

Jesse Byock. "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils saga*."
Scandinavian Studies." 76/3(2004), 299-316.

Social Memory and the Sagas

The Case of *Egils saga*

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BORN IN ICELAND around the year 910, Egill is the son of Norwegians who immigrated to Iceland, and his saga is a biography of a warrior poet who travels throughout the Viking world of the late tenth century. If *Egils saga* focuses on one individual and his family, the text is nevertheless wide-ranging and multifaceted. It offers a portrait of his time and tells of the passage of generations and the actions of strong-willed individuals. This saga, like many of the Icelandic family sagas, offers a broad portrayal of social and historical issues yet scholars for the past half century have tended to study *Egils saga* principally for its literary inventiveness. A good example is the introduction to the influential modern Icelandic edition of *Egils saga* in which the saga is said to be "Heilsteyptr bókmenntaverk frá 13. öld" (viii) [a completely literary invention from the thirteenth century]. But is such a portrayal of the saga as invention correct? In this article, I explore this issue concentrating on matters other than the saga's literary qualities, I turn to the socio-historical roots of the tale and treat *Egils saga* as part of an anonymous tradition of social memory. This tradition reveals deep concerns among medieval Icelanders with their cultural self-identity.

My hypothesis is that the social and historical nature of the family sagas has been rather misunderstood. The sagas are far more than creative invention. With their deep social, historical, and oral roots, the sagas employ rather than invent a remembered past. They capture social

I presented these ideas at the conferences "Íslenska Söguþing," University of Iceland (1997), and "Saga Literature and the Shaping of Icelandic Culture," Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (May 2000). The discussions brought forward many comments for which I am thankful.

memory, and *Egils saga* is a fine illustration of how this is done. Written down in the thirteenth century, a time when Icelandic autonomy was jeopardized by the growing power of the Norwegian crown,¹ *Egils saga* makes a point of establishing categories of loyalty that separate Icelanders from Norwegians. Such distinctions, a crucial part of the tale, are also a decisive part of social memory,² a process of socialization that works to a large degree through story.

But what is social memory and why is it important in saga studies? Social memory is the process by which a society uses its past in giving its present form and meaning. If we are to understand the sagas within the context of the medieval society that produced these texts, then distinguishing the role of social memory is crucial. An active process, social memory allows history to be shaped in the image and interests of a community's needs.³ It is a process that abhors fixed texts. Through the operation of social memory, stories are altered again and again to meet the needs and expectations of a changing contemporary audience.⁴ Not an especially difficult process to understand, social memory, nevertheless, underlies saga-telling.

In part, the centrality of social memory in the Icelandic context is due to cultural developments. The absence in Iceland of overlordship and hierarchical government—social institutions that generate their own self-serving memories—the identity and conceptual integrity of Icelandic society rested on the memory vouchsafed in the sagas. Recounts of the past did not have to be factual to be acceptable since creative story-telling is part and parcel of the process of on-going social memory. Pools of remembrances were always open to invention, interpretation, and exaggeration. But if the narrative past could be creatively embroidered and changed, there were also self-defining limits to inventiveness. The

¹Iceland loses its independence to Norway in 1262-1264.

² In a seminal study, James Fentress and Chris Wickham point out that the process "does more than provide a set of categories through which, in an unselfconscious way, a group experiences its surroundings; it also provides the group with material for conscious reflection. This means that we must situate groups in relation to their own traditions by asking how they interpret their own ghosts, and how they use them as a source of knowledge" (26).

³ Social memory is both a process and a concept; as concerns the sagas, see Fentress and Wickham (134,163-72). See also Wickham; Byock, "Saga Form" and "Choices of Honor." For an Icelandic reaction to such views, see Vilhjálmur Amason, who discusses the sagas in light of modern Icelandic custom and philosophical concepts.

⁴ The process also works through art.

saga audiences were usually aware of an individual's genealogy. They knew the location of farms and the districts in whose political and judicial arena the individuals participated. Personality traits became famous, at times exaggerated, and tend to be rather steady from saga to saga. Material culture was realistically portrayed, a factor that allowed the narrative artistry of "sagamen" (a term that can include women) to dwell on actions set in easily recognizable and often repetitive social contexts.

