

# Genealogy, Labour and Land

## The Settlement of the Mýramenn in *Egils saga*

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### INTRODUCTION

*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* is one of the most well-known texts composed in Iceland during the first half of the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> While it is officially considered anonymous, the saga has often been associated with the figure of Snorri Sturluson, the most famous author of Old Norse literature and one of the major players in Icelandic politics during his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that

<sup>1</sup> The precise date of composition is debated but the usually accepted time range is c.1220-1240. This makes it one of the earlier exemplars of the subgenre of *Íslendingasögur*, often called ‘family sagas’. While this label is far from perfect and there are better alternatives (such as the recently proposed ‘Sagas about early Icelanders’), it still suits *Egils saga* well. On the other hand, the strong biographical element that characterizes the subgroup of sagas about skalds is also clearly present in *Egla*. The standard edition of the saga is *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenszk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík, 1933). My citations refer to this edition by chapter and page numbers. Translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The early scholarship on the attribution was summarized by Vésteinn Ólasson, ‘Er Snorri höfundur Egils sögu?’, *Skírnir* 142 (1968): 48-67. Recently the attribution of *Egla* to Snorri has been championed repeatedly by Torfi Tulinius, most clearly in *Skáldið í skrifinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík, 2004), esp. at pp. 211-15 and 253-59. A revised version of that text is in the forthcoming *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson* (Ithaca, 2014), in which Torfi updates, but essentially reaffirms, his view. Kevin Wanner, in the published version of his doctoral dissertation, has stated that ‘nearly everyone who has examined this question to any extent has leaned towards ascribing *Egils saga* to Snorri’; see K. Wanner, *Snorri Stur-*

this paper is not interested in the debate over authorship, but rather aims to analyse how the saga depicts the settlement of a migrant family in the area around a farm at Borg in south-western Iceland.

The first two-thirds of the thirteenth century were a period of conflict in Iceland, led by half a dozen families that struggled for political supremacy. Named after one of those families, the so-called 'Sturlung age' also produced some of the best-known texts of medieval Nordic literature. *Egils saga* appears particularly meaningful in this context, not only as a superb literary work but also as a source for historical research, as there is little doubt that it was composed during this period. It is one of the few sagas in which the manuscript tradition can be traced back to the thirteenth century, instead of the usual late- or post-medieval tradition that often characterizes the genre.<sup>3</sup>

*Egla* has a dual structure, and many elements in the first part prefigure similar scenes in the second.<sup>4</sup> The first third of the saga, sometimes separately referred to as *Þórólfs saga*, happens in Norway during the alleged expansion of the Norwegian crown under Haraldr Hárfagri. According to the saga, the protagonist, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, is a vassal of the king, while both his father and his brother, Skalla-Grímr, choose to follow an independent course of action. After court intrigues cause Þórólfr's downfall, Úlfr and Grímr move away from their neutral stance towards the king and instead become his enemies. This change in their stance, vis-à-vis the king of Norway, leads to their emigration to the newly discovered and unsettled lands of Iceland - far from the reaches of royal power. Úlfr, unfortunately, dies during the migration, and his coffin is carried by the waves to the area later known as Borgarfjörður in the south-western part of the island. Grímr decides to settle there, and makes an

*luson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto, 2008), p. 183, n.66. His own excellent study of the issue is sadly not present in the published version of his thesis, but he concludes that *Egla* likely represents the attitude of an older Snorri who resented the monarchy, which is portrayed much more positively in *Heimskringla*, and also includes a good discussion of the scholarship on the attribution. See K. Wanner, 'The Distinguished Norseman: Snorri Sturluson, the Edda, and the Conversion of Capital in Medieval Scandinavia' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Chicago, 2003), pp. 437-54. In any case, it is not the goal of this article to take a side in this discussion, even if our conclusions tend to give support to attributing the saga to Snorri or his milieu, and some of our arguments depend at the same time on this attribution being generally valid.

<sup>3</sup> The saga discussed here is preserved in three main manuscripts. Editors have traditionally considered the text in Möðruvallabók (labelled M or A) to be the best version. Möðruvallabók is an *in folio* vellum codex dated c.1330-1370, where it occupies thirty-eight folios. Of the other remaining full redactions, one stems from a late-fourteenth century codex in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. This text is known as W or B. Two very similar copies (in paper) written by Reverend Ketill Jörundsson (1603-1670), constitute the core of a third version, named K (or C). In traditional editorial practice, the main utility of redaction K is to supply a complete text of poem *Sonatorrek*, and both W and K have *Höfuðlausn*, another of the long poems. Both are missing in M, except for the first strophe of *Sonatorrek*. The third main poem, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, is attached after the end of the saga in M, but it is absent in both K and W.

