Intercultural political models in Egils Saga and other literary sources. A philological study

Costel Coroban

“Ovidius” University of Constanța, E-mail: coroban_costel@yahoo.com

Abstract

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

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

Rezumat

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

CC BY-SA License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0)

The main source of this article, Egils saga Skallagrímssonar ("Saga of Egil son of Grimr the Bald", Egla or Egils saga), belongs to the category sagas of the Icelanders – the first settlers of the country, landnámamenn, or of biographical

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

2 For the present research we have used the English translation by W. C. Green, The Story of Egil Skallagrímsson. Elliot Stock, London, 1893; and the one by E. R. Edisson, Egils saga, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1930).
sagas of individuals according to some other scholars\(^3\), and is one of the most ar\(t\)y and monumental such sources. The saga was written roughly 1240\(^4\) or 1230, before the writing of the iconic chronicle *Heimskringla*\(^5\), but the oldest manuscripts of *Egils saga* date from the 14\(^{th}\) century. Since the 19\(^{th}\) century, it is strongly believed that the author of this saga is none other than Snorri Sturluson, and this was his first such work, even though there is no conclusive evidence to this\(^6\). Evidence for Snorri Sturluson’s authorship consists in examples of intertextuality to *Heimskringla*, *Ágrip*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Sverris saga*\(^7\). In regards to some events that are presented in the source, *Egils saga* even parallels *Heimskringla* word by word. In other cases, it is not so facile to pinpoint to the source material, but once done so, intertextuality becomes evident. Unlike *Heimskringla*, *Egils saga* does not aim to be a historical record of the deeds of the Norwegian kings, yet it remains the most “historical” of the Icelanders’ sagas as it reaches the level of details of many *konungasögur*\(^8\).

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

---

6 Neijmann 124.
8 Strayer 402.
It is noteworthy to remember that these Icelanders’ sagas may be read as political declarations of the author. In the case of *Egils saga*, one immediate reason of the author was to reinforce the claim of his family over Borgarfjörður, as he lived and farmed at Borg. This is only one example that supports the value of these sources for analysing the political conceptions of the Icelanders in the 13th century. Another argument is the fact that *Egils saga* has mostly been analysed from the points of view of aesthetics of Old Norse skaldic poetry or in relation to certain anthropological concepts.

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

---

9 Ibid. 403.  
11 Strayer 402.  
12 Ibid.
The term of *forn siðr* (the old way/custom/law) in opposition to *nýr siðr* refers to the influences of the Pagan faith, respectively, of Christianity, on the two corresponding political models. Given the fact that the events in *Egils saga* take place two centuries before it was written (namely, in the 12th century) and that it was written in Iceland, we may presume that the construction and description of the Norwegian kings in that age when Christianity had not totally replaced the Old beliefs are conclusive when attempting to better understand and analyse the *mixed ideology* of power in 12th and 13th century Norway and Iceland (note, 13th century Icelandic society was highly literate, on par with the most developed cultural centres in Europe\(^\text{13}\)).

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

Since the description of Norwegian kings in Icelandic sagas is our concern here, a few general remarks on their image in Icelandic sagas shall follow. Because Iceland was not a monarchy, Kings appears as secondary characters in the sagas of the Icelanders. This does not imply that the Icelanders had no direct contacts with the kings of Norway\(^\text{14}\). We can assume that many prominent Icelanders had relatives in Norway, but what was of greater importance was that Icelandic skalds were the keepers of oral

---

\(^{13}\) Ármann Jakobsson, “The rex inutilis in Iceland” in *Majestas* 7 (1999): 44.

tradition and lore in Norwegian king’s courts (dróttkvædi)\textsuperscript{15}. In Hallfreðar saga,\textsuperscript{16} the monarch who appears is Óláfr Tryggvason. He is described through the eyes of his court poet, Hallfreðr, who experienced dilemmas adapting to the conversion to Christianity, and at one point became overly jealous on his wife’s admiration for the King but regretted his feelings at the demise of the ruler\textsuperscript{17}. After the death of Óláfr, the skald wanted to avenge him by killing Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson, but the recently deceased monarch appeared in his dreams and urged him to write a laudatory poem to the Jarl instead, as it befitted anyone to offer his service to the King, whoever he may be\textsuperscript{18}. Here we see an example of the concept of an intercultural model of political rule. The champion of Christ, King Óláfr Tryggvason, remained faithful to the ideal of justice even after his death, becoming an embodiment of it.

Turns such as these could be considered a minor motif of the conflict with Norwegian kings in the Icelanders’ sagas. Another example is Kormáks saga\textsuperscript{19}, where the skald Kormákr Ögmundarson maintains amicable relations with kings Håkon the Good (v. 920-961) and Haraldr gráfeldr (Grey-cloak, d. 970), even though they had been rivals and enemies\textsuperscript{20}. This minor motif may possibly be explained by a reality of the time, the Icelanders’ need of maintaining good relations with the multiple claimants and rivals to the throne of Norway, a task often made very difficult due to a large number of pretenders to the position of King.