The social memories of societies differ. Iceland was an island society that developed for centuries without major wars or abrupt change. In the context of peace yet feud, social memory came to play an especially large role. It combined new, often imported cultural ideas and values thereby allowing the new to mix with real or perceived history. A cognitive process, social memory is not static but adaptive. In Iceland it functioned as a bond of shared understanding in uniting the saga teller- author with the audience. In saga and Viking-Age studies, we need a term and a working concept like social memory because the unnamed process was both the catalyst that shaped and the glue that molded past and present into a cultural continuum. The process touched the memory of a broad range of issues including religious norms, ethics, and values as well as changed attitudes between men and women. Social memory allows the dynamism of the sagas to take its rightful place. The process created in the sagas a pastiche that satisfied the needs of the thirteenth-century audience without letting their storytelling or literature (why quibble about such terms) evolve into pure fiction.

Egils saga is a case in point. It exemplifies a medieval community's use of "history" in turning stories of the past into reflections about contemporary thirteenth-century social and economic issues.⁵ In many ways, the saga is a political tract. Its historical roots offered the Icelandic audience a "digestible" view of Norway, the mother country, and Egill's conflicts in Norway are set within an Icelandic perception of the differences between Iceland and mainland Scandinavia. Like many

⁵ Such thinking rests at the core of the socio-historical study of Iceland and its sagas. Helgi Thorláksson was the first to review this new approach in "Að vita sann á sögunum." See also his "Hvað er blóðhefnd?" where he sorts out central issues of feud in light of the specific type of society that Iceland was. Such precision is essential for structuring our understanding of the Functioning of Icelandic social memory. For a discussion of saga texts as socio-historical documentation, see Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (36-8) and *Viking Age Iceland* (21-4); for an example of a working methodology, see pages 99-117.

saga journeys of Icelanders to Norway, Egill's voyages and struggles with kings reflect the Icelanders' troubled consciousness concerning their ethnic identity.

Norway's history in the early Viking period and the emigration from Norway to Iceland are surely more complicated than the saga presents them. And here we can understand social memory as the narrative tool that it is. Rather than documentary history, *Egils saga* is a one-sided view recounting the past by focusing on conflicts and differences between two countries, themselves related by both the past and the present. The saga unabashedly reinforces an Icelandic view of this relationship. Yet the fact that *Egils saga* stresses aspects of story that appealed to Icelanders does not mean the text is entirely invention. And that fact is social memory at work: the past in the service of the present.

Ethnic distinctions separating Icelanders from Norwegians served the medieval Icelanders well. Still we sense in the sagas a hint of Icelandic fear at being separated and thus isolated in the North Atlantic. The concern with ethnicity was not invented by the writer of *Egils saga*. It is not a literary creation, rather, it is an element of the community's cultural makeup that surfaces in this immigrant people's storytelling about its past (see Mazo). Other European peoples created for themselves timeless origins beginning with mythic descent from gods and semi-divine heroes. Icelanders, however, knew their past, even the names of hundreds of the first settlers. In this unusual situation for Europe, they developed a historical, linear reckoning of the past that took into consideration a factual founding. Alongside older Scandinavian mythic stories of the distant creator gods, Icelanders understood recent historical time in a datable historical context. Whether altogether true or not, they developed the understanding that the migration to Iceland, the *Landnáma*, began with their ancestors' quarrels with King Haraldr Fairhair. Today we might coolly say that the migration west over the Atlantic was for land and only secondarily, if at all, to escape tyranny, but that has no bearing on medieval saga writing. The thirteenth-century Icelanders shared a different concept. The event of crossing the north Atlantic was for them the equivalent of the biblical crossing of the Red Sea. For both Jews and the Icelanders, the crossing was the beginning of their history as a people. For medieval Icelanders, tyranny provided an honorable explanation for the migration. The Icelanders' concept of time and hence their organization of historical memory were neither distant nor timeless but encapsulated in the memorable

events recounted in the sagas—social memory at work, both catalyst and glue.

At this point we can draw some conclusions about the family sagas that provide glimpses of the shared memory and the basis for narrative creativity. Collectively, the prose narratives are the account of the foundation of the Icelandic people. They can be described as a series of stories about a historical migration of farmers rather than a mythic origin. Over centuries, these stories helped an immigrant people form a coherent sense of who they were. Of crucial importance to the emigrés from Scandinavia, the sagas explained how traditional freeman values, so important to the Icelandic self-image, came to the island.

And what of the old argument that the sagas are either creative literature or history, that is the "one-or-the-other" argument that keeps popping up in Icelandic studies?⁶ The answer is that the presumptions to this distinction are simply wrong: the sagas are both. Icelandic prose storytelling was a form of ethnographic expression that allowed authorial creativity while retaining its roots in historical tradition. For example, the splits in loyalties within families in sagas such as Egill's are both fact and fantasy. The choice of whether or not to become a king's man was very real at the time of the migration from Norway to Iceland. How it is told in the sagas involves a good deal of fiction. *Egils saga* offers a good example of the mixture between fact and fiction in the hands of the most recent narrator or sagaman. The two Thórólfrs in the saga, one Egill's uncle and the other Egill's brother, each tried to adapt to the increased power of Norwegian royal government. Other family members, such as Egill's grandfather Kveld-Úlfr and his father Skalla-Grímr, held fast to the older customs of Norwegian freemen. The issues are not small ones. To the contrary, they are the basis of conflict suitable for great story telling. That these issues are at the core of the thirteenth-century community's social memory of the earlier migration is an indication of the central role played by social memory in saga narrative.

