to remind the reader of Christ. If so, his slaying would signpost a deeper meaning in the saga. The killing of Christ has a precise significance in Christian theology. Christ is God and man, and thus both father and brother to every Christian. According to the Christian view of history, the Crucifixion signified the repetition of two original sins by mankind; the defiance of God when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and the crime against brotherhood when Cain murdered Abel. The Bible and medieval biblical exegesis make it explicit that Christ's resurrection from the dead liberated mankind from these two sins.<sup>66</sup> The saga's allusions to the world of Christian texts thus have connections to the theme of fratricide, as do the other textual links I have explored earlier in this chapter. In the context it can hardly be a coincidence that this is one of the few times, if not the only time, that Egill is said to be angry. The reader is bound to remember that anger is considered one of the seven cardinal sins and, as such, a crime against God and consequently

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65. See, for example, Matthew 14:22ff. or John 6:16ff.

66. See, for example, Romans 5:12–14 or 1 Corinthians 15:20–23. See also Hebrews 12:24 on Abel as an analogy of Christ. On the traditional interpretation of the Cain and Abel story by medieval theologians, see G. Dahan, "L'exégèse de l'histoire de Caïn et Abel du XIIe au XIVe siècle en Occident: Notes et textes," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 49 (1982). On page 80 there is a reference to *Contra Faustum* by St. Augustine as an example of Abel taken to symbolize Christ in the story of his murder.





*Figure 1:* Jesus sleeps while his twelve disciples gaze in terror at the storm on Lake Genesareth. From an eleventh-century German manuscript (HS 1640, fol. 117, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt).

also against Christ.<sup>67</sup> The textual links are all the more insistent in this episode because the light of Christian morality is being shed on the killing of the king's son Rögnvaldr and hence on the conflict between Egill and Eiríkr Bloodaxe.

Let us now return to the characters called Ketill with a cognomen who feature in *Egils saga*. There are six of them in all but only four play a direct role in the story: Ketill höðr, named above; Ketill hængr, who claims land between the Þjórsá and Markarfljót rivers; Ketill blundr; and Ketill gufa. All except Ketill höðr are settlers in Iceland, and the accounts of their land-takings invariably mark a climax in the story, as already has been described in a previous chapter. There it emerged that the account of Ketill hængr, juxtaposed as it is with the slaying of the king's kinsmen, opens a new chapter in the story of the relationship between the descendants of Kveld-Úlfr and the Norwegian royal dynasty, while the accounts of Ketill blundr and Ketill gufa serve to bracket the phase of Egill's career that he spends in traveling abroad.

Previously it has been pointed out that these Ketill characters have precious little function in the saga aside from acting as marking posts for its carefully structured form. But perhaps their nicknames have some connotation that is intended to hint at an alternative meaning, just as Ketill höðr's cognomen contains a reference to a heathen story of fratricide. The question is a pertinent one because the accounts of Ketill blundr and Ketill gufa seem to have been largely invented or at least adapted for inclusion in *Egils saga*.<sup>68</sup> They must therefore have been included for a particular purpose and provide clues to the larger meaning it is intended to convey.

A closer examination of the nicknames "gufa" and "blundr" reveals that both refer to visual impairment. *Gufa*, "steam," obscures people's vision, while *að blunda* means to close one's eyes; compare the account in *Snorra Edda* of the otter that was eating the salmon *blundandi*, "with eyes half-closed."<sup>69</sup> This common

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67. See C. Casagrande and S. Vecchio, *Histoire des sept péchés capitaux au Moyen Âge*, Collection historique (Paris: Edition Aubier, 2003), especially 93–125. See also Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

68. See Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 73ff.

69. See *Edda. Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research and University College, 1998), 1:45; *Edda* (1987), 99.



association links these settlers with the nickname of Ketill höðr, whom Egill kills after the Gulapíng assembly; Höðr being the blind god. Blindness is therefore hinted at in three important episodes in Egill's life story: when he quarrels with his brother over his determination to go abroad, when he kills the king's relative in error for the king, and when he finally settles down in Iceland and loses his favorite son. It is also worth noting that there are allusions to stories of fratricide when Ketill höðr and Ketill gufa, ancestor of Váli, enter the story. According to *Snorra Edda*, Váli and Höðr were the names of fratricides. Why then is there mention of blindness in all these places and why is it always in connection with conflict between brothers, even with fratricide?

The answer may lie in one of the texts that would have been familiar to Christians in the period, the First Epistle of John (2:10–11):

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, for that darkness hath blinded his eyes.

The *Norwegian Homily Book* contains a verse from the same epistle, which suggests that the entire text was known at the time, at least to educated men, either in Latin or in Norse translation.<sup>70</sup> It would not be unreasonable then to include this text among those the intended audience of *Egils saga* might have known and could therefore have been referred to in order to alert it to the spiritual message underlying the saga. He who envies his brother lives in darkness, he is blind. If conflict with one's brother is at the heart of Egill's story, it is surely significant that blindness should be hinted at precisely when Egill takes center stage.

There has been little scholarly interest in identifying biblical ideas and imagery in *Egils saga*,<sup>71</sup> but an exploration of this kind is surely

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70. See *Gamalt Norsk Homiliebok* (Cod. AM 619 4°), ed. Gustav Indrebø (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1931), 100.

71. An exception to this is Bjarni Einarsson in his *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 260–61, where he points out parallels between the saga's account of Egill healing the sick girl and the Gospels' account of Jesus healing the daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:41–56).



justified by the positioning of the stories of the settlers Ketill blundr and Ketill gufa. Ketill blundr enters the story when Egill first vents his spleen against his brother, while Ketill gufa enters just before the death of Böðvarr Egilsson. Moreover, the same kind of gale, a southwesterly, is raging when Egill loosens the moorings on his brother's ship, as in the storm long afterward when Böðvarr drowns. The text of *Egils saga* thus indirectly links Egill's violent behavior when he is refused permission to go abroad in the first instance with the subsequent death of Böðvarr. Previously it has emerged that Egill's responsibility for Þórólfr's death is greater than it might seem on a casual reading of the saga, and also that Egill profits substantially from the loss of his brother, gaining sole possession of their father's legacy as well as Ásgerðr's inheritance. But is Egill a fratricide in the Christian sense? The above-cited Epistle of John includes the following passage (3:15): "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him."<sup>72</sup> According to this it is sin enough for a man to harbor hatred for his brother, even if he has not acted upon it: he has imperiled his soul and its possibility of eternal life after the perishing of the flesh.

But does Egill hate his brother Þórólfr? There are various indications to the contrary, particularly the verse he composes after Þórólfr's death (stanza 17) and similarly the verse in "Sonatorrek" where he mourns his *bræðraleysi* (brotherless state; verses 13 and 14). Of course, it could be claimed that in the latter poem Egill is mourning not Þórólfr in particular but rather the lack of any brother to stand by his side in battle. Nor is Egill's sorrow necessarily sincere, even if he does express it in stanza 17: "helnauð er þat" (deep as my sorrow is). It is important not to fall into the same trap as Arinbjörn in chapter 56 of the saga and attribute feelings to Egill that he does not have. It is love for Ásgerðr that causes Egill to hide his head in his cloak, not grief for the loss of Þórólfr, as Arinbjörn assumes.

One could also point out that Egill does not hesitate to imperil

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72. The same passage can be found in the *Norwegian Homily Book*, where the wording is as follows: "Hvær sa er . . . hatar broðor sin. hann er manndrápsmaðr"; see *Gamla Norsk Homilieboek* (1931), 100.

his brother's life by cutting the moorings of his ship (chapter 40) and that they do not speak to each other for a long time afterward. Similarly, Egill falls ill rather than attend the wedding of Þórólfr and Ásgerðr, after which he seems to do his best to fuel the hostility between the brothers and the king. As has already been noted, this has repercussions, leading the brothers to England where Þórólfr meets his death. From all this we can conclude that Egill's attitude to Þórólfr is at best ambivalent. Moreover, his indirect responsibility for his brother's death appears in a graver light if one considers that Christian ideas about sin had undergone a development in twelfth-century Europe whereby a man's intention came to be viewed as equal to the sin itself.

Although there is no doubt that *Egils saga* originated in a Christian society, it might seem doubtful that people would have judged the heathen Egill Skallagrímsson by Christian values. Yet we must remember that Egill had been prime-signed and as such had a certain status according to medieval Christian doctrine, as has already been noted. Unlike heathens, those who had been prime-signed could look forward to the possibility of salvation, that is, of attaining eternal life. Strictly speaking, Egill had no "right" to a place in heaven unless he received full baptism, which he did not. Yet his final resting place suggests that this possibility is being entertained. Later we will explore what meaning should be assigned to the translation of his remains, first from a heathen burial mound, then from under the altar to the edge of the churchyard. For the present, suffice it to point out that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries important changes were taking place in the way the Church envisaged the afterlife. Purgatory was generally recognized as the midpoint between heaven and hell, along with two other abodes for the dead. These were the two states of limbo. One was for pagan ancestors who had nevertheless lived according to God's commandments, including Old Testament personages such as David, Solomon, etc.; the other was for children who had not been baptized. The latter was a remarkable innovation, evidence that in positing the existence of this state of limbo, theologians had apparently given way to pressure from the parents of children who had died before they could be christened by a priest, as was mentioned in the introduction. Both states of limbo were supposed

to be emptied on the Day of Judgment when the souls who occupied them would attain their place in heaven.<sup>73</sup> Egill's status was thus similar to that of an unbaptized child, though superior in that he had received *prima signatio* like those children who had received preliminary baptism. He was also in like case with the characters of the Old Testament, as will now be explored in more detail.

For the moment suffice it to repeat that for Egill to have a hope of attaining Paradise, he would have to have been subject to Christian morality. Thus if he entertained hostile thoughts towards his brother, one could claim that he was a *manndrápari*, "manslayer," in the sense given to the term in the Epistle of John. Yet it is not only the theme of blindness that might have evoked the idea of fratricide in the minds of the Christian audience of *Egils saga*.

### Cain and Judas

In the foregoing I mentioned that the Bible was not simply one text in the Middle Ages but many texts, of varying kinds. Among them we must include visual art, for as the Middle Ages wore on, pictures became increasingly prominent in religious life and practice. Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, were common subjects of illustration, and a tradition developed as to how the brothers should be depicted in church art. This has been analysed by Ruth Mellinkoff, who concluded that the following elements predominate in the iconography of Cain and Abel:

- Cain is dark-complexioned whereas his brother is fair.
- Cain has coarse features whereas his brother is handsome.
- Cain sometimes wears a hat.<sup>74</sup>

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73. There is an in-depth explanation of this development in Jérôme Baschet, *La civilisation féodale: De l'an mil à la colonisation de l'Amérique* (Paris: Aubier, 2004), 376–87, especially 383–85.

74. On the brothers' coloring, see Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1:47. On Cain's coarse appearance and crooked eyebrows see Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 1:134 and 2:fig. 2.28. On Cain and hats, see Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 1:61ff. and 2:figs. 3:6–10.



As it happens, these traits could equally apply to the brothers Egill and Þórólfr, and indeed to the sons of Kveld-Úlfr as well. The saga audience is likely to have been aware of this iconographic tradition, as the bishops' sagas and surviving artifacts testify to the existence of a considerable body of church art in Iceland by the first half of the thirteenth century. Many Icelanders of the period in question traveled to Norway and perhaps even farther afield, where they would have had the opportunity to visit lavishly decorated churches. It is quite plausible that the description of Egill's and Þórólfr's respective appearances is an intentional allusion to the story of Cain and Abel, indicating by this means Egill's putative culpability in Þórólfr's death.

Ever since the days of Ambrose and Augustine, patristic tradition had identified close links between Cain and Judas, regarding the former as the type or foreshadowing (*præfiguratio*) of the latter, and Judas's behavior in the Gospels as adumbrated in Cain's actions. The iconographic tradition enhances the typological link, while depicting the two figures slightly differently; instead of wearing a hat, for example, Judas is often portrayed as bald, like Skallagrímr and his son Egill.<sup>75</sup> Hence it would also be possible to interpret Egill's baldness as an allusion to Judas. Other commentators have pointed out the correlation between the silver Egill accepts in compensation for his brother Þórólfr and the New Testament account of the blood-money Judas accepts for betraying Jesus.<sup>76</sup> There is nothing in medieval Christian thought to prevent an author from alluding simultaneously to both Cain and Judas in order to shed light on Egill's status. If he is indirectly responsible for his brother's death, Egill is, symbolically and typologically speaking, a murderer of Christ like Judas.

This correlation throws unexpected light on the above-cited description of Egill in chapter 55 of the saga. Crooked eyebrows are, as it happens, one of the characteristics of Cain in an illustration found in an English manuscript from the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>77</sup> Perhaps it is no coincidence that Egill's appearance is

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75. Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, 1:192–93.

76. Árni Sigurjónsson and Keld Gall Jørgensen, "Saga og tegn: Udkast til en semiotisk sagalæsning," *Nordica* 4 (1987).

77. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts* (1993), 1:134.

described in the most painstaking detail at this very point in the saga, where allusions to Cain and Judas would be most apposite and one can also make a case for the presence of allusions to heathen stories of fratricide. Þórólfr has lost his life as an indirect consequence of Egill's actions, and the fact places Egill in the position of Cain. Subsequently, he accepts silver like Judas.<sup>78</sup>

Admittedly, the fact that Egill's father Grímr is also the swarthy, bald, coarse-featured brother of a handsome hero rather militates against the above interpretation. Nor does the saga give the slightest hint of any tension between the two brothers in the first generation. But in response to this I would draw attention to the hat Egill wears when he comes to York to face King Eiríkr after killing his son. The episode has a parallel earlier in the saga when Grímr goes to meet Haraldr Finehair and is first nicknamed Skalla-Grímr (Skallagrímr) or "Bald Grímr." Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir has put forward an ingenious argument that this parallel between *skalli* and *hattr* refers to the myth of the two wolves, called in *Snorra Edda* Skoll and Hati, or Skalli and Hattr in one version of *Hervarar saga og Heiðreks*.<sup>79</sup> There is no reason to be skeptical of Kristjánsdóttir's reasoning, but the possibility should also be pointed out that whoever composed the saga could have had Egill don a hat at this stage in order to draw attention to his connection with Cain. Far from cancelling each other out, these interpretations reinforce each other, not least because both assume a special relationship between *Egils saga* and *Hervarar saga*.

Finally, yet another clue that the audience is supposed to assess Egill in relation to the story of Cain is embedded in one of the last stanzas ascribed to Egill in the saga. The stanza begins thus: *Vals hefk vofur helsis*. In his edition of the saga, Sigurður Nordal explains this line as: "I have a trembling head."<sup>80</sup> After Cain was banished by God for the murder of Abel, Genesis 4:15 states: "And

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78. Árni Sigurjónsson and Keld Gall Jørgensen, "Saga og tegn: Udkast til en semiotisk sagalæsning" (1987): 176.

79. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, "Primum caput: Um höfuð Egils Skalla-Grímssonar, John frá Salisbury o.fl." *Skáldskaparmál* 4 (1997): 79.

80. ÍF 2:294. This explanation is in fact somewhat controversial, and in a more recent edition of the saga the line is interpreted differently. See *Egils saga: Með formála, viðaukum, skýringum og skráum*, ed. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, Síðildar sögur 2 (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992), 236.

the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.” This passage of the Scriptures gave rise to a whole body of exegesis in the Middle Ages, on which Ruth Mellinkoff has written a detailed study.<sup>81</sup> Commentators on the Bible pondered long on the nature of this mark, and Peter Comestor suggested in his *Historia scholastica* what was to become one of the most widespread views, that the mark of Cain was a trembling head. Comestor died in 1179 and his works were known in the North when *Egils saga* was composed.<sup>82</sup> Hence it is conceivable that Egill is made to suffer from this ailment as yet another reminder of his Cain-like nature.