In Egils saga, the image of the monarch is a negative one\textsuperscript{21}, because the kings were in conflict with the family of Egill, the Mýramenns. Notably,

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{16} This saga is part of the Flateyjarbók collection.
\textsuperscript{17} Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 148.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 148.
Egill’s ancestor, Þórólfr Kveld- Úlfsson had fallen victim to King Haraldr hárfagrí’s betrayal and ill treatment. The nephew, Egill, had a feud against King Eiríkr blóðøx. Some have attempted to challenge this negative general perception by pointing out to the fact that Egill Skallagrímsson was not the typical hero who evinces perfect attributes\(^ {22}\). Indeed, Egill was often portrayed as impudent, ruthless. savage, and, at best, undiplomatic; his deeds are often the target of the author’s irony; furthermore, the saga tells us that in the end, the hero made peace with King Eiríkr blóðøx after the king offered Egill the chance to write a laudatory poem about him; also the other prominent kings featured in the saga, King Hákon (brother of Eiríkr blóðøx), appears as a just and beneficent king\(^ {23}\). Ármann Jakobsson introduced an interesting discussion by assigning the independent-minded and easily-offended Egill to the mentality of the farmer, while arguing that his friend, Arinbjørn, belonged to the mentality of the courtier\(^ {24}\).

While King Eiríkr blóðøx’s reputation in view of the author was saved owing to the monarch’s appreciation of fine skaldic poetry, the irreconcilable “tyrant” and traitor of \textit{Egils saga} remains the father of Eiríkr, King Haraldr hárfagrí. This negative description is in contrast to the general historical reputation of King Haraldr hárfagrí, who is hailed as the unifier of the kingdom of Norway, and as the one who contributed significantly to the spread of Christianity in Scandinavia\(^ {25}\). In \textit{Islendingabók}, King Haraldr hárfagrí was commended and at the same time “held responsible” for the colonisation of Iceland, for having driven the people out of Norway through his forceful conversions\(^ {26}\). According to Ármann Jakobsson, \textit{Egils saga} is responsible for King Haraldr hárfagrí’s renown as a tyrannical monarch because:

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 148.
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
“King Haraldr hárfagri is depicted in terms of a 13th-century monarch who holds the whole of his kingdom as his personal property, allocating it to his servants as fiefs. He collects taxes from all of his population, and declares himself the owner of all lakes and the sea. Scholars have tended to take this at face value, perhaps owing to an inclination to believe everything written by the presumed author of Egils saga, Snorri Sturluson […] The power attributed to King Haraldr in Egils saga is, however, far beyond credibility for any Viking ruler of the 9th century. Contemporary evidence offers in fact no firm proof that King Haraldr ever even existed.

This foundation myth probably originated in the 13th century, and certainly flourished during the following centuries […] Most Family Sagas are not very explicit, but nevertheless appear to take their cue from Egils saga and depict King Haraldr as a ruler on a grand scale, who permits no opposition and drives kings, earls and magnates from his realm. Laxdæla saga (4), Eyrbyggja saga (3-5), and Gisla saga (3, 16-19) give same version of history, probably influenced by Egils saga (11-12). In Laxdæla saga, though, the emigration of the Laxdælir is not due to the king’s excessive harshness, but rather to the fact that he wanted to be the sole ruler of his state and control all honours (4). In younger sagas, such as Svarfðæla saga (210), Harðar saga (3), Bárðar saga (106-7) and Grettis saga (4-19), the myth is perpetuated”."
identifying elements in regards to the ideology of power. In the historian’s opinion, these sources reflect the main ideas of the ideal qualities of rulers, even though they may never yield fully conclusive notions on this subject. Conversely, contemporary sagas (samtíðarsögur) are thought to be reliable sources because they were written two to seven decades after the events had taken place and, possibly, the authors may have been reproached by witnesses to the events if they had changed the truth.

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

“Fictional conversations or characters do not automatically imply that the social structure of these sagas is invented. The difference between history and literature is often small, sometimes consisting of no more than the fact that the writers of literature use invented names, unlike the writers of historical accounts.”