<sup>4</sup> This procedure is also used in other sagas, such as in *Gísla saga*. It might derive from Biblical exegesis. On the structure of *Egla*, see J. Sand Sørensen. 'Komposition og Værdiunivers i Egils saga', *Gripla* 4 (1980): 260-72; and the first chapter in Torfi Tulinius *Skáldið í skriftinni: Snorri Sturluson og Egils saga* (Reykjavík, 2004).

enormous land claim.<sup>5</sup> In the process, he founds a farm at Borg, not far from the coast, and redistributes most of the outlying lands to his men, who in turn establish farms for themselves.

The second part of the saga focuses on Grímr's second son, Egill. This story is considerably longer than the first, and it occupies the remaining two-thirds of the text. Egill's elder brother, named Þórólfr after his uncle, is also a major character in the saga. Both of the Þórólfrs contrast starkly with his respective brother in both appearance and personality. The Þórólfrs are attractive and sociable, while Grímr and Egill resemble their grandfather Úlfr: they are surly and ugly, and maybe even tainted with lycanthropy.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike his reclusive and taciturn father, Egill is eager to travel abroad and to participate (often belligerently) in military, poetic, judiciary and commercial enterprises. Egill's adventurous life takes him to many places within and without the Scandinavian milieu, including Iceland and Norway, while the Baltic, and England are also significant locations of action in the saga. Most of these places (with the partial exception of England) do not play a significant role in the power struggles in a text that is arguably centred on political matters in Iceland and Norway (or maybe on personal matters that reflect diverse political stances).<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that in *Egils saga*, the settlement is used to create an ideological statement about the legitimacy of Úlfr's descendants. Such statement seems to be articulated around three main marks of identity shared between these men: burial in barrows, skill as farm managers, and the transference of both personal traits and material goods from one generation to the next. This unified image of lineage is intimately linked with the ties between these men and their land. This second aspect reuses some of the ideas of allodial patrimony (*óðal*) that were present in Norway and applies them (with considerable modifications) to a new land settled by migrants. Such associations can be related to the idea of a 'continuity of being' between people and things, common to many preindustrial societies.<sup>8</sup> A

<sup>5</sup> The land-claim is much larger in *Egla* than in the oldest preserved version of *Landnámabók*. It has been long noticed that the saga likely exaggerates the claim to legitimate further rights by the inheritors. For a fairly recent discussion of this topic, see Axel Kristinsson 'Sagas and Politics in 13th century Borgarfjörður', in S. Würth et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the Conference 'Sagas and Societies' Borgarnes, Iceland, September 5.-9. 2002* (Tübingen, 2002), pp. 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> Ármann Jakobsson notices the permanent ambiguity in the description of supernatural elements in *Egils saga*, which enabled both a believer and a sceptic public to understand the text in different ways. See Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in Egils saga', *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011): 29-44.

<sup>7</sup> In his recent *The Partisan Muse*, Theodore Andersson discusses the politics in *Egils saga*. According to him, there is a thematic tension in the clash between provincial chieftains (Icelanders included) and the royalty. The depiction is biased in favour of the Mýramenn and is less glowing on the royals in the early stages, but becomes more equal during the conflict between Egill and King Eiríkr. Andersson thinks that Egill is the man responsible for the conflict. Concerning land ownership, he adds that 'The Mýramenn retain a kind of moral title to the land and the land to retract what they bestowed (...) He [Egill] will forego no right because his rights are grounded in history. The Mýramenn are a historical entity, coeval with the centralized monarchy in Norway and therefore co-entitled. In historical terms at least, the conflict between the Mýramenn and the Norwegian crown is a confrontation of equals.' See T. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas* (Ithaca, 2012), pp. 138-9.

<sup>8</sup> The discussion on the issue has been prominent in anthropological scholarship since the publication of the

similar process occurred in many preindustrial societies and is (theoretically) opposed to the fully commodified, alienated form of production characteristic of market-based societies. In order to assess the validity of this hypothesis, we first need to survey the evidence for each of the aforementioned marks of shared identity in the text of the saga.