The details collected here suggesting textual links between *Egils saga* and the story of Cain and Abel are fairly tenuous and would be insignificant were they isolated cases. But the number of these allusions, combined with the overall context that is gradually coming to light, supports the view that the audience of the saga, or at least some part of it, was intended to use its knowledge of religious writings and commentaries to gain a deeper understanding of the enigma of Egill Skallagrímsson.

### Fallen Angels in the North

If *Egils saga* is concerned with a sinner, as the mounting evidence is beginning to suggest, it is worth giving some account here of how sin was perceived at the time of writing. The seminal work for the ecclesiastical doctrine on sin was Pope Gregory I's ninth-century *Moralia in Job*. Indebted to patristic authorities, such as Augustine on mankind's relationship with the deity, this text was read

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81. Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*, Quantum books (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 49.

82. The section of *Stjórn*, the collection of Bible translations into Norse, believed to date from the mid- thirteenth century (*Stjórn: Gammelnorsk bibelhistorie fra verdens skabelse til det babyloniske fangenskab*, ed. C. R. Unger (Christiania: Feilberg & Landmark, 1862)), is greatly indebted to the *Historia scholastica*. On the dating of *Stjórn*, see Ian J. Kirby, *Bible Translation in Old-Norse* (1986), 56–60; Sverrir Tómasson, *Formálar íslenskra sagnaritara* (1988), 352–55; and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir “Prose of Christian Instruction” (2005), 344–45. Ole-Jørgen Johannessen has also pointed out that Brandr Jónsson used *Historia scholastica* in his *Gyðinga saga*; see Ole-Jørgen Johannessen, “Litt om kildene til Jóns saga baptista II,” *Opuscula* 2, 2 (1977), Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 25: 100–15.



throughout the medieval period.<sup>83</sup> The mother of all sins, according to Gregory, was pride, and the first to commit that sin was the angel Lucifer, whom God expelled from heaven before the creation of Man. Ever since, Lucifer has been trying to lead God's creation into evil.<sup>84</sup> According to Gregory, and Augustine before him, Adam's sin had the same root; his desire for knowledge resembled Lucifer's pride in that both believed they could rely on themselves without recourse to their Creator.

The structure of *Egils saga* could be said to reflect a theological view of history, in that its narrative of two generations of Kveld-Úlfr's descendants corresponds to the main stages in the story of mankind's salvation. The first generation rebels against authority, like Lucifer or Adam and Eve; the second experiences conflict between two brothers, as in the case of Cain and Abel. Let us examine this pattern more closely.

A modern audience may have difficulty in seeing any correspondence between rebellion against a fallible human king and disobedience to God's commandments, but it should not be forgotten that *Egils saga* was written at a time when the idea that kings ruled by the grace of God was establishing itself throughout Western Europe. Moreover, the Norse authors of the kings' sagas, including Snorri Sturluson, seem to have regarded the unification of Norway under Haraldr Finehair as a necessary precondition for the conversion to Christianity. The king was one of the "noble heathens" who had a natural understanding of Christianity, although they had not been granted the benefit of the

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83. We have no firm evidence that this work of Gregory's was known in Iceland in the first half of the thirteenth century, although other works by him had a major influence on Icelandic literature from around 1200 onwards. In the introduction to Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen's edition of the *Icelandic Homily Book: Perg. 15 4° in the Royal Library, Stockholm*, Íslensk handrit, Series in quarto 3 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1993), 10, it is stated that the homilies are based on numerous sermons by Gregory. *Jóns saga baptista II* by Grímr Hólmsteinsson (d. 1298) also bears witness to a familiarity with Gregory's works, though not of the *Moralia*; see Ole-Jørgen Johannessen, "Litt om kildene" (1977), 100–15. Régis Boyer has found countless places in historical texts that testify to an extensive knowledge of Gregory's *Dialogues*, see *La vie religieuse en Islande* (1979), 163–76.

84. The following is based on Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *Histoire des sept péchés capitaux* (2003), 19–24.

revelation.<sup>85</sup> Hence in *Egils saga* Haraldr's *hamingja* is probably meant to be interpreted as the will of God; Kveld-Úlfr—another “noble heathen”—says more than once that it cannot be contested (chapter 3).<sup>86</sup> Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson's *gæfa*, or “luck,” is not strong enough to grant him any hope of emerging victorious from a contest with King Haraldr Finehair (chapter 19).<sup>87</sup>

Although Haraldr treats Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson unjustly in confiscating the office he had entrusted to him in Hålogaland, and reveals weakness in heeding the slander of evil men, the king cannot be accused of showing Þórólfr enmity, since he invites him to head his retinue at court (chapter 16). By this the king means to give Þórólfr a chance to regain his friendship, but the latter rejects his offer. Þórólfr does not wish to relinquish his retinue; he wants to be a leader of men rather than serve another. This is a fateful step which leads inexorably to his downfall, prompting one to ask whether Þórólfr has not here fallen into the sin of pride. One can infer such a reading from the saga itself, for when Þórólfr initially decides to enter the king's service, his father comments (chapter 6): “Just avoid aiming too high or contending with stronger men than yourself, but you will never give way to them either.”<sup>88</sup>

While the story of the fallen angels is no longer part of the Bible, it was regarded as such at the time *Egils saga* was composed and turns up widely in Norse literature, for example in a speech by King Sverrir in *Sverris saga*, and also in *Veraldar saga* and *Konungs*

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85. On this see Lars Lönnroth, “The Noble Heathen” (1969), 1–29. On the Norse saga writers' view of history see G. W. Weber, “Intellegere historiam” (1987), especially 109ff.

86. “‘I have a feeling Harald has plenty of good fortune in store for him, but our king doesn't have enough to fill the palm of his hand.’” Scudder (2004), 6. “‘. . . því at ek hygg, at hann hafi þar byrði gnóga hamingju, er konungur várr hafi eigi krepping fullan.’” ÍF 2:9.

87. “‘For all your prowess and accomplishments, you lack the good fortune to prove a match for King Harald. No one else has managed that in this country, whatever their power and force of numbers.’” Scudder (2004), 32. “‘. . . en þótt þú sér vel búinn at hreysti ok allri atgörvi þá hefir þú ekki til þess gæfu að halda til jafns við Harald konung, er engum hefir qðrum ensk hér í landi, þótt aðr hafi haft ríki mikit ok fjqlmenni.’” ÍF 2:49.

88. Scudder (2004), 10. “‘. . . varask þú þat, at eigi ætlir þú hóf fyrir þér eða keppisk við þér meiri menn; en eigi muntu fyrir vægja at heldr.’” ÍF 2:15.

*skuggsjá*.<sup>89</sup> The account in the last named has a number of parallels with the story of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson. Like Lucifer, Þórólfr has been elevated by the one he serves and, also like Lucifer, he shows immoderation and the desire to *etja kappi við hann*, “challenge him,” to use the words of the saga. But the most striking point is that Þórólfr is given power in Hålogaland in the north of Norway, just as Lucifer settled in the northern part of heaven.<sup>90</sup>

Alluding to a character from another text to shed light on a protagonist in the text at hand need not mean that the comparison is intended as a full one. When King Sverrir mentions the fallen angels in a speech he gives at Magnús Erlingsson’s funeral, he is not claiming that Magnús had become a devil, rather he is referring to the story of the angels in order to elucidate his moral lapse, which consisted in the presumption of claiming the throne when he was not descended from Norwegian royalty in the direct male line.<sup>91</sup>

Something similar seems to be present in *Egils saga*. Allusions to the Scriptures were part of the contemporary political discourse in Europe, since Church and state had not yet undergone the separation that characterizes present-day Europe.<sup>92</sup> It is thus not inconceivable

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89. See *Konungs skuggsjá*, ed. Magnús Már Lárusson (Reykjavík: Leiftur, 1955), 154ff.; and Karl Jónsson, *Sverris saga Sigurðarsonar*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykjavík: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944–45), 3:241. *Veraldar saga* is printed in the companion volume to *Sturlunga saga*, vols. 1–2 (1988).

90. See *Konungs skuggsjá* (1955), 155: “En þá er Guð hafði lokið þessari ræðu, þá hvarf Lúciเฟอร์ svo sem í norður frá Guði meður öllum sínum fylgjurum og mælti svo: ‘Hví skulum vér þola hót af Guði fyrir þjónustu vora, þar sem vér höfum sjálfir yfrinn kraft og fegurð og fjölda að halda vorri sæmd. Nú mun ég setja mér annað há sæti líkt Guði í nyrðra hlut himins eða meira og varðveit meður ágætlegri stjórn annan helming himins eða meira’.” (But God having finished his speech, Lucifer turned away from God with all his following as if *toward the north* and spoke thus: ‘Why should we suffer threats from God in return for our service, seeing that we have power, beauty and numbers in full measure to *maintain our prestige*? Now I intend, like God, to set up a high-seat in *the northern part of heaven* and to extend a wise control over half of heaven or even more (emphasis added). *The King’s Mirror: Speculum regale*, trans. Laurence Marcellus Larson, Scandinavian Monographs 3 (New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1917), 262.

91. Whoever composed *Egils saga* was a contemporary of the author of *Sverris saga* and had probably read the work; see Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 261.

92. See, for example, Philippe Buc, *L’Ambiguïté du livre: Prince, pouvoir et peuple dans les commentaires de la Bible au Moyen Âge*, Théologie historique 95 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994).



that these allusions are intended to shed light on the fate of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, while simultaneously underscoring the references to the Christian view of history that informs the two-generational structure of the saga.

### David, King and Poet

Unlike Cain and Judas, Egill neither killed his brother nor betrayed him to his enemies in return for silver. If he bears any blame for Þórólfr's death it is according to the stricter notion of guilt as it was defined by Christian moralists. This notion will become clearer if we consider another figure from the Bible to whom *Egils saga* seems to refer: the Old Testament psalmist King David.

It has become increasingly clear in recent decades, thanks to the efforts of scholars such as Lars Lönnroth, Gerd Wolfgang Weber and numerous others, that the medieval saga writers viewed the heathen past of the Nordic countries in light of the Christian-historical perspective associated with St. Augustine. According to this, the history of mankind was the history of salvation, from the Creation to the Fall, and from the Fall to the Redemption through the Incarnation of Christ. This view of history maintained that many aspects of the pagan past had their uses, and that the non-Jewish predecessors of the Christian peoples, such as the Romans and Greeks and even the Germanic or Nordic tribes, were capable of possessing innate virtues, of being "noble heathens," as Lars Lönnroth calls them.<sup>93</sup> As such, their theological status was not dissimilar to that of Old Testament figures such as Moses and King David. The latter was prominent in medieval intellectual life, probably for three principal reasons. First, the consolidation of royal power in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries derived major ideological support from the theologians' interpretation of the Old Testament books devoted to the Hebrew kings, Saul, David and Solomon.<sup>94</sup> Examples of this can be found in Norse writings such as *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Sverris saga*. Second, David was symbolic of the repentant and reborn

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93. Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen" (1969). On the Norse saga writers' view of history see Weber, "Intellegere historiam" (1987), especially 109ff.

94. An informative account of how medieval kings modeled themselves on the kings of the Old Testament can be found in Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis*, Bibliothèque des histoires (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 388–96.

sinner, who, coveting his neighbor's wife, had brought about the man's death and taken his widow, only to repent bitterly and suffer punishment in the form of the loss of his first-born child.<sup>95</sup> Third, David was a psalmist and so in a sense the epitome of all poets.<sup>96</sup> As a character in a narrative, who is both heroic and human, exalted and fallible, David appealed to authors and audiences of European literature in this period, and the depictions of characters such as Charlemagne in some French *chansons de geste*, or King Arthur in the matter of Britain, are believed to owe a debt to David.<sup>97</sup>

David and Egill have much in common. Like David, Egill is a poet of "the old customs," that is, of the pre-Christian culture. He also desires the wife of another man, in this case his brother's wife. Uriah, David's adversary, dies in battle when he advances too far ahead and is left exposed to the spears of his enemies. The circumstances resemble those in which Þórólfr falls, since he also advances too far ahead and is slain. By the same token, Egill was responsible for Þórólfr's presence on the battlefield, just as David sent Uriah forth to fight, the difference being that Egill did not order Þórólfr's men to retreat as David did Uriah's.

David and Egill also share the fact that they are in conflict with a king; David is at odds with King Saul but placates him with his singing. Egill has to confront King Eiríkr, who wants him dead but is nevertheless persuaded to grant a hearing to his poetry in York. And just as David can rely on Jonathan, Egill has a loyal friend in Arinbjörn who is able to protect him from the king's rage thanks to his influence at court. Finally, Egill loses his most beloved son, the son of another man's wife whom he desired and won, just as King David desired and won Bathsheba.

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95. See 2 Samuel 12:13–14.

96. On David as the forerunner 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). Sverrir Tómasson discusses David as the model for King Sverrir in *Sverris saga*; see "Perfecta fortitudo," in *Sjötíu ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni* (1977), 738.

97. See M. Victoria Guerin, "The King's Sin: The Origin of the David-Arthur Parallel," in *The Passing of Arthur*, ed. Christopher Baswell and William Sharpe, New Essays in the Arthurian Tradition (= Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 781) (New York: Garland, 1988).

David's fate was certainly known to all Icelanders when *Egils saga* was being composed, judging by the following account in *Konungs skuggsjá*:

Now you must know that God did not forgive David's crime so completely as to excuse him from just punishment; for this was the first penalty that the king suffered from God: the child which he had begotten with Bathsheba was a man child and very lovely, wherefore David much desired that it might live; but it did not please God to let him enjoy the child which he had begotten in such a sinful way.<sup>98</sup>

David lost his son for the sin of desiring Bathsheba and engineering her husband's death. The death of Böðvarr would be a logical punishment if Egill had committed the same sin. The verses Egill composes about Þórólfr's death and the care he takes over the preparation of his brother's corpse at Vínheiðr (chapter 55) need not be taken to negate this interpretation, for although Egill's behavior implies that he is grieving for the death of his brother, he may nevertheless bear some of the blame for how it occurred. His culpability is indirect, after all, and there are many examples of people mourning dead relatives, even when they had long been at loggerheads with them.<sup>99</sup> In spite of Egill's apparent regret for the loss of his brother, he is punished for his transgressions.

In this context let us consider Egill's reaction when King Athelstan appoints him to lead a different division after the first day of

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98. *King's Mirror* (1917), 324–25. “Nú skalt þú það vita at eigi lét guð svo fyrirgefna þessa synd Davíði að hann hefndi eigi eftir réttindum, því að sú var hin fyrsta hefnd, er Davíð tók af guði, að barn það er hann hafði getið með Bessabe. Þá var það son og var afar fríður ok vildi Davíð gjarnan að barnið hefði líf en guð vildi eigi unna honum nytja af því barni er hann hafði svo syndlega getið.” *Konungs skuggsjá* (1955), 208. See also Finnur Jónsson's edition (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1920–21).