To illustrate social memory at work, I turn to a series of examples from *Egils saga*. The examples focus on dealings among three generations of

⁶ The issue of saga historicity has played a large role in the hook prose/free prose controversy. See Holtsmark; Andersson; Scovazzi; Hallberg (49-69); Baetke; Mundal, *Saga-debatt* and "Til debatten om islendingasogene"; and Byock, *Feud* (7-10) and "Modern Nationalism." Stephen A. Mitchell, in chapter one of his *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*, provides an overview of the more recent effects of the controversy including an appraisal of the role of continentalists.

Egill's family and three corresponding generations of Norwegian kings. The issues of contention go to the heart of social and political change in Viking Age society.

I. KING HARALDR FAIRHAIR

Prominent Norwegian freemen, such as Egill's grandfather, Kveld-Úlfr, did not want to see change in their relationship to kings. For Kveld-Úlfr, the relationship to a king was a personal bond. His view did not alter once Norway's older system of petty, regional kings had been replaced by Haraldr Fairhair, a conquering over-king. Úlfr bases his relationship to a king more on his own free will to choose his liege than on the king's right to command. Kveld-Úlfr's concept of loyalty corresponds roughly to the weak allegiance owed by Icelandic thingmen to their *goði*, a leader who negotiated rather than ruled (*sec Bagge*). Haraldr Fairhair, a liege lord, expected loyalty. The saga teller had historical reality and narrative conflict with which to work. How were these elements employed?

Due to his obsolete concept of loyalty, Kveld-Úlfr's life was in danger in Norway. According to the saga, King Haraldr sent his royal retainer Ölvir Hnúfa to convince Kveld-Úlfr to become the king's supporter. The saga recounts:

Síðan fór Ölvir á fund Kveld-Úlfs og sagði honum all konungur var reiður og eigi mundi duga minn annar hvor þeirra fedga færi til konungs, og sagði að þeir mundu fá virðing mikla of konungi ef þeir vildu hann þýðast, sagði frá mikið, sem satt var, all konungur var góður mönnum sínum bæði til fjár og metnaðar.

Kveld- Úlfr sagði að það var hans hugboð "að vér fedgar munum ekki bera gæfu til þessa konungs og mun eg ekki fara á fund hans. En ef Þórólfr kemur heim í sumar þá mun hann auðbeðinn þessar farar og svo að gerast konungs maður. Segðu svo konungi all eg mun vera vinur hans og alla menn, þá er að mínum orðum láta, halda til vináttu við hann. Eg mun og halda hints sama um stjórn og umboð af hans hendi sem áður hafði eg af fyrra konungi, of konungur vill að svo sé, og enn síðar sjá hversu semst með oss konungi." (5 kap.)

Ölvir went to Kveld-Úlfr and told him how angry the King was. The only choice Kveld-Úlfr had, he said, was either to go to the King himself, or else to send his son. The King would show them great honor, if only they would submit, he added. Ölvir went on at some length,

saying that he was only telling the honest truth, and that the King was generous to his own men with both money and promotion.

Kveld-Úlfr told Ölvir how he felt about it. "I'll not get much in the way of luck from this King, he said, "and neither will my sons so I'm not going to see him. But if Thórólfr comes home in the summer it won't be hard to persuade him to take this step and make himself the King's man. You can tell the King this, that I'll be loyal to him and urge all those who value my words to show him friendship. And just as I've always done for his predecessors, I'll govern on his behalf, if that's what he wishes. We'll see in time how the King and I get on" (Chap. 5)⁷

The issues treated in the above passage becomes clearer if we use a more socially orientated approach. The main characters of the saga are grappling with changes brought about by a rapid intensification of social and economic stratification. Norway is not treated with fantasy, rather with a surprisingly good sense of the social and historical past. The mother culture is portrayed in the saga as moving from a collection of regional chieftaincies to a paramount chieftaincy with incipient statehood in the offing. In stressing this aspect of the future shock with which Viking-Age free farmers throughout Scandinavia were grappling, *Egils saga* is not unique among the sagas. As a group, the family sagas present a distinct cultural response among Icelanders to Haraldr and his royal line, the Ynglings. With the sagas as evidence, can we doubt that Icelanders resented the hardening of rank in Norway and that issues concerning Norway's kings weighed on their minds from the time of the settlement to the fourteenth century?⁸ Norway offered the greatest possible foreign danger to Iceland. Like many thirteenth-century writings, *Egils saga* treats both the past memory and the current social effects of this danger. Here we have rather clear evidence of social memory at work. We extend the analysis when we observe that it works through patterns of often conflicting social responses.