Continuing his debate on the historicity of the sagas, Jón Viöar Sigurdsson introduces the concept of the continuity of society. If indeed there existed continuity between the society of 13th century Iceland, when many sagas were written, and 9th and 10th century Norway, then the sagas may be regarded as worthy sources. The same historian considers that evidence is

29 Ibid., p. 96.
30 Ibid., p. 99.
31 Ibid., p. 99.
32 Ibid.
sufficient to assume that a high level of continuity truly existed in Norwegian and Icelandic societies between the 10th and 13th centuries, identifying as break-points to earlier or later social order the changes brought about by Christianization, and respectively, the political developments of the 14th century. In conclusion, we can assume that sagas such as *Egils saga* may be trusted to reveal us the main rules of the “political game” throughout that period:

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

It is useful to reflect on the image of King Haraldr hárfagri bearing in mind the above remarks. Exercising such a strict, tyrannical control over Norway as the King is depicted in the sagas may have been possible in the later rule of King Hákon Hákonarson, or during the reign of King Magnús lagabœtir, when the consolidation of the kingdom had made it possible. Historians opinionate that King Haraldr hárfagri, who came from the region of Opplandene (the upper lands of Østlanded) and Vestfold, was unlikely to have begun his conquests in Østlanded and that, regarding the tight control the sagas say he exercised over the country, that was also actually unfeasible for the King in 9th century Norway given that there was no bureaucratic apparatus to permit the ruler to hold such an influence. More probably, he exercised control through local small independent chieftainships so indeed the King was responsible for beginning the process of the unification of the country.

---

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 100.
35 Dyrvik 24.
To offer an example of how the sagas treat King Haraldr, in the aftermath of his visiting various regions of the country and attending banquets given by local rulers, the King is informed by a faithful man, Hárek, that Throlf Skallagrímsson (the brother of Egill), whose banquet Haraldr had just attended, had actually been planning to raise an army against the King. Throlf even confessed to the King that because of his tyranny the whole country lacked only the courage and the opportunity to get rid of him. When King Haraldr was landing his fleet to join the feast held by Throlf, the local yeomen-soldiers were discouraged when they witnessed the mighty ships of the King. Next, the plotters allegedly attempted to assassinate the King in his sleep or drunkenness, but they failed in this as well because the King kept an extensive guard. It is remarkable that the author describes Throlf, the local leader, as an equal of King Haraldr hárfagri:

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

Both King Haraldr and Thorolf appear as great feudal lords in the above fragments, and it seems as if Thorolf had many vassals or sworn men. Discussing the assigning of relations of vassalage to 9th century Norway by the author of the saga appears as an anachronism unless we trust that Snorri Sturluson was better informed of the realities of feudalism on the continent, which was rather likely, but he was most likely referring to hirdmen or housecarls. Continuing the above account from Egils saga, Hárek advised King Haraldr that he should keep Thorolf near him and “let him be in thy guard, and bear thy standard, and be in the forecastle of thy ship; for this

---

36 Egils saga, chapters 11-12.
37 Egils saga, chapter 12.
38 For a discussion on how the concept of feudalism was not adopted in Scandinavi and how it was understood in High Medieval Norway see Erik Opsahl, „Bastard Feudalism or Sub-Vassality In Medieval Norway?” in Collegium Medievale 4, 2 (1991), 178-214.
duty no man is fitter. Or if thou wilt have him to be a baron, then give him a grant southwards in the Firths, where are all his family: thou mayest then keep an eye on him, that he make not himself too great for thee.\textsuperscript{39} Hárek appears to be wishing the best for King Haraldr, but then he asked that he and his brother be given the chieftainship of Thorolf’s region, the Hálogaland. Ármann Jakobsson calls this model of an aristocrat that is well-behaved to the King in spite of his tyranny the “chivalric vein of a faithful noble who welcomes the king to his home.”\textsuperscript{40} One trait of King Haraldr hárfagri that is repeated in this small story is the King’s ability to not let anger take control of his actions. Haraldr became extremely angry when he witnessed the magnificence of Thorolf’s banquet and when Hárek imparted him his thoughts on Thorolf’s betrayal, but in both situations the king did not lose his temper and behaved perhaps wiser than expected. Yet, the same Hárek remarks that Thorolf had just gone north in order to avoid meeting the retinue of the King because he was “too wise.”\textsuperscript{41} This is another example where Thorolf, the brother of Egill, evinces qualities that are usually specific to Kings (in contrast, his brother appears rash and undiplomatic at times).

To conclude, not all depictions of King Haraldr hárfagri are negative in the sagas though. For example, in \textit{Vatnsdœla saga}\textsuperscript{42}, the protagonist chooses to fight on the side of the king at the battle of Battle of Hafsfjørðr, for which he was richly rewarded and treated with great reverence and with the gratitude of Haraldr, after which a soothsayer advised him that if should he seek his fortune in Iceland he would become prosperous. This is one of the rare examples where the main reasons of the family’s migration to Iceland do not reside in the tyranny of King Haraldr hárfagri. The same saga tells us that the descendants of the protagonist, the people living in the Vatn valley in northern Iceland, maintained amicable relations with the King of Norway.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Egils saga}, chapter 12.
\textsuperscript{40} Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 153.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Egils saga}, chapter 12.
while at the same time they were able to keep their independence. Thus, Haraldr hárfagri appears as a strong king that is magnanimous to those loyal to him but unforgiving towards his enemies\(^43\).

\(^{43}\) Jakobsson, “Our Norwegian Friend” 150.
Works Cited