99. See for example the comments of Sturla Þórðarson on Snorri Sturluson's reaction when he hears of the fall of Sighvatr in the battle of Örlygsstaðir: “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 (“He thought the death of his brother Sighvat a very great loss, as it was, although they had not always been given to agreement with one another.” *Sturlunga saga* (1970–74), 1:345).



the battle at Vínheiðr (chapter 54). Egill protests that he would rather fight on at Þórólfr's side, but when Þórólfr agrees with the king, Egill gives way with the comment: "You can decide, but this is an arrangement I will live to regret."<sup>100</sup> It is as if Egill has had a premonition that Þórólfr will die in the battle, in the same way that his father and grandfather foresaw the deaths of their sons (chapters 19 and 38). However, neither Kveld-Úlfr nor Skallagrímur used the verb *iðrask*, "to regret, to repent," with its religious association. It is possible that the association is deliberate here. Egill is not directly responsible for Þórólfr's fall, yet it was because of him that Þórólfr was there in the first place, as noted in the previous chapter, and this makes him indirectly to blame for his brother's death. Furthermore, he was not at Þórólfr's side at the fateful moment and therefore could not defend his brother. Perhaps the intention here is to remind the reader of Cain's answer when God questioned him on the whereabouts of Abel after he had murdered him (Genesis 4:9): "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Again, the allusion to a character from another text in order to shed light on a protagonist in the present text, as appears to be the case here, need not mean that the comparison is intended to be exact. Although there are allusions to David, Judas and Cain in the story of Egill, he is not equivalent to any one of them. Even so, allusions of this type raise the question of whether Egill should be understood in the context of the Christian doctrine of sin, contrition and redemption, a question I shall now attempt to address.

### The Salvation of Egill

In medieval Christian thought repentance and absolution were closely connected with the intercession of one figure in particular, who, as it happens, plays only a minor role in the Bible but had acquired major importance in Christian religious life by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; that is, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

It is one of the more entertaining paradoxes of the life of Egill Skallagrímsson, that great paragon of Icelandic manhood, that on several occasions he owed his life to a woman. His wet-nurse,

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100. Scudder (2004), 97. "Þér munuð nú ráða, en þessa skiptis mun ek opt iðrask." ÍF 2:140.

Þorgerðr brák, saves him from the fury of his father Skallagrímr, only to pay for it with her life (chapter 40). Much later Þorgerðr, Egill's daughter, apparently named after his nurse, talks him out of starving himself to death (chapter 80). Finally, his foster-daughter, Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir, has his bones transferred to hallowed ground following the conversion of Iceland to Christianity some years after his death (chapter 89). The two later stories are particularly interesting in connection with the Christian ideas that we are beginning to uncover in *Egils saga*.

In the introduction to the present work the episode of the discovery of Egill's bones was described as a conundrum, closely linked to the enigma of Egill himself and thus to the underlying meaning of the saga. Egill dies in pre-Christian times and is buried in a mound, but after the conversion of Iceland Þórdís has his bones moved to a church and re-interred under the altar. To the medieval Christian mind it was essential to await the resurrection of the flesh in consecrated ground. Such a belief informs various incidents in *Sturlunga saga* where people go to great lengths to have their kinsmen buried in churchyards.<sup>101</sup> In contrast, *Íslendingasögur*, especially *Egils saga*, do not usually accord the same sort of concern to the disposal of the mortal remains of those who die as heathens. Egill must therefore have had a different status from his heathen contemporaries.

The final resting place of Egill's bones supports this conjecture still further, since when moved to the churchyard at Mosfell early in the twelfth century they are interred on the edge of the burial ground, where those who had received only preliminary baptism were accorded a place. Preliminary baptism was the practice whereby a layman baptized a newborn child unlikely to live long enough to be christened by a priest. Those who had received only preliminary baptism occupied the same theological position in medieval times as those who were prime-signed.<sup>102</sup> This is consistent with

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101. The most famous example is doubtless the persistence of Randalín Fillipusdóttir, Oddr Þórarinsson's widow, who persuades Bishop Árni Þorláksson to revoke the excommunication on her husband and transfer his remains to a church, a quarter of a century after his death (see *Sturlunga saga*, vol. 2 (1988), 671, 687, 803–6). On legal provisions for burial in consecrated ground, see *Grágás* (1992), 9–10.

102. See Sandholm, *Primsigningsriten* (1965), 54ff.

the wording in *Grágás* where “prime-signed” is used of children who have received preliminary baptism: “If a child dies who has received the *primum signum* but not been baptized, it is to be buried out by the churchyard wall, where hallowed and unhallowed ground meet, and no burial service is to be sung over it.”<sup>103</sup>

Egill’s third and last resting place was thus consistent with his theological status. Þórdís literally acted to save her foster-father’s soul and his hope of eternal life because, unlike most Icelanders of his generation, Egill was in a position to be saved. However, the act of burying him under the altar was a step too far; after all, Egill was no saint!

The scene in which Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir talks her father out of starving himself to death is one of the most memorable in the saga and worth close attention since it includes Christian references modern readers can easily overlook. When Böðvarr, Egill’s favorite son, drowns in Borgarfjörður, Egill is stricken with grief and locks himself in his bed-closet. No one dares speak to him and he refuses both food and drink. In the end his wife Ásgerðr resorts to sending for their daughter Þorgerðr, who now lives with her husband in the Dalir region. On reaching Borg, she joins Egill in the bed-closet under the pretence of wanting to follow his example, much to Egill’s approval. Soon, noticing that she is chewing dulse, he asks if he can have some, but the seaweed is so salty that it gives him thirst, so Þorgerðr calls for water. She drinks from the horn first, then Egill follows suit, but when the horn turns out to contain milk, he reacts angrily. Þorgerðr has tricked him into breaking his fast. She then persuades him to channel his anger in a more positive direction by composing a memorial poem for Böðvarr.

Since Þórdís was a convert to the Christian faith when she had Egill’s bones re-interred, we may assume that the thirteenth-century audience of the saga thought her able to understand the significance of her actions. Þorgerðr, on the other hand, was still a heathen when she came to her father’s aid after the drowning of Böðvarr, so it would be far-fetched to suggest that she may have been aware that she was saving not merely his life on earth but also his chance of a place in Paradise. Yet this is precisely what she is doing if we view the incident

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103. *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (1980–2000), 1:26. “Ef barn andast þrímstígn, og hefir eigi meiri skírn, og skal það grafa út við kirkjugarð, þar er mætist vígð mold og óvígð, og syngja eigi líksöng yfir.” *Grágás* (1992), 4–5.



from the perspective of ideas that were current among medieval Christians.<sup>104</sup>

Christians were expected to embrace three virtues above all others: faith, hope and love. They were to have faith in God, never lose their hope of salvation, and love their fellow men. Hope, or rather despair, is central to this chapter of *Egils saga*. In theological terms, Judas's greatest sin was not his betrayal of Jesus but his suicide; a sign that he despaired of obtaining God's forgiveness.<sup>105</sup> This idea was well known in Iceland around 1200 and is expressed in the following manner in the *Icelandic Homily Book*:

Despair is the most pernicious of all sins, as it implies doubt in God's mercy. Presumption is next, because it implies doubt in his justice, and next again is the despair of thinking that one cannot atone for one's sins through divine mercy.<sup>106</sup>

If Egill had a chance of eternal life, it was vital that he should not starve himself to death, so it is not only his life that is being saved in this episode but also his immortal soul.<sup>107</sup>

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104. As has already been noted, Lönnroth discusses the enigmatic quality of this scene in a reading suggesting a Christian meaning consistent with his reading of other saga scenes in the same article. See "Saga and Jartegn" (1999), 118–22.

105. See Friedrich Ohly, *The Damned and the Elect: Guilt in Western Culture*, trans. Linda Archibald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), especially the first two chapters. Christian attitudes to Judas's suicide can be traced to its condemnation by Augustine, who wrote: "quoniam Dei misericordiam desperando exitiabiliter paenitens nullum sibi salubris paenitentiae locum reliquit" (For by despairing of God's mercy he repented to his own destruction and left himself no room for saving penitence) (*De Civitate Dei* 1, 17; trans. Ohly, 35). Gregory the Great stated: "pejus de peccato poenituit quam peccavit" (his repentance of his sin was worse than the sin) (*Moralium libri* 11, 9; trans. Ohly, 35).

106. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Örvilnun er verst allra synda, því að hún tortryggvir miskunn Guðs. En ofvilnun þar næst, því að hún tortryggvir réttlæti hans. Örvilnun enn það næst að hyggjast eigi munu bætt geta syndir sínar með miskunn Guðs." *Íslensk hómilubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 193.

107. As it happens, this story has a remarkable parallel in world literature. In Shakespeare's play *King Lear* Edgar tricks his father Gloucester in a similar manner to that in which Þorgerðr tricks Egill, also for the purpose of saving his soul from a despairing death. On this, see my article "Snorri and Women in his Life and Literature," in *Sagnaheimur: Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 80th birthday, 26th May 2001*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek, Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia 6 (Vienna: Fassbaender, 2001), 272–75.

### Intercessors for the Sinner: Mary and Abigail

The stories of the three women who save Egill at different stages of his life (and afterlife) are possibly prefigured in the first part of the saga where Sigríðr of Sandnes, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson's wife, tries in vain to intercede with the king to spare her husband's life (chapter 22). This pattern is consistent with the structural rule that we have observed to govern the work as a whole: important motifs that occur once in the first part of the saga generally occur three times in the second part. Thus one woman tries to save the hero in the first part, while three, Brák, Þorgerðr and Þórdís, perform the same role in the second part.

As it so happens, there is another woman who plays a similar role in the second part, albeit she tries to save the life of a minor character rather than the main protagonist. This woman is Ármóðr skegg's wife, who features in the story of Egill's Varmland expedition (chapters 72 and 73). Egill has undertaken to levy tribute for King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri in Varmland in order to spare Arinbjörn's nephew an extremely hazardous mission, for recently all the king's tax-collectors who have passed through the region have been slain. One night Egill and his men accept lodging at Ármóðr's farm. The hospitality is not up to much even though they are there on royal business. Telling Egill and his companions that there is no ale, Ármóðr offers them *skyr*, "curds" or perhaps "sour whey," instead. They have already drunk deeply of the *skyr* when Ármóðr's wife sends her daughter to convey the following stanza to Egill:

My mother sent me  
to talk to you  
and bring Egil word  
to keep on his guard.  
The maid of the ale-horn  
said treat your stomach  
as if you expect  
to be served something better.<sup>108</sup>

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108. Scudder (2004), 155. "Því sendi mín móðir / mik við þik til fundar / ok orð bera Agli / at ér varir skyldið; / Hildir mælti þat horna: / haga svo maga þínum, / eigu órir gestir / æðra nest á frestum." ÍF 2:224–25.

The implication is that Egill and his companions should take care not to fill up with whey as they can expect *æðra nest á frestum*, “to be served a better drink soon.” Ármóðr reacts angrily to the verse, striking the girl and telling her to hold her tongue. Shortly afterward, the ale-drinking begins, but ale and whey tend to curdle in the stomach, as Egill had found out to his cost when a boy at Atleyjar-Bárðr’s feast. Before long Egill stands up and vomits in Ármóðr’s face. Not satisfied with this, he goes next day to kill his host, and only spares him on the intercession of his wife, making do instead with gouging out one of his eyes and cutting off his beard.

Finnur Jónsson was of the opinion that this was a late verse, from the twelfth century, and therefore “inauthentic.”<sup>109</sup> But Sigurður Nordal, in his preface to the saga, suggested that Egill had composed the verse and put it in the girl’s mouth when, in his later years, he used to spin yarns about his voyages and exploits; “Egill enjoyed talking about them,” as the saga says.<sup>110</sup> Nordal argued that the verse showed no particular evidence of being of a more recent composition than the others and, although it was not especially accomplished, one could imagine it forming part of the oral tradition about Egill’s Varmland expedition, which was used by the saga author when he collected material relating to the old poet and arranged it into *Egils saga* as we now know it.<sup>111</sup>

The last lines of the stanza merit particular attention: *Eiga órir gestir æðra nest á frestum*, “Our guests shall receive better drink soon.” In its immediate context, it means that Ármóðr’s guests and family will be served ale after their whey, that is, a better drink to follow a worse one. But if the stanza is read with the Bible in mind, the circumstances described find a verbal echo in the story of the wedding at Cana in chapter 2 of the Gospel of St. John. When the wine runs out at the wedding feast, Jesus’s mother draws his attention to the fact. At first he seems resistant: “Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.” In spite of this, Mary tells the servants to be ready to obey Jesus’s orders, and soon he tells them to fill six stone jars with water. When the master of ceremonies

109. “Fölsuð” is the term used by Finnur Jónsson. Sigurður Nordal cites him in the preface to his edition of the saga (ÍF 2:vi).

110. Scudder (2004), 183. “. . . þat tal þótti Agli gott.” ÍF 2:268.

111. See Sigurður Nordal’s preface (ÍF 2:xi–xii).



tastes the water he discovers that it has turned into the finest wine, so he calls to the bridegroom, saying: "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but *thou hast kept the good wine until now.*" The bridegroom's guests could look forward to a better drink. In other words, they could expect *æðra nest á frestum*.

These stories have three points in common: a better drink is served after a worse one, our attention is drawn to the fact through direct speech, and a woman plays an important role in conveying the message. One could dismiss this as mere coincidence were it not for the tendency we have already discovered in the saga of requiring the audience to dig deeper, consider textual links, examine the context, and understand the story in its larger sense. The audience is being asked to approach the text as if trying to unravel the meaning of a *dróttkvætt* verse or else elucidate an obscure passage in the Scriptures in the manner of a priest.

The biblical story of the wedding at Cana inspired a large body of commentary, occupying as it did a central place in medieval Christian theology, for at least two different reasons. First, it was used by exegetes to provide authority for the major cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which began to gain momentum early in the twelfth century and had achieved immense popularity throughout much of Christendom by the time *Egils saga* was composed.<sup>112</sup> Second, it was used to explain the relationship between the Jewish and Christian faiths; between God's first and second covenants with mankind. Both interpretations can be found in the sermons preserved in the *Icelandic Homily Book*.<sup>113</sup>

Comparatively little mention is made of Mary in the New Testament, so theologians did not have much to go on when trying to find authority for various aspects of her holiness. In chapter 2 of the

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112. The status of the Blessed Virgin Mary in medieval thought is admirably described in the introduction to *Maríukver: Sögur og kvæði af heilagri guðsmóður frá fyrri tíð*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1996), ix–li. A good description of the origins and spread of the cult of the Holy Virgin in connection with other developments in Western medieval culture can be found in Richard W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 209–44.

113. See *Medieval Scandinavia* (1993), 290, as well as Andrea de Leeuw van Weenen's introduction to the *Icelandic Homily Book* (1993).

Gospel of St. John, however, they found proof that God intended Mary as an intercessor for mankind, for the chapter shows Mary mediating between the deity and his people. It is at her urging that the might of the Lord is revealed in Jesus's first miracle, or, as the *Icelandic Homily Book* expresses it in a commentary on this passage of the Scriptures:

Holy Mary, Virgin of Virgins, lady of the world [heaven?] and earth, surpassing all the angels in purity and all men in holiness; she had compassion for the wedding hosts and arranged with her son, the Lord Jesus, that there should be no failure of hospitality at the feast, telling him that they did not have any wine.<sup>114</sup>

This episode was taken to signify that repentant sinners could expect salvation through the intervention of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>115</sup> Mary did not merely intercede to ensure that the wedding guests were served with a better drink; the good wine also symbolizes that sinners will receive the greatest gift of all hereafter; that is, eternal life. In other words, Mary gives a promise of *æðra nest á frestum*.

Further possible references to the Virgin's role in saving sinners from eternal damnation can be found in the two incidents in *Egils saga*, in which Egill's daughters can each in their own way be said to save his soul. Hence it seems a reasonable assumption that the three points of resemblance between Ármóðr skegg's daughter's verse and the story of the wedding at Cana were deliberately inserted in the narrative.

Now we come to the second meaning exegetes read into the account in the Gospel of St. John, which is also mentioned in the *Icelandic Homily Book's* commentary on the wedding at Cana:

The wine ran out at the feast, because the laws that were given to the Jews had fallen into decay or even been extinguished in their hearts by the time Christ came down to earth.