In *Egils saga*, beginning with Kveld-Úlfr's generation and passing then through the years of his sons Skalla-Grímr and Thórólfr and finally through his grandsons Egill and Thórólfr, scenes of cultural conflict

⁷ English passages are adapted from the Pálsson and Edwards translation. Icelandic passages are from *Egils saga* (1992).

⁸ In the period of thirteenth-century saga writing, the acquisitiveness of the contemporaneous Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson (d. 1263) was a major concern to the Icelanders.

form a considerable part of the story of three generations. In the following episodes, the audience repeatedly faces patterns of social change that disturb family solidarity. These patterns are presented in light of historical choice and conflict. If one side of Egill's family reacts with distaste to the new royal order in Norway, another side finds the change appealing. The saga tells us:

Þórólfur Kveld-Úlfsson og Eyvindur lambi komu um haustið heim úr viking. Fór Þórólfur til föður síns.

aka þeir feðgar þá tal sín í milli. Spyrr Þórólfur eftir hvað verið hefir í erindum þeirra manna er Haraldur sendi þangað. Kveld-Úlfur sagði að konungur hafði til þess orð sent að Kveld-Úlfur skyldi gerast maður hans eða sonar hans annar hvor.

"Hvernig svaraðir þú?" kvað Þórólfur.

"Þórólfur. sagði svo sem mér var í hug, að eg mundi aldrei ganga á hönd Haralds konungi og svo munduð þið gera báðir ef eg skyldi ráða.. Ætla eg að þær lyktir muni á verða að vér munum aldurtíla hljóta af þeim konungi."

"Pá verður allmjög á annan veg," sagði Þórólfur, "en mér segir hugur um, Því að eg ætla mig skulu af honum hljóta hinn mesta frama og til þess er eg fastráðinn að fara á fund konungs og gerast hans maður og það heft eg sannspurt all bird pans er skipuð afreksmönnum einum. Þykir mer það allfýsilegt að koma í þeirra sveit ef þeir vilja við mér taka. Eru þeir menn haldnir miklu betur en allir aðrir í þessu landi." (6 kap.)

In the autumn Thórólfur Kveld-Úlfsson and Eyvindr Lambi came back from a Viking expedition and Thórólfr went home to his father. They began talking, and Thórólfr asked Kveld-Úlfr what business the messengers from the King had had with him. Kveld-Úlfr said Haraldr's message was that either he himself or one of his sons must become the King's man.

"What did you say to that?" asked Thórólfr.

"I spoke my mind. I told him I'd never become King Haraldr's man, and neither would you or Grímr if I had my way but I'm afraid that as things are going, this King will be the death of us all"

"That's not the way I see it," said Thórólfr. "I think I'll gain a great deal of honor from him. I've made up my mind to go and see the King and become his man. I know for a fact that all his retainers are men of unequalled reputation, and as long as they're willing to have me in their ranks I couldn't wish for anything better than to go and join them."

(Chap. 6)

According to the passage, Kveld-Úlfr's vision is the clearer. Subsequent events show that Thórólfr's choosing to side with the king was a poor choice. The sagas, as a central vehicle of Icelandic social remembrance

and ethnographic self-identification, probably overstate Norwegian royal tyranny. Even if true, conflicts between kings and freemen are so common in the sagas that they represent political and, as far as Icelanders are concerned, ethnic definitions.

Patterns of economic exchange are also central pillars around which to gather and organize social memory. Stories of quarrels with Norwegian royalty, such as the contention that arose between Thórólfr and King Haraldr over the lucrative trade with Lappland in furs, skins, and forest products are a case in point illustrating an extensive understanding among thirteenth-century Icelanders of the wealth required to maintain royal power in Norway during the earlier Viking Age. At stake in the saga is whether the rising monarch will wrest from Norway's land-owning farmers economic resources sufficient to construct a state. As a warning to Icelandic farmers, the king's cold reception makes it clear that Thórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson found it impossible to satisfy the king's need for wealth.

Gerði hann svo, gekk til konungs þá er hann sat yfir matborði. Og er harnn kom inn heilsaði hann konungi. Konungur tók kveðju hans og bað Þórólfi gefa að drekka.