## MARKING THE LANDSCAPE: BARROWS AND LANDOWNERSHIP

Most of the action in the saga happens in a pagan context, with the exception of the last two chapters and the few scenes that occur in England. For example, *Egils saga* presents several scenes in which deceased men are buried inside a barrow. A Christian author of the thirteenth century likely associated barrows directly with the pre-conversion period of Icelandic settlement. This can be illustrated with the term *haugsöld*, which is used in *Heimskringla* to name one of the past ages of the world.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, the author of *Egla* similarly chose to place the dead pagan characters inside tumuli. Nevertheless, we need to explain why these burials are given such a prominent place in the narrative: Egill is buried (near Mosfell) with fine clothes and his weapons by his son-in-law.<sup>10</sup> In Norway, Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson was also likely buried with grave goods. The mounds he was interred in was said to be made following the custom according to men of his rank. Additionally, his grave was topped with a commemorative stone after he fell battling the royal troops.<sup>11</sup> His nephew and namesake, who also died in battle (in England), received burial goods and was said (like his uncle) to be buried following customary practices.<sup>12</sup> The goods buried with him are also weapons and clothes, plus some golden arm rings that Egill clasps to the corpse of his brother. Skalla-Grímr, meanwhile, was buried in a headland near Borg with his horse, tools and weapons.<sup>13</sup> Not far from there, Kveld-Úlfr (who died at sea during the migration to Iceland) was interred in the place where his body was found on the coast.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to note that all the instances of burial with grave goods that are found in the saga refer to four of the male members of Egill's family. The saga does not mention whether Kveld-Úlfr is buried with any wealth, but he, Egill and Grímr (who constitute the 'ugly' side of the family) mark

*Essai sur le don* by Marcel Mauss. On the notion of alienability in the Maussian tradition, see M. Godelier, *L'Enigme du Don* (1994; repr. Paris, 2002) and A. Weiner, *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving* (Berkeley, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* I, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit 27 (Reykjavík, 1945), *prologus*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> At the very end of the saga, the pseudo-*inventio* and *translatio* of his bones adds an extra layer of meaning to this character, colouring him with Christian overtones (*Egils saga*, ch.86, pp. 298–9).

<sup>11</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 22, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 55, p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 58, p. 175.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 27, p. 72.

the local Icelandic landscape with their graves and all of them died of natural causes.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the stories of their deaths are preceded in all cases with memorable scenes that place wealth as a central narrative element: both Egill and Grímr bury treasures in the landscape, while Úlfr prophesises Grímr's land-claim. Egill and Grímr's deaths are contrasted with the deaths of both Þórólfrs, who die violently (one in Norway and the other in England), in scenes where wealth is not clearly part of the description.

There is another important narrative contrast: Úlfr, Egill and Grímr all die free from bonds of loyalty to lords. Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson dies as a consequence of trying to break his bond with King Haraldr of Norway, while Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson dies serving King Æthelstan of England. We may add that the legacy of each side of the family was also different in terms of transfer of landed property. On the one hand, Grímr transfers his estate to Egill, who in turn transfers it to his son Þorsteinn. Úlfr dies landless, but his death announces the acquisition of new land for his surviving son. On the other hand, Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson dies without a male heir and without having transferred his land to someone. His namesake dies without possessing any land and his farm is expropriated by the king and only returned to his widow, Sigríðr (who is remarried to a royal servant, Eysteinn), by a royal grant.<sup>16</sup> From this evidence, it is clear that the saga has a clear ideological message. That is, the whole '*Þórólfs saga*' can be read as a warning about the dangers of land obtained by royal concession; the obvious moral of the story is that such lands are ultimately held by the king, who might take back at will what he once conceded. The story of Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson is not as exemplary, but his legacy in the saga is secondary: his wealth, wife and daughter are actually taken by Egill.

In this context, barrows mark the narrative by reinforcing the presence of Kveld-Úlfr's lineage in the textual representation of the land. Moreover, they also marked the real, material land in the thirteenth century by tying the story to real men, and serving as proof of authenticity. This process can be seen as directly analogous to the legal practices analysed by Gurevich, in which claims to allodial patrimony (*óðal*) were dependant on the ability of the claimant to recite his family links to people buried in the barrows.<sup>17</sup> However, it should be noted that the idea of *óðal*, though present in medieval Scandinavian laws, is absent in Iceland.<sup>18</sup> Iceland was a new country and the Icelanders were con-

<sup>15</sup> Grímr's death scene has a strong supernatural flavour, but it does not relate the specific way that he dies. His death seems to be caused simply by old age.

<sup>16</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 22, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> A. Gurevich, 'Semantics of the Medieval Community: Farmstead, Land, World', in *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 201-2.