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114. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Heilög María, mærmeyja, domina heims [possible scribal error: himins?] og jarðar, öllum englum hreinni og öllum mönnum helgari, hún bar vorkunnaráhyggju fyrir brúðkaupsmönnum og sýsti um við son sinn, Dominum Iesum, að eigi yrði háttaföll að samkundu og sagði, að menn höfðu eigi vinum." *Íslensk bómilubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 267–68.

115. On this, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Picador, 1976), 286–87.

Six stone jars stood empty, each of which would hold two or three measures.

These stone jars symbolize the hearts of those who believed in the advent of Christ, which were empty at the time when the old laws became obsolete, before Christ gave them the new laws.<sup>116</sup>

This passage deals with religious conversion; more precisely, with the conversion from the Jewish faith to Christianity, which occurred when the new laws replaced the old covenant between God and his people. Jesus's first miracle symbolizes God's will to impose two sets of laws on his people; the first covenant with Moses, and the second covenant when the divine became incarnate in the man Jesus Christ.

We will return later to the signification of this for the interpretation of *Egils saga*. However, the possible allusion to the wedding at Cana is not the only one to the Bible in the account of Egill's visit to Ármóðr skegg. The episode also has echoes of an incident in the life of King David: his encounter with Abigail. The story of David and Abigail is related in chapter 25 of the First Book of Samuel. David is in the wilderness and requests help from a rich man called Nabal, just as Egill requests hospitality from Ármóðr. David wants Nabal to supply provisions for his men but Nabal is miserly and will give them nothing, like Ármóðr, who pretends he has no ale. Like Egill, David intends to punish the man with death but spares him on the intercession of Nabal's wife Abigail.<sup>117</sup>

In contrast to Ármóðr, Nabal commits no deception, and in the biblical account David marries Abigail after God has struck down Nabal, whereas *Egils saga* tells us nothing further of the fate of Ármóðr and his wife. Nevertheless, the other parallels between David and Egill, noted above, are bound to alert us to the analogy. Medieval exegetes regarded Abigail as one of the "types," that is, prefigurations or foreshadowings of Mary, because she intercedes on

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116. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Vín þraut að samkundu, því að lög þau, er Gyðingum vóru gefin, höfðu þá dofnað eða enn heldur þrotnað í hjörtum þeirra á þeirri tíð, er Kristur lét hingað berast. Steinker sex stóðu þar tóm, þau er í lágu tvennar eða þrennar málskjólur. Steinker þessi merkja hjörtu þeirra, er trúðu hingaðkomu Krists, en þau vóru tóm á þeirri tíð, er eyddust in fornu lög, uns Kristur gaf in nýju." *Íslensk hómiljubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 269.

117. The story can be found in *Stjórn* (1862), 481–85 (chapter 248).





*Figure 2:* Decoration featuring the wedding at Cana on an Icelandic drinking horn from 1598. The top picture shows water being poured into jars.

behalf of her husband.<sup>118</sup> The second meaning assigned to this Old Testament story was that it foretold the union of the old and new laws, with Abigail taken as a symbol of the Jewish faith and David of Christianity, their marriage hence symbolizing the union of the two faiths.<sup>119</sup> The story of Abigail and David is thus linked to the same ideas as the story of the wedding feast at Cana; that is, they are typologically related. That parallels with both can be found in the same chapter of *Egils saga* suggests considerable knowledge not only of the Bible but also of its tradition of exegesis. Furthermore, it draws attention to the idea of conversion as an important theme in the saga.

### The Fifth Woman, a Copper Cauldron and the Wind

As pointed out in the previous section, the wife of Ármóðr skegg is the fifth woman in the saga to plead for mercy on behalf of a man who is closely connected to her. Yet she differs from the other

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118. There are innumerable examples of such identifications in medieval literature (see figure 3). The following description of Abigail as a foreshadowing of Mary is a quotation from a Middle English manuscript, *The Mirour of Mans Saluacioun: A Middle English Translation of Speculum Humanae Salvationis: A Critical Edition of the Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Illustrated from Der Spiegel der Menschen Behältnis*, Speyer, Drach, c. 1475, ed. Avril Henry (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), 189: "And þat this gloriouse virgyne shuld oure mediatrice be / Was shewed lange tyme tofore be fulle faire figures thre. / First be fonde Nabals wif, the jentyle Abigael, / Whilk pesid the king Dauid, commyng with hire camel."

119. Countless biblical commentators designated the marriage of David and Abigail as a foreshadowing of the conversion. See the list of quotations in the *Patrologia Latina* 219b, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 219, *Indices, generales simul et speciales* (Paris, 1862), 275: "ABIGAIL, uxor impii Nabal, cujus post mortem regi David nupsit. S. Augustinus, XL, 1409. S. Gregorius Magnus, LXXVI, 911; LXXVII, 77. Beda Ven., XCI, 681. Rupertus abb. CLXVII, 1112. Hugo de S. Victore, CLXXV, 696. Philippus de Harveng, CCIII, 870. Petrus Cantor, CCV."

Abigail was also taken to symbolize the Holy Church; cf. the following interpretation of the verses narrating how she brings David and his men provisions (1 Samuel 25:18–27): "Abygail significat sanctam ecclesiam que attulit ad comedendum principibus pietatem, misericordiam et caritatem, et pro omnibus peccatoribus ut veniam consequentur apud dominum intercedit." This passage can be found in the manuscript of a glossed Bible (Oxford Bodley 270B, 143v) and could be translated as follows: "Abigail signifies the Holy Church, which brings piety, mercy and charity for the consumption of princes, and intercedes on behalf of all sinners so that they may obtain absolution from the Lord." On this passage, see Philippe Buc, *L'Ambiguïté du livre* (1994), 186, footnote.

women in that her husband is not the hero of the story, like Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson in the first part or Egill in the second, but the hero's adversary. I now wish to consider another symbolic element that occurs for a fifth time in the text, in an even more oblique manner than the afore-mentioned women.

As we have already noted, *Egils saga* features four men named Ketill who bear a cognomen. They are not only characters in the story but also have a structural function in highlighting the connections among different strands of the saga and shedding light on the content by virtue of their nicknames. There is, however, another *ketill* in the saga that one would not immediately associate with the others. That is the *eirketill*, "copper cauldron" or "kettle," that Skallagrímr sinks in Krumselda marsh with a chest of silver on the night he dies (chapter 59). His reason for removing the chest is understandable, since he and Egill have recently fallen out over the English King Athelstan's gift of silver that Egill was supposed to have delivered to Skallagrímr as wergild for his son Þórólfr. If Egill is not prepared to share the English silver with his father, it is logical that Skallagrímr should hide away his own treasure. But why on earth does he bury it with a copper cauldron? A glance in the dictionaries reveals that *eir* can mean not only copper but also "mercy," "grace," "clemency."<sup>120</sup> Egill himself seems to use the word in this sense in stanza 32 of the saga where *selju gandr*, the wind, files down the prow of the ship *eirar vanr*, literally "mercilessly." The *eirketill* crops up in the very next chapter. In fact, the word *eir* occurs four times in Egill's free-standing skaldic stanzas, always with the same meaning.<sup>121</sup> If the cognomens of the other Ketills have connotations of blindness and fratricide, "Ketill eir" might perhaps allude to mercy.<sup>122</sup> When Skallagrímr sinks the cauldron, the implicit suggestion is that because Egill refuses to hand over the silver, he can no longer expect any mercy or kindness from his

120. See Sveinbjörn Egilsson, *Lexicon poeticum antiquæ linguæ septentrionalis* (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige nordiske oldskrift-selskab, 1913-16), 103.

121. As well as in stanza 32, it occurs in 41 ("eir veitti eg Friðgeiri"), 43 ("Arinbjörn hefur árnað / eirarlaust eða meira"), and 59 ("bið eg eirar Syn geira").

122. The assumption here is that the stylistic trick of "að gera ofljóst," i.e. saying things in a deliberately veiled way, is being used here. It is described by Snorri in his *Edda* and will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.





Figure 3: A page from *Speculum humane salutis*, a manuscript dating from the second half of the fourteenth century, preserved at the National Library of Austria in Vienna (Cod. No. S. N. 2612, fol. 39v). It depicts the typological link between the Blessed Virgin Mary, shown here on the left, pleading with her son to have mercy on sinners, and Abigail, here pleading with David to spare her husband Nabal.

father; figuratively speaking, Skallagrímr is burying mercy. Yet this interpretation is difficult to square with the fact that Skallagrímr dies later that evening. Or is it?

If we are right in suggesting that Egill is indirectly to blame for Þórólfr's death, Skallagrímr has another reason to be angry with his younger son. Egill is his son, but also, as we have established, responsible for his other son's death. It is tempting to speculate whether the action of sinking the copper cauldron contains a declaration of some sort; a declaration that Skallagrímr will henceforth no longer spare Egill from his vengeance. If Skallagrímr had not died straight afterward, the inference would perhaps not seem so far-fetched, since earlier in the saga both father and son kill substitutes for each other (chapter 40). But two details suggest that Egill's and Skallagrímr's dealings are not in fact cut short by the latter's death. The first is the way in which Egill handles his father's corpse in a way strikingly similar to an account in another saga and that might help to understand what is being suggested in *Egils saga*. Egill takes great care to avoid the dead man's gaze, treating the body in the same way as Arnkell goði treats the corpse of his father, Þórólfr bægifótr (Lamefoot), in *Eyrbyggja saga*. This Þórólfr also died sitting upright and at odds with his son.<sup>123</sup> Yet since these measures did not prevent Þórólfr Lamefoot from returning to haunt people in various nasty ways, it is possible to imagine that Skallagrímr might do the same, although the saga does not actually make this explicit.

In his study of ghosts and revenants in the Middle Ages, Claude Lecouteux draws attention to examples in Germanic folklore that seem to point to a belief that people could return to life after death if they had taken the precaution of burying a hoard in the ground beforehand. Although Lecouteux admits that this idea crops up nowhere in the *Íslendingasögur*, he does not regard this as conclusive evidence that it was not known in Iceland at the time the sagas were written. In support of his theory, he contends that when the narrator states that no money is laid in a dead man's burial mound,

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123. *Íslendinga sögur og þættir*, ed. Bragi Halldórsson et al. (Reykjavík: Svart á hvítu, 1987), 1:578–79. See also Matthías Þórðarson's article, "Um dauða Skalla-Gríms," in *Festskrift til Finnur Jónsson*, ed. Johs. Brøndum-Nielsen et al. (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1928), which points to similarities between these two accounts.



this could indicate an attempt to prevent his returning as a ghost.<sup>124</sup> Now, in *Egils saga* it is specifically mentioned that there are no stories of any money having been placed in Skallagrímr's mound. While this is clearly a humorous reference to Egill's avarice, it may also be intended to create an expectation in the saga audience that Skallagrímr's corpse might walk after his death.

If Skallagrímr does return to haunt his son, although such a thing is not explicitly stated, we would expect him to intervene in the course of events in some fashion. Now, given the earlier animosity between father and son, it is worth paying closer attention to Böðvarr's drowning, as it is striking how carefully both where and how it occurred are described. Böðvarr and his companions are sailing between Borg and Vellir (modern Hvítárvellir) when a wild southwesterly gale, *útsynningurinn steinóði*, combined with the turning tide, capsizes their boat and they all drown. The question is what causes this fateful storm.

The legendary sagas and chivalric romances often tell of supernatural storms raised by demons or sorcerers against their enemies.<sup>125</sup> One of the most interesting examples of this type of storm is found in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, which is among the texts scholars believe whoever is responsible for *Egils saga* must have known.<sup>126</sup> There Earl Hákon raises a violent storm against the force of Jómsvíkings who are invading Norway.<sup>127</sup> Going ashore on an island called PrímSIGÐ, he falls to his knees and prays to Þorgerðr Hörðatröll for help in resisting the incursion from Denmark, but *horfði þó í norðr*, "looked however to the north." Since we have no evidence that our pagan forebears prayed in this manner, this seems to be a deliberate imitation of Christian practice, perverted by pagans. The fact is underlined in the text by the presence of the word *þó*, "however," when it is said that Hákon faced north. From the perspective of

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124. Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants au Moyen Âge*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Imago, 1996), 45.

125. Examples of supernatural storms can be found in *Friðþjófs saga frækna*, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingaútgáfan, 1950), 3:82–88; and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (ibid., 28).

126. See Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 105–47.

127. See *Jómsvíkingasaga*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðja Jóns Helgasonar, 1969), 183ff.



Christian cosmology it is particularly striking that Hákon should face north and that the supernatural hailstorm should come from that direction, since Lucifer, the fallen angel, was believed to have his abode in the northern part of heaven.<sup>128</sup> Hákon was called *hinn mesti guðníðingur*, “the worst apostate,” in the saga (p. 98), because he had abjured his faith after baptism, a deed considered tantamount to selling one’s soul to the devil.<sup>129</sup>

A close reading of this passage shows that it forms a kind of inversion of an earlier episode in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, when the supporters of the Emperor Otto invade Denmark with the backing of King Óláfr Tryggvason. Whereas the storm from the north came to the aid of the apostate, here the south wind blows the barrels of burning wood chips over the ditch and up to the Danavirki, or defensive rampart, causing it to burn to the ground, while an unusual rain later extinguishes the embers, thus allowing safe passage across the ditch for the followers of the Christian emperor, who have previously fasted for four days to the glory of God. The rain corresponds to the hailstorm and thunder that Hákon raised, while the Danish and Norwegian forces’ fear of the southern army’s miracle has its counterpart in the fear Earl Sigvaldi and many of his Danish followers feel for the supernatural storm from the north.

The audience of *Jómsvíkinga saga* was clearly expected to interpret as divine intervention the scene where Óláfr Tryggvason, who later converts Norway to Christianity, comes to the aid of Emperor Otto with his counsel. This lends force to the idea that the drowning of Böðvarr is charged with *andligr skilningr*, or a spiritual meaning, that the forces of nature are here too the instrument of divine providence, symbolized in this instance by rain and wind from the south-west; one of countless examples in early Icelandic literature of the Holy Spirit manifesting itself as a wind. The most obvious is found in the *Icelandic Homily Book*, which tells how the Holy Spirit descended to the disciples at the Pentecost:

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128. See *Konungs skuggsjá* (1955), 155.

129. See Vacant. A. et al., *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique: Contenant l'exposé des doctrines de la théologie catholique, leurs preuves et leur histoire* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908–1950), 1602–12. See also Jarl Gallén, “Klosterväsen,” in *Kulturbistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 8 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), 574.

They all sat together in that house with their followers. Then toward dawn they heard a noise as of a wind beating on the house. Looking up, they saw what seemed like a fire in the house, which gave off light but did not burn. . . . And afterward they accepted the Holy Spirit as whole-heartedly as they were able.<sup>130</sup>

A similar concept may be present in a skaldic verse by the poet Guðmundr Oddsson, who was a member of Sturla Sighvatsson's household in the 1220s and 1230s. Sturla had traveled west with his army to Vatnsfjörður in Ísafjarðardjúp in the Vestfirðir (West Fjords), with the aim of ambushing Þórðr and Snorri Þorvaldsson in revenge for their recent attack on his home at Sauðafell. Snorri was away from home when Sturla arrived, but Þórðr and his men fled aboard their ships, yet could not make their getaway due to the sudden onslaught of a violent storm. When they came ashore the following morning, a truce was agreed. Guðmundr composed a verse on the occasion, the gist of which is that the chieftain Sturla went west to Vatnsfjörður with revenge in mind but that the Holy Ghost took care of the conclusion.<sup>131</sup> This could either mean that the Holy Ghost softened his hard mind or else that the storm had aided him, since Sturla could only show himself willing to give quarter once he had his enemies in his power, and that could not have happened without the storm.<sup>132</sup>

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130. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Þeir sátu í þessu húsi allir saman með sínu liði, þá er leið að dagmálum. Þá heyra þeir sem vindur kæmi á húsið. Þeir litu up og sá sem eldur væri inn kominn í húsið, sá er lýsti af, en eigi brann. . . . En eftir það þá tóku þeir svo fulllega inn helga anda sem megu of bera." *Íslensk hómilíubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 31.