Þórólfr sagði að hann hafði þar skatt þann er konugur átti, er kominn var af Finnmärk "og enn fleiri hlumi heft eg til minningar við yður konungur; þá er eg hefi yður að færa. Veit eg að þýi mun mér vera öllu best varið er eg hefi gert til þakka yðvarra."

Konungur segir að ekki mátti hann yenta að Þórólfi nema góðs eina "því að eg er engis, "segir hann, "annars af verður en þó segja menn nokkuð tvennt til hversu varfær þú munt um vera hvernig mér skal líka."

"Eigi er eg þar fyrir sömnu hafður," segir Þórólfr, "ef nokkurir segja það að eg hafi ótrúleika lýst við yður, konungur. Hygg eg að þeir muni vera þínir vinir minni en eg, er slíkt hafa upp burið fyrir þér, en hitt er ljóst að þeir mundu vilja vera óvinir mínir fullkominir. En það er og líkast að þeir komist þar að keyptu ef vér skulum einir við eigast." (16 kap.)

As the King sat at the table Thórólfr went to greet him, and the King returned his greeting. He asked someone to give Thórólfr a drink. Thórólfr said that he had brought the King's tribute from Finnmark.

"And I've brought more than that, sir, to honor you with; he added. "I'm sure I couldn't have done more than I have done to show my gratitude."

The King said he expected nothing but good from Thórólfr, adding that this was no less than he deserved.

"All the same, " he said, "people are giving me conflicting reports about how far you go to please me."

"If any man says that I've broken faith with you, sir, it's a false accusation; said Thórólfr, "and it's my opinion that people like that are far worse friends to you than I am, telling you such things. There's one thing that's certain, though, they must be pretty determined enemies of mine. Anyway, if ever they have any dealings with me they can take it that they'll get their moneysworth." (Chap. 16)

But why are internal Norwegian issues such as the above given so much space in the Icelandic saga? The answer is that Iceland's social memory was inextricably bound with Norway. For Icelanders, such information defined not just the limits of royal authority, but who they were as a people. Again we see the importance of economic issues. The Yngling kings were free to regulate trade and to tax production everywhere in Norway. Royal power extended from the Vík region in Norway's south to the far north of Hálogaland, but not across the sea to independent Iceland until after 1264.

Woven into an operative concept of the past, the tale of Egill and his family was both new and old, and that is the essence of social memory. Realistic sounding stories of farmers at fisticuffs with just about everyone, including powerful foreign rulers, is a particularly Icelandic phenomena. The family sagas are not folk tales, epics, romances, or chronicles, and the beauty of the concept of the sagas as the expression of an evolving social memory is that the concept is not bound to any specific form of narrative expression, but rather reflects what the sagas are: sometimes exaggerated stories of Icelanders' successes abroad, but mostly realistic stories about issues confronting Icelandic farmers and their chieftains at home. The repeated stories of Icelandic freemen abroad in conflict with tyrants served the island society well by reinforcing homey ethical and social norms. Likewise such stories served a narrative role in freeing thirteenth-century storytellers to fashion episodes creatively.

For author and story to be successful, the audience had to be brought into the process. Here again memory of the past served the present. Both the saga teller and the audience had an acrid taste for Haraldr Fairhair and the mistakes of his princely descendants. In keeping with this penchant, stories describing Icelanders besting kings are common to the sagas. Clever Auðun from the West Fjords, Hreiðarr the not-so-stupid fool, and Kjartan the son of Ólafr the Peacock are among many Icelanders whose intelligence triumphs in their dealings with kings (see "Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka," "Hreiðars þáttur," and *Laxdæla saga*). Although it is doubtful that such feats of brilliance routinely happened, the stories

of these triumphs are evidence of the way Icelanders conceived of the past and understood the present.

Looking deeper into the workings of social memory, we see the ways in which patterns or different threads of memory are woven together. In typical saga style, *Egils saga* expresses larger social issues in terms of individual personalities and specifics of wealth. Saga technique is to tell the story rather than to explain it. *Egils saga* details King Haraldr's actions against Egill's grandfather Kveld-Úlfr and Egill's father Skalla-Grímr. The following passage tells what happens after these two farmers took vengeance on the king's men for killing Thórólfr, Kveld-Úlfr's son and Skalla-Grímr's brother. The saga says:

Haraldur konungur hinn hárfagri lagði eigu sína á jarðir þær Qallar er þeir Kveld- Úlfr og Skalla-Grímur höfðu eftir átt í Noregi og alit það fé annað er hann náði. Hann leitaði og mjög eftir mönnum þeim er verið höfðu í ráðum og vitorðum eða a nokkurum tilbeina með þeim Skalla-Grími um verk þau er þeir unnu áður Skalla-Grímur fór úr landi á brott, og svo kom sá fjandskapur er konungi var á þeim feðgum að hann hataðist við frændur þeirra eða aðra nauðleytamenn eða þá menn er hann vissi að þeim höfðu allkærir verið í vináttu. Sættu sumir af honum refsingum og margir flýðu undan og leitudu sér hælís, sumir innan lands en sumir flýðu með öllu af landi á brott.

Yngvar mágur Skalla-Gríms var einn of þessum mönnum er nú var frá sagt. Tók hann það ráð að hann varði fé sínu svo sem hann mátti í lausaeyri og fékk sér hafskip, réð þar menn til og bjó ferð sína til Íslands því að hann hafði þá spurt að Skalla-Grímur hafði tekið þar staðfestu og eigi mundi þar skorta landakosti með Skalla-Grími. (30 kap.)

King Haraldr Fair-Hair took over all the estates that Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr had left behind in Norway, and anything else of theirs he could lay his hands on. He searched out all of the men who had dealings with, or had known about, or had done anything to help Skalla-Grímr and his father in any way at all before they had left Norway, and the King's hostility towards father and son grew so fierce that he directed his hatred towards all their kinsmen and in-laws and anyone whom he knows to have been close friends of theirs. Some of them had sentences imposed on them by the King, many had to run for their own safety, a number of them seeking it in Norway itself, while others left the country. One of these was Skalla-Grímr's father-in-law, Yngvar, who decided to invest all he had in moveable property. He got himself a ship, hired a crew and made ready to sail to Iceland as he'd heard Skalla-Grímr had settled there and had more than enough good land. (Chap. 30)

The above passage is framed in terms of contrasts. In Norway, royal overlords had a monopoly on the use of coercive force. In Iceland, Norwegian immigrants found breathing room in a society that rejected overlordship and taxation. At any one moment the narration is highly personal and specific, but the contrast continues in the generations succeeding the *landnámsmenn*.

II. KING EIRÍKR BLOODAXE AND QUEEN GUNNHILDR

Structurally, the memory patterns in *Egils saga* are highly repetitive, even if the details constantly change. Egill, the first generation of his family born in Iceland, faces the same contrastive reality between Iceland and Norway experienced by his forefathers on his several trips to Norway. A good example is his attempt to have his wife's right to her Norwegian inheritance upheld at the Norwegian Gula thing. There Egill relies on laws of freeman ownership. But just as Egill's witnesses are preparing to come forward, Egill's opponent, a royal retainer, receives the Queen's assistance. The message is clear. With a king or queen as an opponent, even a tough, well-born Icelander like Egill is in danger. The Queen, speaking for royalty, sees the issue in terms of disloyalty and a threat to the nature of kingship. If the two are talking at cross purposes, the saga and almost surely its audience are well aware of the difference:

Og buðu þeir konungi og dómendum að sverja þar eftir. Dómendum vildu taka eiða þeirra ef konungur bannaði eigi. Konungur sagði að hann mundi þar hvorki að gerra, lofa né banna.

Þá tók til málls Gunnhildur drottning: "Það er undarlegt konungur er þú lætur Egil þenna hinn mikla vefja öll mál fynir þér, eða hvort mundir þú eigi í mitt mæla þó að hann kallaði til konungdómsins í hendur þér? Nú þótt þú viljir enga úrskurði þá veita er Önundi sé lið að þá skal eg það eigi þola að Egill troði undir fótum vini vora og taki með rangindum fé þetta af Önundi. Eða hvar ertu Asknaður? Far þú til með sveit þína þar dómendurnir eru og lát eigi dæma rangindi þessí."

Síðan hljóp Asknaður til dómsins og hans sveitungar og skáru í sundur véböndin en brutu niður stengur en hleyptu í brott dómendum. Þá gerðist þys mikill á þinginu en allir menn voru þar vopnlausir. (57 kap.)

The king and the judges were invited to take their oaths, but the King said he would have nothing to do with the matter, for or against.

Next Queen Gunnhildr spoke up. "It's very odd, my lord," she said, "that you let this big fellow Egill tangle up all your cases for you. I suppose you wouldn't even complain if he wanted to take the whole

kingdom off your hands. But whether or not you're going to refuse Önundr the verdict, I'm nor going to put up with it. Egill isn't going to trample all over my friends, grabbing this money that doesn't belong to him. Where are you, Alfr Askmaðr? Take your men over to where the judges are and stop this miscarriage of justice."