131. See *Sturlunga saga* (1988), 1:326.

132. In *Laxdæla saga* (chapter 66) there is another example of a wind obeying the will of God in the account of the deaths of the friends Ósvífr Helgason and Gestr Oddleifsson. Following the Christianization of Iceland, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir has a church built at Helgafell, and when Ósvífr dies, he is buried there. Shortly afterward Gestr dies at his home of Hagi on Barðaströnd. Before he died he had asked his son to bury him at Helgafell because "it will be the most prominent seat in the district. I have also often seen brightness there." Freezing temperatures and thick ice prevent people from carrying the body on board ship but after his body has lain in state for two days, "a storm blew up with winds so strong that the ice was driven from the shore. The following day the weather was mild and calm." It was then possible to transport the body to Helgafell but once this had been done, a wild storm blew up. All the ice was driven back to shore and for much of the winter

These examples show the range of possible ways that would have been open to a thirteenth-century audience for interpreting the storm that led to Böðvarr's death. It could simply have been a force of nature, or else raised by supernatural powers, either good or evil. That it comes from the south would seem to imply divine intervention, though two other possible interpretations of the southwesterly gale should be mentioned here. First, far to the south in Denmark is the lair of Queen Gunnhildr, who could also have raised the storm. She had already used sorcery against Egill and it is not inconceivable that the saga is hinting that she was behind the storm that caused Egill to wreck his ship at the mouth of the Humber and end up in York where she and her husband Eiríkr held sway (chapter 60). She certainly had good reason to want Egill's son dead in revenge for her own.<sup>133</sup>

Second, it so happens that the wind blows in a direction that would take it past the burial mound of Skallagrímr on Digranes at the entrance to the fjord. This adds yet another possible interpretation; the saga can be read as signifying that Skallagrímr's ghost caused the wreck in order to avenge the death of his son Þórólfr, Egill's brother. If we accept this alternative, we could interpret Egill's action of laying Böðvarr's body in the mound beside Skallagrímr as a form of acknowledgement. He gives his own son to his father in recompense for having been responsible for the death of his brother Þórólfr.

The latter two interpretations are possible, and it is worth keeping an open mind about them, not least because it appears that the saga has deliberately been left open to more than one interpretation. Here, however, I will persist in interpreting the wind as divine retribution, a reading further strengthened by an incident reported in connection with Ketill gufa's land-taking. The incident, which occurs after Egill has returned home for good, shortly before the death of Böðvarr, is the rebellion by Ketill's slaves (chapter 78) who run away and rob a neighboring farm, burning the household to death inside. The

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it was impossible to come or go from Hagi by ship, but "the chance to transport Gest's body . . . was thought to be a great omen. . . ." Trans. Keneva Kunz in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997), 5:102.

133. See Hermann Pálsson, "Fornfræði Egils sögu," *Skírnir* 168 (1994): 51–52. Pálsson discusses supernatural storms in *Egils saga* and wonders whether Egill could have learned sorcery from his wet-nurse Brák and thus raised the southwesterly wind that was to hinder Þórólfr's journey (chapter 40).



farmer's son subsequently hunts them down, one by one, and kills them. The places where the slaves meet their doom are named after them: Kóranes after Kóri, Skorrey after Skorri and Þormóðssker after Þormóðr. Superficially, this appears to be a typical settlement story, not unlike the story of the rebellion of Hjörleifr's slaves, which is told in *Landnámabók*.<sup>134</sup> As often in such stories, place-names are cited as evidence for the narrative. However, tales explaining place-names are often traps for the unwary, as scholars have pointed out.<sup>135</sup> The story could just as well have been derived from the place-names in order to draw attention to the overall meaning of the saga.

At this stage it is worth taking a closer look at how the word *þræll*, "slave," is used in religious imagery by contemporaries of the saga's composition, who, it should be remembered, lived long after slavery had been abolished in Iceland. Let us again refer to the *Icelandic Homily Book*:

When a man commits a crime he is invariably made a slave, enslaved by sin and hindered from heaven by his bonds. And it is no light matter, good people, for a man to regain his freedom once he has entered into slavery, or to be released once he has been bound. And so it is much safer to avoid being oppressed and enslaved or bound in the first place.<sup>136</sup>

He who is trapped in sin is a slave. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to see who punishes the slaves for their crimes. His name is Lambi and he appears twice in the story. This is the first occasion; the second is when he restrains Steinar Sjánason in order to prevent his attack on Þorsteinn Egilsson (chapter 87). To be sure, his name is not uncommon but it has explicit associations with the deity and

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134. See Bjarni Einarsson's discussion of this passage in *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 73–92.

135. See for example Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger*, as above, and also Anne Holtsmark, "Skallagríms heimamenn," *Maal og Minne* 3–4 (1971): 97–105.

136. Trans. Victoria Cribb. "Ávallt er maður gerir glæpinn, þá er hann þræll gjör, ánauðugur af syndinni og bundinn frá himinríki. En ábyrgð er á mikil, góðir menn, hvort maður verður frjáls, ef hann kemur í þrældóminn, eða svo laus, ef hann verður bundinn. Og er því öruggara miklu að koma eigi í ánauðina og þrældóminn né böndin fyr öndverðu." *Íslensk bómiliubók: Fornar stólræður* (1993), 229.

Christian imagery. The Lamb of God is Jesus, and it is the lamb that punishes the unrighteous according to the following passage in the Book of Revelations (6:16–17):

And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:

For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

But the lamb also protects the righteous, those who have *góð málaefni*, “just causes.”<sup>137</sup> Lambi punishes the slaves who rose up against the authority of the father but he also protects the man who trusts in providence. Here we have an explanation for the curious behavior of Þorsteinn after the lawsuit with Steinar Sjónason (chapter 87), which we drew attention to in the previous chapter, and which we will discuss in the following section.

### Conversion: a Spiritual Interpretation of Egill's Life?

It is time to sum up our main findings on the underlying cohesion in Egill's life, as a thirteenth-century reader might have understood it. This understanding would have been *andligr*, “spiritual” or “allegorical,” in the sense that Snorri Sturluson applies to the word in the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*, that is, in keeping with the tradition of Christian exegesis, which was well known in Iceland in his days, as the evidence shows.

Egill is guilty of harboring anger towards his brother and coveting his wife, facts that led indirectly to the circumstances of Þórólfr's death. Furthermore, Egill has married his brother's widow, although this practice was unlawful for Christians. These sins are to have repercussions throughout his life, sometimes directly, as in

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137. *Fóstbræðra saga* is believed to be somewhat younger than *Egils saga*. Christian ideas of free will, good will, and the slavery of sin, also present in *Egils saga*, come together in the following quotation: “And as all good things come from God, so too does steadfastness, and it is given unto all bold men together with a free will that they may themselves choose whether they do good or evil. Thus Jesus Christ has made Christians his sons and not his slaves, so that he might reward all according to their deeds,” trans. Martin Regal in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (1997), 2:336.

his conflict with King Eiríkr, which culminates in the dispute with Berg-Önundr over Ásgerðr's rightful inheritance.

On closer examination, it transpires that all but one of Egill's four voyages abroad are undertaken on account of Ásgerðr and her inheritance. Egill demands to join Þórólfr and Ásgerðr on the first voyage, as has already been noted. The second voyage is undertaken because Berg-Önundr has confiscated Ásgerðr's entire inheritance. The ostensible reason for the third voyage is that Egill wants to find out whether King Athelstan intends to keep his promise to make him a great man in England (chapter 60). But after narrowly saving his neck at the court of Eiríkr Bloodaxe in York, Egill sees his chance, now that Eiríkr has been exiled from Norway, to go over there and recover Ásgerðr's inheritance (chapter 63). He is successful in this and returns to Iceland with great wealth (chapter 67). His fourth voyage is again motivated by the hope of riches, this time the property of the berserker Ljótr hinn bleiki (the Pale), whom Egill had slain in a duel. He believes he has a claim to this property, although the king has seized control of it (chapter 69).

Now, although all these journeys are undertaken because Egill wants something he believes is his by right, he nevertheless performs heroic deeds in the service of others in the course of all but one of them. On the first journey he rescues Áki and his sons, as well as performing outstanding exploits at the battle of Vínheiðr. On the third he fights a duel with Ljótr the Pale, simultaneously rescuing Arinbjörn's niece from a fate worse than death and saving her brother's life. On the fourth journey he undertakes to pursue the business of King Hákon on behalf of Þorsteinn, Þóra's son, another of Arinbjörn's nephews, and performs many heroic deeds on this mission. Only the second voyage could be described as an exception, since there Egill is merely taking care of his own and his wife's business, and moreover he puts himself well beyond the pale by his dishonorable killing of Rögnvaldr Eiríksson.<sup>138</sup>

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138. In a recent book containing an interesting examination of *Egils saga*, Richard North states that there is a difference between Egill and his forefathers to the extent that he does not shape-shift. Instead he flies into rages: "Again this writer makes Egill less like the original men of Hrafnista. Throughout the story as a whole, his tribe is shown evolving from monstrous beginnings in a Norwegian hinterland to an assimilation into the human community in Iceland. This is not a prominent theme in



### Egill's Foreign Travels

1. Egill insists on traveling abroad with Þórólfr. Þórólfr marries Ásgerðr in Norway. The brothers are prime-signed in England. Death of Þórólfr. Egill marries Ásgerðr.
2. Egill travels to Norway with Ásgerðr to claim her inheritance. He kills Berg-Önundr and the king's son Rögnvaldr.
3. Egill intends to visit Athelstan but ends up at the court of Eiríkr Bloodaxe. Afterward he travels to Norway where he fights a duel with Ljótr the Pale on behalf of Arinbjörn's nephew Friðgeir.
4. Egill visits Arinbjörn who gives him money in compensation for Ljótr's lands. Egill goes raiding with Arinbjörn, then undertakes an expedition to Varmland on behalf of Arinbjörn's nephew Þorsteinn.

If a true hero performs feats on behalf of others, we can detect an ascending scale in Egill's heroism as the saga progresses. The Varmland journey stands out in this respect, for here allusions to the Scriptures become more obtrusive than in earlier chapters, as we have noted. It is as if the reader is being given a hint that something is about to happen in the story of Egill's personal salvation, and indeed it is not long before he feels the full force of divine retribution.<sup>139</sup>

I have already presented most of the arguments in favor of this interpretation. To sum up, Egill's indirect responsibility for the fall of Þórólfr is underscored by comparisons with Cain, Judas and David. His subsequent slaying of the king's young son, the Christ-like Rögnvaldr, when overcome by rage, must also be seen as a criminal act. Compounding his sins still further, Egill then marries

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Egils saga, but it is part of the author's image of surreptitious transformation from pagan to Christian cultures" (*Pagan Words and Christian Meanings*, Costerus 81 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 149). Although North assumes a mostly tenth-century date for Egill's poetry, he believes the author of the saga interprets the character from a Christian perspective.

139. In an inspired and vigorously argued book (*Egils saga og úlfar tveir*, Rætur íslenzkrar menningar (Reykjavík: Mímir, 1990)), Einar Pálsson contends that the Varmland journey marks a watershed in Egill's life. While his arguments differ from mine, there is some overlap.

the wife of the man he sent to his death. He must be punished but, unlike Nabal, he is not struck down by God; rather his status is similar to that of David. He is a poet of the old rites who, by receiving the *prima signatio*, has obtained the mercy of Christ and thus can hope for divine forgiveness for his sins.

It is not Egill's prime-signing alone that places him in a Christian context but the force of the saga as a whole. As a young man he is avaricious and unruly, seemingly motivated exclusively by self-interest. Gradually, however, his behavior acquires a new dimension, a development in which the visit to York seems to mark something of a turning point (chapters 60 to 62). Arinbjörn squeezes out some sort of pardon for Egill from the king and after that Egill puts himself out to help Arinbjörn's kinsmen. He fights a single combat with Ljótr the Pale because he owes Arinbjörn a debt of gratitude (chapter 65), although naturally he does also profit from the duel. By killing Ljótr he acquires all the lands that the berserker had appropriated from others.

In spite of the pecuniary incentive, Egill shows an interesting new side to himself in the events leading up to the fight with Ljótr. He lodges with Gyða, Arinbjörn's sister, who lives at the farm of Blindheim on the island of Höð. While there, he has a long talk with the householders, Gyða and her son Friðgeir. His attention is caught by Gyða's pretty daughter, who seems dejected and weeps all evening. Next morning Egill goes to her and asks: "What are you crying about? I have never seen you happy for a moment."<sup>140</sup> He is then told that a berserker called Ljótr has challenged the girl's brother Friðgeir to a duel and that if Ljótr wins, he will carry her off. Egill offers to fight Ljótr and succeeds in vanquishing him.

This chapter has many parallels with Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century verse romance about the knight Yvain.<sup>141</sup> A hero

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140. Scudder (2004), 123. "Hvat grætr þú, mæ? Ek sé þik aldri káta." ÍF 2:201.

141. See Bjarni Einarsson's discussion in *Litterære forudsætninger* (1975), 184–86. Einarsson here summarizes the findings of other scholars who have pointed out the similarities between the episodes in *Egils saga* and *Yvain*, such as E. Sattler ("Das Märchen vom 'Retter in der Not' in Chrestien's 'Yvain' und in der Egilssaga," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 3 (1911): 669ff.) and Odd Nordland (*Höfuðlausn i Egils saga: Ein tradisjonskritisk studie* (Oslo: Norske samlaget, 1956)). As well as agreeing with their findings, Einarsson adds some arguments of his own.

comes to a place where he is shown great hospitality. Noticing that his hosts are downcast, he asks why and is told that a villain intends to kill the hosts' son in order to acquire their daughter. The hero offers to fight in the son's place since their mother is the sister of his best friend and benefactor. The hero defeats the villain.<sup>142</sup>

The two stories seem to be related, a sign that Chrétien's verse romances may have begun to reach Iceland or Norway around the time *Egils saga* was composed.<sup>143</sup> The relevance of the relationship here is due to the crucial role that the incident in question plays in the story of Yvain. Chrétien's romance has been read as a tale of repentance and atonement, the incident in question representing the first of Yvain's good deeds after he has been punished for breaking his promise to his wife. He is a new man and from now on his heroic deeds will prove that he has become a knight dedicated to the service of others. The tales of Chrétien, and indeed other twelfth-century romances, are comparable to the *Íslendingasögur* or sagas about early Icelanders in that their authors have taken material from oral tradition with roots in the pagan past and adapted it to the social reality of their own times and religion. The tale of Yvain is a typical example of how folklore and mythological material could be reworked and charged with meaning for a contemporary audience. The moral of the story is that it is not enough for a knight to fight for his own honor and happiness; he must also employ his strength in the service of those who are in distress and unable to defend themselves.<sup>144</sup> For this to happen, the

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142. See Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion*, in his *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Daniel Poirion et al., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 408 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 431–33. Note that in Chrétien's poem it is the host's sons in the plural, not just one son, who are supposed to fight the villain.

143. On the translation of Chrétien's romances, see Jürg Glauser, "Romance," in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, Blackwell Companions to literature and culture 31 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

144. Another parallel with the sagas about early Icelanders is that the verse romances of Chrétien and many other twelfth-century poets are not as limited by the constraints of orthodox biblical interpretation as ecclesiastical texts, rather they use ecclesiastical methods of exegesis for their own ends; see Marie de France's exhortation to *gloser la lettre* (seek a deeper meaning in the text) in the preface to her *Lais*. Marie de France, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, ed. Jean Rychner, Les Classiques français du Moyen Âge 87 (Paris: H. Champion, 1981), 1 (lines 9–16).



knight's character must undergo a transformation, and Chrétien's tale describes how this comes about. Chrétien is thought to have been influenced by the teachings of twelfth-century theologians on the soul's progress towards God, which begins with self-examination, or the humiliation of the self, followed by knowledge of others, which leads in turn to love and compassion, and, finally, to knowing God.<sup>145</sup>

Yvain's heroics place him at the second stage in this progress, and the duel with Ljótr the Pale has a similar function in *Egils saga* in that Egill is now fighting primarily in the service of others. Bjarni Einarsson has demonstrated that the account of the duel draws on material from diverse sources. In addition to the verse romance *Yvain*, it seems to have borrowed from a chapter of *Orkneyinga saga*, while of course tales of berserkers who challenge men to single combat in order to gain possession of their property and/or women were common in this period, occurring widely in the legendary sagas, for example.<sup>146</sup> Yet there is one text that Einarsson does not mention, which may nevertheless have influenced the episode of the duel, and that is the New Testament Gospel of St. John. Egill's question to Friðgeir's sister, *Hví grætr þú, mæ?* is like an echo of the angels' words when the Virgin Mary stands

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145. For this, see Robert G. Cook's informative article, "The Structure of Romance in Chrétien's Erec and Yvain," *Modern Philology* 71, 2 (1973): 142–43: "Willson's theory may apply equally to Chrétien, who as a twelfth-century writer would have found it difficult to keep the romantic and religious worlds rigidly apart. It is natural to expect that Chrétien's descriptions of the progress of a knight will have some resemblance to formulas of Christian progress, perhaps especially those of Saint Bernard, for whom the progress of the soul toward God was an incessant topic. In the *Steps of Humility* Bernard describes the three steps to truth. The first is knowledge of self, or humility, 'that thorough self-examination which makes a man contemptible in his own sight.' The second step is knowledge of others, which leads to love and compassion. The third step is knowing God."

A good idea of Bernard of Clairvaux's influence on Icelandic churchmen at the beginning of the thirteenth century can be gained from reading Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir's article "Að kenna og rita tíða á millum: Um trúarviðhorf Guðmundar Arasonar," *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 232–34.

146. Hermann Pálsson discusses this type of narrative in *Sagnagerð: Hugvekjur um fornar bókmenntir* (Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1982), 56. On the links between *Egils saga* and tales of the men of Hrafnista, see Baldur Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), 118–34.

weeping outside the empty tomb of Jesus (John 20:13): “Woman, why weepest thou?” These words are repeated shortly afterward by Jesus himself. While we cannot be certain that the audience of *Egils saga* would have been familiar with this scriptural passage, there is no parallel in Chrétien’s tale. Perhaps, given the presence of at least three other biblical allusions in this part of *Egils saga*, someone well versed in the Bible who heard or read the saga would have been reminded of the relevant passage in the Scriptures and felt moved to interpret Egill’s career in its light.<sup>147</sup>

After the duel Egill returns to Iceland, only to go abroad again some time later and join Arinbjörn in a raiding expedition (chapter 68). Following this, he agrees to levy tribute for the king in Varmland. Once again he is protecting a nephew of Arinbjörn’s, in this case Þorsteinn, on whose behalf Egill undertakes an extremely hazardous mission, during which he performs his greatest exploits, as indeed he claims later in his talks with Einarr skálaglamm (chapter 81). The account of the Varmland expedition contains two episodes with biblical overtones, as already stated; the visit to Ármóðr skegg and Egill’s healing of Helga Þorfinnsdóttir, which is analogous with Jesus’s healing of the daughter of Jairus. The latter episode has a further parallel in the chapter where Egill saves Gyða’s daughter, in that here again he takes the initiative and asks what is causing her suffering. This supports the idea that his character is undergoing an important change.

In the context, Egill’s show of “mercy” towards Ármóðr would seem to provide a further clue to the changes that are occurring within him. The story of how David spared Nabal on the intercession of Abigail was important in the Middle Ages. It appealed to rulers and was used to persuade them of the necessity of tempering their exercise of power with mercy. Recourse was made especially to the words the Bible ascribes to David after he has allowed Abigail to appease him:

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147. If the significance of the allusions in the saga to blindness and fratricidal motifs uncovered in previous sections is acknowledged, the fact that Gyða’s farm is named Blindheim and that it is placed on the island of Höð may also be a marker, intended to suggest that the reader/audience seek a spiritual meaning to this episode.

And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: And blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand.<sup>148</sup>

In other words, a righteous leader of men should trust in God's justice. Egill is not only the fearless emissary of the king but also a man capable of showing mercy. His story thus seems concerned with the changes that are taking place in his inner man. In medieval times ideas about the soul were invariably linked to the theme of conversion; not only to the conversion that occurred a few years after Egill's death, that is, the conversion of Iceland to Christianity, but also the conversion that every Christian soul undergoes when it is purged of sin and draws near to the Lord.<sup>149</sup>

In the preface to their edition of *Egils saga*,<sup>150</sup> Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir point out that Egill's thoughts are described nowhere in the saga but in the episode where

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148. 1 Samuel 25:32–33: “Lofaðr se drottinn gvð minn er hann sendi þik til fvndar við mik. oc blæzvð ser þv oc þin tala er þv bannaðir mer i dag at fara til manndrapa oc heptir mik at hefna min með sialfs mins hendi.” This is the *Stjórn* text; see Kirby, *Biblical Quotation* (1976), 1:22. Note that the phrase “sendi þik til fvndar við mik” has a parallel in the stanza placed in the mouth of Ármóðr skegg's daughter in chapter 73: “Því sendi mín móðir/mig við þig til fundar. . . .” This strengthens still further the supposition that this chapter is linked to the story of David and Abigail. The *Vulgate* version is as follows: “Benedictus Dominus Deus Israel, qui misit hodie te in occursum meum, et benedictum eloquium tuum. Et benedicta tu, quae prohibuisti me hodie ne irem ad sanguinem, et ulciscerer me manu mea.”

149. On this see Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 34ff. According to Morrison, the medieval Church's view of history and ideas about the progress of the soul were closely related; see the following: “In constructing their great, deliberate fiction, the idea of conversion, writers turned to their chosen antecedents in the Old Testament. For this reason, the Christian idea of conversion was the Christian idea of history by another name. . . . Both individual and universal experience unfolded continuously through one person's lifetime or through the changing circumstances of all centuries.”

150. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, introduction to *Egils saga* (1992), xviii–xix. In an unpublished lecture (“Úlfur, úlfur”) delivered at the conference of the Society for Icelandic Studies on *Egils saga* in November 1992, they discussed the links between this sudden self-examination and the ideas of twelfth- and thirteenth-century theologians on the inner life of Christians, along similar lines to the discussion here.



he goes to York and discovers that King Eiríkr Bloodaxe is in residence (chapter 63, my emphasis):

When they met people to talk to, they heard something that *Egil thought rather ominous*: King Eirik Blood-axe and Gunnhild were there, rulers of the kingdom. . . . After he had found out all this news, *Egil made his plans. He did not feel* he had much chance of getting away even if he were to try to hide and keep under cover all the way back out of Eirik's kingdom. . . . *Considering it* unmanly to be caught fleeing like that, *he steeled himself and decided* the very night that they arrived to get a horse and ride to York.<sup>151</sup>

This chapter shows two things: first, an ability to describe the inner life of the main protagonist, and, second, a choice to do so nowhere in the story but here, preferring to construct the character as an enigma as we have seen previously.<sup>152</sup> There is something about Egill's circumstances in York that made it imperative to draw attention to his inner life. Egill had no doubt often found himself in greater danger but never before in danger of being executed by the authorities. This then is the first time he turns his gaze inwards, in a manner consistent with the ideas of medieval theologians on the role of discipline and chastisement in compelling the type of introspection that is the necessary prelude to repentance and absolution.<sup>153</sup>

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151. Scudder (2004), 123. "Ok er þeir hittu menn að máli, spurðu þeir þau tíðendi, er Agli þóttu háskasamlig, at Eiríkr konungr blóðøx var þar fyrir ok Gunnhildr ok þau höfðu þar ríki til forráða. . . . Ok er Egill var vís orðinn þessa tíðenda, þá gerði hann ráð sitt; þótti honum sér óvænt til undankvámu, þótt hann freistaði þess, at leynask ok fara huldu höfði leið svá langa, sem vera myndi, áðr hann kæmi ór ríki Eiríks konungs. . . . þótti honum þat lítilmannligt, at vera tekinn í flótta þeim; herði hann þá huginn ok réð þat af, at þegar um nóttina, er þeir höfðu þar komit, þá fær hann sér hest ok ríðr þegar til borgarinnar." ÍF 2:177–78 (emphasis added).

152. There has previously been question of Egill's anger. There are, however, no efforts made to tell the reader what Egill is particularly angry about. The emphasis is on his anger, which is an inner state but also one of the cardinal sins, as has already been mentioned.

153. Legal thinking and theological thinking are related in this respect, as emerges in a common phrase in medieval Icelandic texts referring to the moment when men prepare to meet their maker. The phrase is "rannsaka þeir ráð sitt" (they examine their conscience), the verb *rannsaka* also being used in legal language in reference to

The deviation from the normal narrative mode in this chapter may therefore imply that Egill has begun to undergo a process similar to conversion. The fact that he is at the king's mercy, with a punishment hanging over his head, forces him to do some soul-searching. After narrowly escaping execution for his misdeeds, he experiences a transformation in that now he begins to show consideration for others. This is in keeping with the theological ideas already noted about the soul's progress towards God, and in this respect the structure of *Egils saga* may be similar to that of *Yvain*.

One of the best known and most momentous examples of conversion in the Bible is that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. Struck to the ground by God and blinded by light, he hears a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:3-9). Thus begins a process that culminates in the Jewish priest adopting the Christian faith and becoming an apostle under the name of Paul, despite his former persecution of Christians. One of the salient characteristics of conversion is that it is a protracted process, brought about by divine intervention. Saul's conversion was initiated at the moment when God revealed his power to him on the road to Damascus, but the process was not complete until long afterward.

Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir has explored how wolf imagery has been used to lend meaning to the story of the men of Mýrar, especially in Egill's case.<sup>154</sup> The wolf is a common motif in the secular and ecclesiastical literature of the Middle Ages, and can be traced partly to the influence of Æsop's fables. Kristjánsdóttir's findings are reinforced still further by the fact that those who had not undergone conversion, whether literal or figurative, were often portrayed as wolves in medieval imagery, while those who had adopted the Christian faith tended to be likened to lambs. Figure 4 shows how an artist working around 1200 conceives the status of a man who is undergoing religious conversion. He is simultaneously both lamb and wolf.

In the light of this imagery it is worth returning to the symbolic nature of Lambi Þórðarson that was mentioned in the last section. By the end of the saga the wolfish character is slowly disappearing

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the search for thieves and stolen goods. There is a particular section on this subject, the *Rannsóknabáttir* or "Searches Section" in *Grágás* (1992), 467-73.

154. Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, "Primum caput" (1997), 74-96.



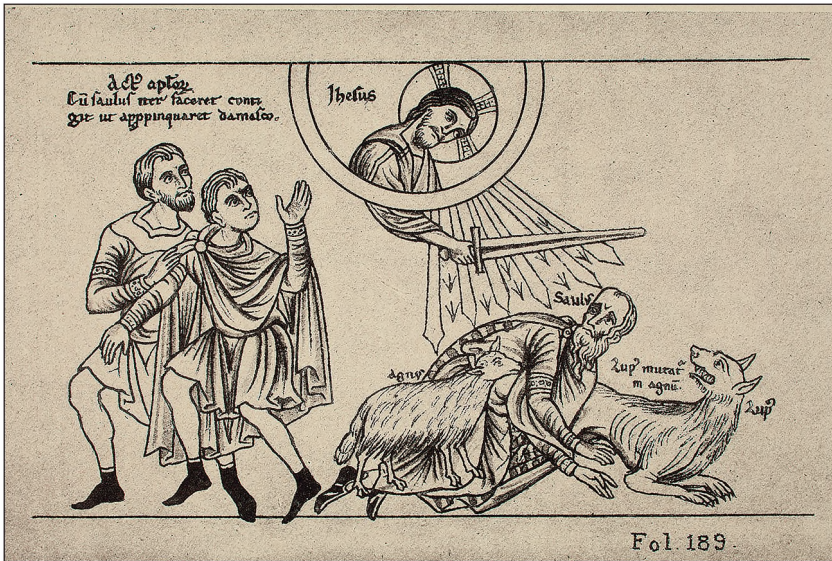


Figure 4: Saul's conversion envisaged by an artist working around 1200. The power of Christ is symbolized by the halo and sword. Saul, who has been flung to the ground, is flanked by the animals symbolizing conversion. He was a wolf but will be transformed into a lamb, as the Latin text makes explicit: *Lupus mutatur in agnum*. During the process of his conversion, he is both. From Herrade de Landsberg, Abbess, *Hortus Deliciarum* (Strasbourg, Schleiser & Schweikhardt, 1901). Marquand Library of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University.

from Kveld-Úlfr's progeny; a process reflected in their names. Instead of the two Þórólfrs, "wolves of Þór," we now have a Þorsteinn. Perhaps the scene where Steinar Sjórnason waylays Þorsteinn (chapter 87) should be understood in this context. Once again Þorsteinn has trusted to his *hamingja* or "good fortune" by riding past Steinar's farm with only one attendant. Steinar prepares to attack but Lambi turns up and physically restrains him until Þorsteinn is safely past. This is the same Lambi who punished the rebellious slaves after they had committed an atrocity (chapter 78). On that occasion he can be interpreted as a symbol of Christ, exhibiting the wrath of the Lamb, and the same applies to this chapter, where he apparently represents divine providence in which the faithful should place their trust.

Bearing in mind the theories of medieval theologians on the long-drawn-out nature of conversion, both individual and historical, it is



instructive to see the wolfish strain disappearing from Kveld-Úlfr's clan in the period leading up to the Christianization of Iceland. Egill is a key figure in this change, the symbol of an intermediary or liminal figure: a man who is in the process of conversion; simultaneously both wolf and lamb.

During the Varmland expedition, Egill is ambushed by the men of Earl Arnviður while on his way back to Norway with the tribute the Earl has paid him. In preparation for the fight he ties a stone slab to his chest and belly. The saga describes the scene in detail (chapter 76):

Egil and his men took off their cloaks and all their loose clothing, and put them on the sleighs. He had taken along a long bast rope in his sleigh, since it was the custom on longer journeys to have a spare rope if the reins needed mending. Then he took a huge slab of rock and placed it against his chest and stomach, then strapped it tight with the rope, winding it around his body all the way up to his shoulders.<sup>155</sup>

The slab protects Egill in the fierce battle that he fights more or less single-handedly against the significantly named Úlfr, "Wolf," who leads a band of eleven men to attack him in the forest of Eiðaskógr. Here Egill is fighting against wolves, that is, against the symbols of sin, according to the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>156</sup> The number of his adversaries further enhances the allegorical element, since the number eleven symbolizes sin according to various medieval authorities going back to St. Augustine.<sup>157</sup> In this context the stone slab could be intended

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155. Scudder (2004), 163. "Síðan kasta þeir Egill af sér skikkjum ok qllum lausaklæðum; leggja þeir þat í sleða. Egill hafði haft í sleða sínum bastlínu mjök mikla, því at þat er siðr manna, er aka langar leiðir, at hafa með sér lausataugir, ef at reiða þarf at gera. Egill tók hellustein mikinn ok lagði fyrir brjóst sér ok kviðinn; síðan rábendi hann þar at tauginni ok vafði henni sívafi ok bjó svá allt upp um herðarnar." ÍF 2:235.