So Alfr Askmaðr ran with his men to the place of judgement, cut the holy rope, broke the poles and chased away the judges. The gathering turned into a brawl, but all the freemen were without their weapons. (Chap. 56)

The saga description of Egill's dealings with the King and Queen shows several aspects of the social and political climate. In Egill's case his adversary, King Eiríkr, was likewise caught in a dilemma. The King faces consequences when he allows his wife to assist his retainer and break the traditions of law. Because of his actions the King alienates the freemen. We will never know whether Egill actually contested with King Eiríkr, as the saga reports, but we do know that the historical Eiríkr, was an ambitious and unsuccessful king. He had to flee Norway after losing the support of the free farmers, a historical fact that was well known to the medieval audience. We can hypothesise that social memory is not only actively propelled by issues of conflict, but also invigorated by the subtleties of dilemma. Let us consider a somewhat longer narrative example.

III. KING HÁKON AÐALSTEINN'S FOSTER SON

The contrast between Iceland and Norway continues in the treatment of the king who follows Eiríkr Bloodaxe. With Eiríkr gone, Egill again asserts his rights to inheritance. The details change and Egill has sonic success, but the role of Iceland and refuge is underscored.

Egill gekk á fund Hákonar konungs og bar fyrir hann sín erindi og þar með orðsending Aðalsteins konungs og jartegnir hans. Egill taldi til fjár þess er átt hafði Björn höldur; landa.. og lausacaura. Taldi hann sér helming fjár þess og Ásgerði konu sinni, bauð þar fram vitni og eiða með will sínu, sagði og að Bann hafði það allt fram borið fyrir Eiríki konungi, lét það fylgja að hann hafði þá eigi náð lögum fyrir ríki Eiríks konungs en eggjan Gunnhildan Egil í inni app allan þann málavöxt er fyrr hafði í gerst á Gulapingi. Beiddi harm þd konung unna sér laga. á þi í máli.

Hákon konungur svarar: "Svo hefi eg spurt að Eiríkur bróðir minn muni það kalla og þau Gunnhildur bæði að þú Egill munir hafa kastað steini um megn þér í yðrum skiptum. Þætti mér þú vet mega yfir láta Egil að eg legði ekki til þessa máls þó að við Eiríkur bæratum eigi gæfu til samþykkis."

Egill mælti "Ekki máttu konungur þegja yfir svo stórum málum því að allir menu hér á landi, imlenskir og útlenskir, skulu hlýða yðru boði. Eg hefji spurt að þér setjið lög hér á landi og rétt hverjum manni. Nú veit eg að þér munuð mig láta þeim ná sem aðra menn. Þykist eg hafa til þess burði og frændastyrk hér í landi að hafa við Atla hinn skamma. En um mál okkur Eirílu konungs er yður það að segja að eg var á hans fund og skildumst við svo að hann bað mig í friði fara hvert er eg vildi. Vil eg bjóða yður herra mina fylgd og þjónustu. Veit eg að vera munu hér með yður þeir menn er ekki munu þykja vágiegri á velli að sjá en eg er. Er það mitt hugboð að eigi liðt langt áður fundi ykkra Eiríks konungs muni saman bera ef ykkrr endist aldur til. Þykir mér fiat) undarlegt ef eigi skal þar koma að þér þykí Gunnbildur eiga sona uppreist marga."

Konungur segir: "Ekki muntu Egill gerast mér handgenginn. Miklu hafíð þér frændur meira skarð höggið í ætt vora en þér muni duga að staðfestast hér í landi. Far þú til Íslands út og ver þar að föðurarfi þánum. Mun þér þá verða ekki mein að oss frændum en hér í landi er þess von um alla þína daga að vorir frændur séu ríkastir. En fyrir sakir Aðalsteins konungs fóstura míns þá skaltu hafa hér frið í landi og ná lögum og landsrétt í því að eg veit að Aðalsteinn konungur hefir mikla elsku á þér."

Egill þakkaði konungi orð sín og beiddist þess að konungur skyldi fá honum sannar jarategnir sínar til Þórðar á Aurland eða annarra lendra manna á Sogni og á Hörðalandi. Konungur segir að svo skyldi vera. (65 kap.)

Egill went before the King and told him his business, giving him Aðalsteinn's message and tokens of proof. Egill claimed as his right the property which had once belonged to Bjorn the Yeoman, both the estate and the movable goods, demanded half of everything for himself and his wife Ásgerðr, and supported his claim with sworn witnesses. He added that he had failed to get his rights because of King Eiríkr's power and Queen Gunnhildr's influence, describing the whole case in detail as it had happened at the Gula Assembly. Then he asked the King to grant him his rights in the case.