156. On wolves in poetry in Snorri Sturluson's times, see also Guðrún Nordal's article, "Animal Imagery in Íslendinga saga: The Wolf and the Fall of Sturla Sighvatsson," in *Samtíðarsögur: Nýunda alþjóðlega fornsagnapíngið: Forprent*, ed. Sverrir Tómasson (Reykjavík, 1994).

157. On the symbolism of the number eleven, see Hopper's *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning, and Influence on Thought and Expression*,

as an allusion to the symbol of the Church and of its first pope, Saint Peter the Apostle, deriving from Jesus's famous play on Peter's name in the New Testament (Matthew 16:18): "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." It is in conformity with the methods applied in composing the saga to take an event that is perfectly logical on a literal level and charge it with spiritual significance; in this case, that the Church is the greatest defense against sin. It seems plausible that many—if not most—of the saga's medieval audience would have grasped the symbolism, accustomed as they were to listening to priests expounding on Scripture.<sup>158</sup>

That Egill fights his two most dangerous battles with men called Úlfr is symbolically congruent with all the allusions to the salvation story that are to be found in *Egils saga*, particularly in the Varmland section where the warrior undergoing conversion fights with wolves or incarnations of the enemies of the faith. Egill is struggling with himself, with the wolflike nature that he shares with his forefathers, which is now giving way to something new in his soul: the wolf is being transformed into a lamb.<sup>159</sup>

### A Christian Poem Ascribed to a Heathen?

*Egils saga* forms a link between the pagan period and the Christian time of writing. As was natural in the Middle Ages, the saga implicitly interprets the change that has taken place in terms of a religious conversion. In terms of medieval Christian views of history, Egill Skallagrímsson is comparable to King David in that he is simultaneously a hero, a leader of men and a poet from the days

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Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature 132 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 152.

158. I am grateful to Geir Waage for pointing out the potential symbolism of the stone slab to me after listening to my interpretation of the saga.

159. Einar Pálsson's book *Egils saga og úlfar tveir* (1990) is interesting in this context. The author interprets the saga in line with his theories on the links between saga writing and his perception of the mythological beliefs of the early Icelanders, with the Varmland expedition playing a key role, especially the two characters named Ulf. Most of what Einar has to say about the saga lies however outside the scope of the present book.

before the Revelation. It is thus worth scrutinizing carefully the most famous poem preserved in *Egils saga*, the elegy “Sonatorrek,” to see if we can gain new insight into its content. I have already explored how the saga’s narrative of the events leading up to the composition of this remarkable poem might be understood. Egill is so devastated by the drowning of his son that he has lost the will to live, but his daughter Þorgerðr tricks him into drinking milk. Then, since he is not about to die after all, she suggests that he compose a memorial poem for Böðvarr. By this means she saves Egill from a despairing death, and the poem itself plays an important part in the process.

There are various problems with presenting an interpretation of “Sonatorrek” based on this narrative context. One that is nearly insurmountable is the history of the poem’s preservation. It survives nowhere in complete form except in *Ketilsbók*, a seventeenth-century copy by Ketill Jörundarson of a lost manuscript believed to have been one of the three main recensions of the saga. The poem is not preserved in the other two extant manuscripts, although *Möðruvallabók* does record its first stanza. In addition, many editors believe *Ketilsbók* was copied from a rather corrupt exemplar, resulting in a garbled version of the poem, which creates still further problems in its interpretation.

To make matters worse, the *Möðruvallabók* scribe’s decision to omit all but the first stanza of the poem would seem to presuppose that many people were familiar with “Sonatorrek” and hence there was no need to waste precious vellum copying it out. If this was so, one might infer that the poem had an existence independent of the saga, having been composed by the historical Egill rather than a poet living later and possibly for inclusion in the saga. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that several excerpts from the poem are cited as examples in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* and ascribed to Egill. Why should Snorri have attributed the poem to another poet if he had composed it himself while compiling the saga? This argument would be pertinent even if Snorri were not the author of *Egils saga*, as it seems unlikely that he would have been fooled by a contemporary “fake.”

Although we cannot rule out the possibility that the examples of Egill’s poetry quoted in *Snorra Edda* were incorporated by later



scribes, rather than by Snorri himself, we must also allow that the poem may have existed before the saga was written and had perhaps been composed at a considerably earlier date. It is even conceivable that whoever compiled the saga believed it to have been the genuine work of the historical Egill.<sup>160</sup>

Whatever the truth, all this raises doubts about the validity of interpreting the poem in the context of its position in the saga. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson has provided detailed arguments in support of his belief that the poem is a pagan work, composed by Egill himself. He even believes it may have been carved on a rune stick shortly after the event, as the saga claims, thus explaining its preservation.<sup>161</sup>

It is essential for Aðalsteinsson's argument to destroy all doubt that the poem is a product of the pagan period.<sup>162</sup> This forces him to refute Halldór Laxness's hypothesis, mentioned above, that the final stanza, where the poet says he will *bíða Heljar glaðr með góðan vilja*, "gladly [and willingly] await my own [death]," is indebted to Christian ideas. One of Aðalsteinsson's chief arguments against Laxness's suggestion is that exhortations to meet one's death with a good will were already present in the pagan poem "Hávamál." An objection to this is that scholars have identified various influences from Christian doctrine in precisely the

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160. The important recent scholarship on the poem is based on the premise that the poem is correctly attributed; see Aaron Gurevich, *The Origins of European Individualism*, trans. Katherine Judelson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 61–75; Joseph Harris, "'Myth to Live By' in *Sonatorrek*," in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, ed. Jane Tolmie and M. Jane Toswell, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 19 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010); Russell G. Poole, "'Non enim possum plorare nec lamenta fundere': *Sonatorrek* in a Tenth-Century Context," in *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature* (2010); and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki*, *Studia Islandica* 57 (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001).

161. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki* (2001).

162. Or, as he says himself (*ibid.*, 109): "Tímasetning *Sonatorreks* er grundvallaratriði í rannsóknum þess og margt þarf að endurskoða ef sterk rök hníga að því að kvæðið sé 250–300 árum yngra en fræðimenn hafa almennt talið." (The dating of *Sonatorrek* is fundamental to any analysis of the poem and much will have to be reconsidered if strong evidence supports the poem's being 250–300 years younger than the date generally accepted by scholars. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

parts of “Hávamál” that deal with moral issues of this type.<sup>163</sup> Next, Aðalsteinsson seeks support from the dictionaries to refute Laxness’s assertion that the noun *vilji*, “will,” was not used with the abstract meaning “will to good or evil” in the pre-Christian period, and to claim conversely that the adjective *góðr* could have been used of a pagan god. Aðalsteinsson’s argument is ultimately unconvincing, partly because he cannot adduce a single piece of evidence besides “Sonatorrek” of the phrase *góðr vilji* being used in a pagan context, and partly because he ignores the myriad examples of the phrase found in texts contemporary with *Egils saga* where it is demonstrably employed in the theological sense identified by Laxness in his essay.<sup>164</sup> Whether or not the saga writer’s contemporary readers believed the poem was really the work of the old pagan poet, this phrase, which was familiar to them in a religious context, would surely have encouraged them to read a Christian meaning from the poem.

Aðalsteinsson further states that in the absence of any other trace of Christian ideas in the poem, Halldór Laxness’s hypothesis can be discounted in any interpretation of the content. Rather surprisingly, he omits to mention stanza 5 of the poem, where possible Christian influence has also been identified:<sup>165</sup>

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163. Numerous scholars have written on this subject, including Klaus von See, “Disticha Catonis und Hávamál,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 94 (1972); Hermann Pálsson, *Heimur Hávamála* (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1990); and Richard North, *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings* (1991), 122–44.

164. *Maríu saga*, which may be contemporary with *Egils saga* (see Sverrir Tómasson, “Kristnar trúarbókmenntir í óbundnu máli,” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 1, ed. Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 1992), 462–63, contains a translation of the relevant passage from Luke 2:14 (*Maríukver*, 33): “Dýrð í hinum hæstum hlutum sé Guði, og á jörðu verði friður mönnum, þeim sem með góðum vilja eru.” (Glory to God in the highest, and on earth be peace to those men who are of good will. Trans. Victoria Cribb.)

165. See my articles “Egla og Biblían,” in *Milli himins og jarðar: Maður, guð og menning í hnotskurn hugvísinda*, ed. Anna Agnarsdóttir et al. (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), and “The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as an Influence in Saga Composition and Interpretation,” in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole, *Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 27 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2000).

Yet I shall  
 first recount  
 my father's death  
 and mother's loss,  
 carry from my word-shrine  
 the timber that I build  
 my poem from,  
 leafed with language.<sup>166</sup>

In remembering his parents, the poet evokes a powerful and complex image of bringing the praise forth from his mind like a timber borne out of a temple, which has put forth leaves through the agency of his words. This is a splendidly original extended metaphor in which the image and the reality it evokes demonstrate five points of connection: a piece of timber or praise (1) is carried out or recited (2) from the temple or the mind (3). It has put forth leaves, that is, it has been graced with beauty (4) through the action of language or skill of the poet (5).

As a rule, works by pagan poets refer to the world of the old gods in order to endow their subject matter with a poetic lustre. In a similar fashion, Christian *dróttkvætt* verse alludes to the Christian mythos; for example, Christ is referred to as *meyjar mögr*, "the Son of the Virgin," in a poem by Kolbeinn Tumason, "Heyr himna smiður" (Hark, Creator of Heaven); an allusion to the virgin birth. The extended metaphor in the second half of the fifth stanza of "Sonatorrek" also seems to be derived from the Bible, more precisely from Numbers, chapter 17, which reports how murmurings arose among the people of Israel over which ancestral house should hold the office of high priest. The Lord commanded Moses to write the name of the head of each of the twelve ancestral houses on a rod. The rods were then to be borne into the tabernacle or tent and laid before the Ark of the Covenant. Next day, Moses entered the tabernacle and saw that Aaron's rod had budded

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166. The English translation of stanza 5 of "Sonatorrek" is taken from *Egils saga*, edited by Bjarni Einarsson (2003), 148. For the Old Norse version, see ÍF 2: "Þó mun ek mitt / ok móðr hrør / fǫðr fall / fyrst um telja; / þat ber ek út / ór orðhofi / mærdar timbr / máli laufgat."



and even borne fruit in the form of almonds. He brought the rod forth from the tabernacle and showed it to the people.

This story was well known in the Middle Ages because of its perceived typological significance for the future. It was believed to prefigure the coming of Mary, Mother of God, who was of Aaron's tribe and bore fruit, Jesus, through the agency of the Holy Ghost. This interpretation gave rise to many enduring metaphors in Christian poetry. As Jonna Louis-Jensen has demonstrated, the story and associated ideas were known in the milieu in which *Egils saga* originates, appearing, for example, in the poetry of Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson, nephew of Snorri Sturluson and brother of the saga writer Sturla.<sup>167</sup>

When one bears in mind that the tent of witness was the forerunner of the temple, it is evident that the kenning in "Sonatorrek" would be unthinkable if the poet had not known the scriptural passage in question. There are too many points of resemblance: a piece of wood buds through the power of language and is carried out of a temple. If this conclusion is correct, it would lend support to Halldór Laxness's argument that the poem was composed by a man familiar with Christian ideas, undermining the belief that it was the tenth-century creation of the historical Egill of Borg.<sup>168</sup>

Aðalsteinsson also argues that I have read too much into Egill's prime-signing in my earlier writings, and claims that the rite was nothing more than a means of enabling the brothers and their followers to have dealings with King Athelstan's Christian army.<sup>169</sup> To counter this, one can point out that even supposing Egill had undergone prime-signing merely for form's sake, the sacrament would still have taken effect. Aðalsteinsson also rejects the idea that the passage from one of the main recensions of *Egils saga*, cited earlier, stressing that Egill had been prime-signed and never

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167. Jonna Louis-Jensen, "Vöndr er María mynduð," in *Speculum norroenum: Norse Studies In Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. by Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981).

168. In another of Egill's great poems preserved in one manuscript of the saga, "Arinbjarnarkviða," he also uses extended metaphors based on wood, for example in stanzas 15 and 25. Though they do not contain allusions to biblical tales as the one in "Sonatorrek," they do use wood as a metaphor for the stuff of praise, the poet being the craftsman who shapes it.

169. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki* (2001), 62–64.



Figure 5: Moses brings forth the twelve rods from the tabernacle of witness. One has sprouted leaves and he is handing it to Aaron. The artist links the Old Testament narrative with his contemporary world by depicting the tabernacle or tent as a church and Aaron as clothed in episcopal robes. From a fifteenth-century Dutch Bible manuscript (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, 78 D 38 dl. I 101 v).

worshipped (the verb used is *blóta*, “to worship/sacrifice to”) the pagan gods, could have been present in the original version of the saga. The trouble with this argument is that the passage is included in two of the three principal versions of the saga, the Wolfenbüttel book and *Ketilsbók*, a fact that Aðalsteinsson neglects to mention. Surely this must militate in favor of the supposition that the passage was included in the saga from the outset but omitted by the scribe of *Möðruvallabók*, in keeping with his practice of condensing the texts he copied?<sup>170</sup>

Another of Aðalsteinsson’s arguments is that the passage in question is inconsistent with the internal evidence of the saga, since

170. On this, see Bjarni Einarsson’s foreword to his edition of the saga, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, vol. 1, A–Redaktionen (2001), x.



Egill engages in various behaviors, such as carving runes of sorcery and invoking the land spirits and heathen gods against his enemies, which must be regarded as pagan activities. This is not indisputable, however. *Blót* seems to imply a ritual performed by a group and subject to certain rules. When Egill raises a *níðstöng*, “scorn-pole,” and invokes the land spirits to drive King Eiríkr from the country, this is certainly a heathen ritual but hardly *blót*. Then there is Egill’s own choice of words in “Sonatorrek” (stanza 23) when he says that it is not by his own will that he chooses to *blóta bróðr Vílis*, “worship Vílir’s brother.” This phrase may well constitute a dead metaphor, in that the phrase *blóta Óðin*, “to sacrifice to Óðinn,” signifies the act of composing poetry, the image itself (a sacrifice to Óðinn) having lost its literal meaning.

Irrespective of this last point, the fact remains that the saga never shows Egill worshipping or sacrificing to the heathen gods. In other words, there is no evidence in the text to contradict the statement that he never performed this kind of worship. On the contrary, the account of Egill’s final resting place serves to enhance the credibility of the passage, as I have pointed out earlier.<sup>171</sup>

According to Aðalsteinsson, the poem’s attitude to the pagan gods fits in well with what we know of pre-Christian beliefs. In response to this, it should be mentioned that most of what we know about these beliefs has come down to us through the medium of Christian contemporaries of *Egils saga*, who recorded the mythological stories and verses for posterity. We may therefore be sceptical of claims that it is inconceivable a later poet could have composed the poem and ascribed it to Egill, claims that Aðalsteinsson makes in his refutation of Bjarni Einarsson’s hypothesis that Snorri Sturluson might have composed “Sonatorrek.”<sup>172</sup> One of Einarsson’s arguments is that Snorri had himself lost and mourned a son. Aðalsteinsson counters this with the argument that although Snorri was well versed in the myth of the mead of poetry, he would hardly have seen any reason to “present in alliterative form the poet’s powerful and impassioned

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171. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson does not discuss the significance of Egill’s burial place, despite my article “Guðs lög í ævi og verkum Snorra Sturlusonar,” *Ný Saga* 8 (1996): 36, in which I draw attention to this point.

172. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Trúarhugmyndir í Sonatorreki* (2001), 137–38.



struggles with Ægir and Rán.”<sup>173</sup> Here he is referring to stanza 8 of “Sonatorrek” in which Egill says that if he could he would attack the sea with weapons in order to exact his revenge.

The wish to punish the sea in vengeance for a loss is a widespread motif in classical literature, perhaps originating in the ancient Greek tale of the Persian King Xerxes who ordered that the Mediterranean should be whipped in punishment for destroying the fleet with which he had intended to conquer Greece. This story was part of the medieval scholastic repertory and was almost certainly known in Iceland when *Egils saga* was being composed.<sup>174</sup> Thus it is hardly inconceivable that the image of the poet’s impassioned struggle with the personifications of the sea could have appeared in a work composed in Iceland in the twelfth or thirteenth century. In fact, one could turn the argument on its head and ask whether it would not be more implausible to find the motif in poetry dating from the pre-Christian period, by a poet ignorant of the classical tradition.

There is nothing to preclude the idea that a poet of the twelfth or thirteenth century, well versed in the poetic tradition described in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, would have been capable of writing “Sonatorrek” and ascribing it to Egill. As it happens, the contemporary literary culture in Europe included some famous examples of this rhetorical device. Around the middle of the twelfth century, the theologian and monk Peter Abelard wrote a series of poems in Latin, which he referred to as *planctus*, “lament.” The poems are remarkable for their intensely personal nature and strong sense of the individual and his inner life, qualities associated with an influential development in the intellectual life of Western Christendom, of which Abelard was one of the leading exponents. This development involved an increasing emphasis on the believer’s self-examination

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173. Ibid., 138: “sviðsetja og binda ljóðstöfum magnþrungið og tilfinningarík átök skáldsins við Ægi og Rán.”

174. There are four references to Xerxes in *Alexanders saga* (Walter of Châtillon, *Alexanders saga: islandsk oversættelse ved Brandr Jónsson (biskop til Holar 1263–64)*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1925), 35, 52, 80, and 90). It was common practice to allude to stories about him in medieval Latin court poetry; see Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters* (München: Beck, 1911–31), who gives an account of such an allusion in a poem written to celebrate William the Conqueror’s feat of crossing the Channel with his fleet and conquering England. He achieved what Xerxes could not (ibid., 448).

in the light of a new attitude to sin, where the intention to do the right thing and repentance for doing wrong—or in other words good will, good intentions—matter more than the deed itself.<sup>175</sup>

Yet Abelard is not talking about himself in his poems—at least, not overtly—placing instead his laments in the mouths of various Old Testament figures. In the guise of King David, for example, he writes laments for his friend Jonathan and for King Saul, while in the persona of Jacob he writes of his lost sons.<sup>176</sup> As in the case of “Sonatorrek,” verses are ascribed to a famous personage from the pre-Christian era about whom traditions survive. The poems are composed into a particular narrative framework but are at the same time highly personal in nature. It is striking that Abelard should write, through the persona of David, an elegy to his lost friends, one of whom is Jonathan. In the same way, Egill is made to compose verses about Arinbjörn, and although this poem is not an elegy or lament, Arinbjörn played a similar role in his life to that of Jonathan in the life of David, as we have already noted. Likewise, Abelard has Jacob lament for his dead or lost sons, although in other respects this poem has little in common with “Sonatorrek.” While there is no evidence that Abelard’s poems were known in Iceland during the Middle Ages, the possibility cannot be ruled out. Moreover, their very existence is sufficient to demonstrate that it is far from implausible that a twelfth- or thirteenth-century individual would have been capable of composing a poem and ascribing it to a traditional figure, not least a

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175. A great deal has been written on the connection between this changed attitude to sin and the evolution of ideas about the individual. See, for example, Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050–1200* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1972); Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA, 16 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Aaron Gurevich, *The Origins of European Individualism* (1995); and Jean-Claude Schmitt, “La découverte de l’individu: Une fiction historiographique?” in *La Fabrique, la figure et la feinte: Fictions et statut des fictions en psychologie*, ed. Paul Mengal and Françoise Parot (Paris: J. Vrin, 1989).

176. See Peter Abélard, *Opera omnia*, Patrologia latina 178 (Paris, 1855), 1818–24. Available in French translation in Abélard, *Lamentations: Histoire de mes malheurs: Correspondance avec Héloïse*, trans. Paul Zumthor (Arles: Actes Sud, 1992).

figure who occupies a similar position in the history of Iceland to that of the Old Testament types in the Christian story of salvation.

If the character of Egill was created with a nod to various Old Testament figures, this would draw a parallel between the history of Iceland and the course of Christian history. In the Prologue to *Snorra Edda* we learn that although all men were created by God, it so happened that they “forgot the name of God” and were scattered around the world. It was not until the coming of Christ, the incarnation of the deity in human form, that a new covenant was made between God and mankind. The conversion of Iceland did not come about during the lifetime of the historical Egill but it was nevertheless imminent, and his children later adopted the new religion. The status of Egill and other members of the first generations of Icelanders was thus very similar to that of personages in the Old Testament in relation to the New Testament. Just as the figure of the warrior and poet David, king of the Israelites, was used by Christian kings to justify their political power and by Christian poets for inspiration, so the Icelandic ruling class could mold its own identity on the model of a traditional figure like Egill.<sup>177</sup> For despite Egill’s liminal position in the Christian faith through receiving the *prima signatio*, he was a good representative of the sort of men from whom the chieftain class derived their power. It was therefore essential that the saga should show Egill undergoing conversion in the sense that he changed, like David, after having experienced the wrath of the Lord. The ruling elite needed to be able to trace their ancestry to the original settlers of Iceland, and it did not harm their case if they could also claim to be related to powerful dynasties in Norway. They also needed to indicate their moral legitimacy. Thus the parallel between Egill and David had a wider political and cultural-historical significance.

With this in mind, it is worth examining stanza 23 of “Sonatorrek”:

I do not worship  
Vilir’s brother,  
guardian of the gods,

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177. See Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (1996), 388–96.



through my own longing,  
 though in good ways too  
 the friend of wisdom  
 has granted me  
 redress for affliction.<sup>178</sup>

Scholars have construed this stanza as follows: the poet claims that he does not worship Óðinn (*bróður Vílis*), the guardian of the gods (*goðjaðar*), because he wants to (*at ek gjarn séak*). Yet Óðinn (*Míms vinr*) has provided him with redress for affliction, if he is to mention the benefits that have come from him (*ef it betra telk*). The next stanza describes this redress as consisting of *íþrótt vammí firrð*, “the craft that is beyond reproach,” probably a reference to poetry, as well as the ability to see through those enemies who are posing as friends.

In this stanza the poet is in one sense apologizing for the offering to Óðinn that is implicit in the creation of poetry, while simultaneously claiming that the craft itself is beyond reproach. His stance is extremely interesting, testifying as it does to a prevalent attitude to paganism in the Middle Ages, which can be traced to the writings of St. Augustine. In justifying Christian use of the ideas and wisdom of pagan philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, Augustine based his argument on an interpretation of a passage from the Old Testament in which God’s chosen people were allowed to take with them treasures of gold and silver when they left Egypt and set off in search of the Promised Land.<sup>179</sup> Various positive aspects of the heathen legacy could

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178. Scudder (2004), 176. “Blætka því / bróður Vílis / goðjaðar / at ek gjarn séak, / þó hefr Míms vinr / mér of fengnar / bölvá bætr / ef it betra telk.” ÍF 2:255.

179. The scriptural passage in question is Exodus 3:21ff. Augustine’s commentary can be found in *De doctrina christiana*, book 2, chapter 40, paragraph 60, page 74: “Philosophi autem qui vocantur, si qua forte vera et fidei nostrae adcommodata dixerunt, maxime Platonici, non solum formidanda non sunt, sed ab eis etiam tamquam iniustus possessoribus in usum nostrum vindicanda. Sicut enim Aegyptii non solum idola habebant et onera gravia, quae populus Israel detestaretur et fugeret, sed etiam vasa atque ornamenta de auro et argento, et vestem, quae ille populus exiens de Aegypto sibi potius tamquam ad usum meliorem clanculo vindicavit, non auctoritate proprii, sed praecepto Dei, ipsis Aegyptiis nescienter commodantibus ea, quibus non bene utebantur: sic doctrinae omnes gentilium non solum simulata et superstitiosa figmenta gravesque sarcinas supervacanei laboris habent, quae unusquisque nostrum duce Cristo de societate gentilium exiens debet abominari atque devitare, sed etiam liberales disciplinas usui veritatis aptiores et quaedam morum praecepta utilissima continent, deque ipso uno Deo colendo nonnulla vera inveniuntur apud eos, quod

be mentioned (*ef it betra telk*), as Egill says. It would not strain credibility therefore to suggest that whoever ascribed these words to Egill in the poem “Sonatorrek” was giving voice to a particular concept of the Norse poetic tradition of which Egill was a representative. Although the tradition was rooted in heathendom, it also contained much that was good, and so it was not surprising if Christians cultivated it. This is precisely the attitude to poetry that Snorri expresses in his *Edda*.<sup>180</sup>

How does this reading of stanza 23 of “Sonatorrek” enhance our understanding of the poem and the saga as a whole? If we consider the poem first, stanza 23 fits in well with its evident overall meaning. Egill thanks Óðinn for the gift which enables him to compose a poem of consolation for the loss he has suffered of his parents, brother and sons. He does not *blóta*, “sacrifice to,” Óðinn because he wishes to or

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eorum tamquam aurum et argentum, quod non ipsi instituerunt, sed de quibusdam quasi metallis divinae providentiae, quae ubique infusa est, eruerunt, et quo perverse atque iniuriose ad obsequia daemonum abutuntur, quum ab eorum misera societate ses animo separat, debet ab eis auferre Christianus ad usum iustum praedicandi evangelii.” (Moreover, if those who are called philosophers, and especially the Platonists, have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith, we are not only not to shrink from it, but to claim it for our own use from those who have unlawful possession of it. For, as the Egyptians had not only the idols and heavy burdens which the people of Israel hated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garments, which the same people when going out of Egypt appropriated to themselves, designing them for a better use, not doing this on their own authority, but by the command of God, the Egyptians themselves, in their ignorance, providing them with things which they themselves were not making a good use of; in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God’s providence which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of devils. These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel. Their garments, also,—that is, human institutions such as are adapted to that intercourse with men which is indispensable in this life,—we must take and turn to a Christian use; trans. retrieved from <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/ddc2.html>), 8 October 2014.

180. On this see Ursula and Peter Dronke, “The Prologue of the Prose Edda” (1977), and especially also Gerd Wolfgang Weber, “Typological perspectives” (1987).

because he believes in him as a god, but even so he respects Óðinn's gift which allows him to "carry from my word-shrine the timber that I build my poem from." This is not dissimilar to the view of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christians who esteemed the pagan learning of the Greeks and Romans as the worldly wisdom that they, no less than Christians, had received from God.

This reading of the poem is perfectly consistent with what I perceive to be the overall meaning of the saga. Egill has been punished for his sins, as David was, but also like David he can look forward to redemption on the Day of Judgement. Strange as it may seem, due to the way in which we have traditionally read texts such as *Egils saga*, Egill is one of the "noble heathens" whose souls medieval Christians believed could expect salvation in heaven.<sup>181</sup> This explains why Egill awaits *Hel*, or "death," *gláðr með góðan vilja*. He can look forward to obtaining God's mercy.

This interpretation of the poem and its role in the saga contradicts much of what has hitherto been written about it, especially by those who regard it as the genuine product of a pagan composing in the tenth century. However, Russell G. Poole's article (2010) on the poem opens up the perspective of a historical Egill composing under Christian influence in the tenth century.<sup>182</sup> Poole's findings are to be taken seriously, but whether "Sonatorrek" existed before the saga was written or not, the ideas expressed in it are in keeping

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181. See Jacques Le Goff, "L'Au-delà," in *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'Occident médiéval*, ed. Jacques Le Goff and Jean-Claude Schmitt (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 100; also Jérôme Baschet, *La Civilisation féodale* (2004), 384–85.

182. Russell G. Poole, "Non enim possum plorare nec lamenta fundere" (2010). Not entirely pagan, but also originally by Egill, albeit a rather different one from the Egil depicted in the saga, Poole's reading of *Sonatorrek* would help explain the seeming discrepancy between the Christian themes and allusions to be found in the poem and its attribution to the historical Egill. In an earlier essay, A.C. Bouman had identified striking parallels between Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and *Sonatorrek*, arguing that while residing at Athelstan's court, Egill was exposed to Alfred the Great's Old English rendering of Boethius's work. The poem would then have been authentically composed by Egill, albeit a rather different Egill than the one of the saga. See A.C. Bouman, "Egill Skallagrímsson's poem *Sonatorrek*" (1962), 15–40. Boethius's text was common fare for medieval clerics and would also have been known in Iceland in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and could therefore have had an impact on the poem if it was composed later and by someone else than to whom it is attributed.



with those of *Egils saga* as a whole and reveal an awareness of the Bible and Christian doctrine.<sup>183</sup>

### Deliberate Creation of Meaning

My analysis of the web spun in *Egils saga* has teased out an abundance of allusions to texts that existed in the period it was composed. The allusions, which are varied and complex, serve to lend meaning to the story of Egill, his ancestors and descendants. The saga simultaneously evokes a picture of the past and interprets it. While the underlying meaning is complex, it can be grasped with reference to Christian notions of sin, repentance and absolution, conversion, and the role of the chieftain in society. The example of David as a poet and king plays a key role in this creation of meaning.

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183. In a famous essay from 1924 on the religion of Egill Skalla-Grímsson ("Átrúnaður Egils Skallagrímssonar," *Skírnir* 98), Sigurður Nordal claimed that the heathen poem preserved in the saga showed signs of a conversion that is not explicitly referred to in the saga but must nevertheless have taken place. When Egill became a poet and warrior he ceased to place his trust in Þórr, turning instead to the god of poetry and war, Óðinn. Nordal based his argument largely on the final stanzas of the poem but was forced to emend the manuscript in support of his interpretation. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson agrees with Nordal's idea and believes he has found new evidence in support of it. However, beside what has already been said about obvious Christian influences in the poem, the fact that the idea of conversion is by its nature Christian also militates against this interpretation. Nothing of what we know about heathen beliefs suggests that people experienced anything like a conversion if they changed their allegiance from one god to another. Heathenism seems to have been a pantheistic religion, with a strong strand of belief in nature spirits, which makes it highly unlikely that a heathen would have experienced the type of dramatic conversion that is, in contrast, one of the principal themes of Christianity. Christ brings tidings of great joy and those who heed them adopt a new faith. This applies to all the apostles, most momentarily in the case of Saul, i.e. Paul the Apostle. The same applies to St. Augustine and, as he himself demonstrates, to all Christians. If they have strayed from the path of righteousness, their return to a righteous way of life is equivalent to a conversion. See what is said on conversion in Karl F. Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (1992), 123; and Jean-Claude Schmitt, *La Conversion d'Hermann le Juif: Autobiographie, histoire et fiction*, Librairie du XXe siècle (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 207–34; as well as B. Guldner, "Conversion," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Appelton, 1908; retrieved from the homepage of Kevin Knight, *New Advent* (2009), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04347a.htm>, 8 October 2014.

The present analysis of the structure and contents of this remarkable artifact that is *Egils saga* has thus brought to light an unexpected picture of the saga, though at all times it has been based on an effort to understand the artefact from the context in which it came into existence, that is, the intellectual milieu of Christian Icelanders in the first half of the thirteenth century. Later the information that is available to us about people and events in Iceland in this period will be explored in greater depth, to try to give a clearer idea of the possible reasons why a work like this should have been compiled. But now it is time to ask the question: what is *Egils saga*?