"I've been told, Egill;" said Hákon, "that my brother Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr are of one mind, and think you've over stepped the mark in your dealings with them. As I see it, Egill, you ought to be pleased if I steer clear of the matter, though as it happens Eiríkr and myself don't see eye to eye"

"You can't keep silent about an important case like this, sir," said Egill "Everyone in this land, native or foreign, has to obey your word. I've heard that you're making new laws in the country to secure everybody's rights, and I know you'll let me have mine along with everyone else. As I see it, I've both the family background and the goodwill here in Norway to hold my own against Atli the Short, but as to my disagreement with King Eiríkr I can tell you this, that I went to see him, and when we parted he told me I could go in peace wherever I liked. My

lord, I want to offer you my service and support, and I know there are men here who are thought less warlike than me. I don't think much time will pass, assuming that you and Eiríkr live long enough, before you two meet again. I'd not be surprised if the time comes when you think Gunnhildr has too many ambitious sons."

"You'll never be a retainer of mine, Egill," said the King. "You and your kin have done too much harm to my family to be able to settle down in this country. If you go back to Iceland and stay on your father's farm, you'll not suffer harm at the hands of our kin. But here in Norway no matter how long you live, you'll have to put up with the fact that my family is stronger. However, for the sake of my foster-father, King Aðalsteinn, you'll be granted peace in this land and get your rights according to the law, for I know how fond of you he is."

Egill thanked the King for what he'd said, and asked for tokens of proof to take to Thórðr of Aurland and the other land-holders of Sogn and Hordaland. The King agreed to that. (Chap. 63)

Even though this case of inherited property is finally settled, Egill, ever greedy, returns again to Norway to claim another payment of compensation. The money has been confiscated by King Hákon's stewards, and this time Egill is unsuccessful in his attempts to retrieve the wealth. Matters do not change even when Egill's friend, the nobleman Arinbjörn, pleads Egill's case to the king. Here in this second confrontation with King Hákon, the issue of Egill's nationality surfaces. Is Egill a Norwegian or a foreigner? Or is it a somewhat more subtle problem: can Icelanders afford to avoid Norway?

"Er ass svo sagt konurgur að Egill muni lög mela um þetta en féið hafa tekið upp ármenn yðrir og kastað á yðvarri eigu. Vil eg yður þers biðja herra að Egill nái þar of lögum."

Konungur n'arar hens múli og tók seint til orða: "Eigi veit eg hví þú gengur með slíku máli fyrir hönd Egils. Kom hann eitt sinn á minn fund og sagði eg honum að eg ekki vildi hér í landi vistir hans af þeim sökum sem yður er áður kunnigt. Nú þarf Egill ekki að hefja upp slíkt tilluall við mig sem við Eirík bróður mín. En þér Arinbjörn er það að segja að þú svo megir vera hér í landi að þú metir eigi meira útlenda menn en mig eða min orð því að eg veit að hugir þínir standa þar til er Haraldur er Erikson fósturson þinn. Og er þér sá kostur bestur að fara til fundar við þá bræður og vera með þeim því að mér er mikill g unur á að muni slíkir menn illir tiltaks ef það þarf að reyna um skipti vor sana Eiríks." (70 kap.)

"I understand that Egill has the law on his side, my lord; said Arinbjörn, "but your stewards have seized the money on your behalf. I'd like to ask you to give Egill his rights, sir."

The King took some time before replying. Then he spoke.

"I don't see why you come to me on Egill's behalf with such a case," he said. "The one time he came himself, I told him I didn't want him in this country. You know the reasons for that already. There's no point in Egill raising the same sort of claim against me as he made against my brother Eiríkr, and I tell you this Arinbjörn, that you yourself will only stay in the country as long as you don't go setting foreigners (*útlenda menn*) above me and my words. I happen to know how devoted you are to your foster-son, Haraldr Eiríksson, and it might be better for you to go and join Haraldr and his brothers, and stay with them. I've a strong suspicion that men like you aren't to be trusted in crisis, should matters come to a head between me and the sons of Eiríkr." (Chap. 68)

CONCLUSION

Returning to the initial premise, we can say that *Egils saga* is more than just a late invention. It is a rich exploration of socio-historical memory. Like many sagas, it is a well-developed animation of the past, relying on a good deal of memory. With *Egils saga* in mind, we may draw conclusions about the family and Sturlung sagas. In particular, we may determine that the Icelandic sagas emphasize issues of concern to the contemporaneous audience. A treasure trove of culturally reinforcing information, the sagas reinvigorated the actions of ancestors by employing a remembered rather than invented past.

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