<sup>18</sup> Two Icelandic notions, *hǫfuðból* and *aðalból* ('head farm' and 'main farm') appear in the laws and refer to familial patrimonies similar to *óðal*. *Aðalból* appears in the *Landabrigðapáttir* of Grágás, while *Hǫfuðból* appears in the later *Jónsbók* (introduced in 1281). Magnús Már Lárusson has studied these concepts, but most of his information derives from late medieval and modern sources, even if they may reflect similar conditions during the early thirteenth century. Both terms are absent in *Egla*. Among the farms that Magnús lists as main farms (from his analysis of the documents in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*), it is interesting to note that he mentions Hvammr and Möðruvellir, which are respectively the place of origin of the *Sturlungar* family and the place

scious of their immigrant origin, so it would not have made much sense to legitimise land claims on grounds of their immemorial antiquity. It is possible that the narrative of *Egla* was conceived as a way to suggest ties of inalienable rights to land in a country without legally sanctioned forms of allodial property. The use of landscapes marked by barrows to reinforce claims of *óðal* in the continent has already been noticed, and runestones might have been used in a similar way.<sup>19</sup> Such were typical uses of secular memory in the Early Middle Ages, given that legal legitimisation depended directly on custom and precedent; the same logic might have also applied to thirteenth-century Iceland.<sup>20</sup> The codification of *óðal* rights in Scandinavia owed much to the influence of continental and canon law, even if the notion of allodial property was an ancient tradition in the Nordic regions.<sup>21</sup>

An ideology of inalienable family rights to land can be seen as representing either peasant or aristocratic values, and is generally opposed to ideologies founded on the idea of land concessions ultimately based on the king as ‘ultimate owner’ (or first non-divine owner at least). This is clearly expressed in the early chapters of *Egils saga*, where King Haraldr’s expansion is explained in terms of his appropriation of all allodial property and land, inhabited or not.<sup>22</sup> The latest editor of the text, Sigurður Nordal, noticed parallel expressions concerning Haraldr’s rise to power, and a similar reference about Torf-Einarr, a jarl of Orkney described in *Orkneyinga saga*.<sup>23</sup> This reference suggests that political superiority was somehow understood in patrimonial, ‘economic’ terms at least by some thirteenth century men. However, the use of similar terminology in the sources does not hide what are clearly different modes of appropriation and control in analytical terms: that is, the king obtained estates by politico-military means, while the traditional pattern was one of intra-family inheritance. *Egils saga* is clearly arguing for the second type of land transfer, as evidenced by Haraldr being presented as a rather negative figure, whose actions are much less justified than those of Hákon, Æthelstan or even Eiríkr. In my opinion, only the villainous queen Gunnhildr is presented as more reprehensible among the royal figures.

where the main manuscript of *Egla* was preserved (and maybe produced). Magnús Már Lárusson, ‘Á Höfuðbólum Landsins’, *Saga* 9 (1970): 40–90, at p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> T. Zachrisson, ‘The Odal and its Manifestation in the Landscape’, *Current Swedish Archaeology* 2 (1994): 219–38; see also M. Hansson, *Aristocratic Landscape: The Spatial Ideology of Medieval Aristocracy* (Stockholm, 2006), pp. 88–9.

<sup>20</sup> P. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> M. Gelting, ‘Odelsrett – Lovbydelse – Børdsrett – Retrait Lignager: Kindred and Land in the Nordic Countries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries’, in L. Hansen (ed.), *Family, Marriage and Property Devolution in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century* (Tromsø, 2000). This text also provides a useful critical overview of traditional scholarship on *óðal*.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Óðull ǫll ok allt land, byggt ok óbyggt.’ *Egils saga* ch. 4, p. 11. This has to be seen as a literary use of an (imagined) past. How real this appropriation was during the reign of Haraldr is almost impossible to know, given the scarcity of the reliable sources for such an early period. See C. Krag, ‘Norge som odel i Harald Hårfagres ætt’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Norway] 68 (1989): 288–301; K. Dørum, ‘Det norske riket som odel: Harald Hårfagres ætt’, *Historisk Tidsskrift* [Norway] 80 (2001): 323–42.

<sup>23</sup> *Egils saga*, p. 11, n. 2.

## FARM MANAGEMENT: ARISTOCRATS OR ENTREPRENEURS?

A different aspect of the relationship between men and the land in *Egla* is found in the recurrent references to farm-management. At first sight, this seems to be a useful criterion to distinguish between aristocrats and farmers.<sup>24</sup> The references, for example, focus on the lineage of Kveld-Úlfr, but we also have hints of other wealthy men who had acquired their positions through careful farm management. One such farmer is Hǫgni, who appears in the saga as the closest figure to a ‘self-made man’ who rose socially through personal entrepreneurship. The saga introduces Hǫgni at a feast held by *gǫf-gastir* (noble) men. He is said to have been from a small family, intelligent and handsome, and to have made himself rich through his own efforts.<sup>25</sup> Hǫgni is a commoner attending a high-ranking feast, and his position there does not seem to be one of complete subordination. His daughter, Hildiríðr, for example, is allowed to sit beside the aristocrat Björgólfr, during the celebration. Björgólfr becomes interested in the young woman, and visits Hǫgni’s farm. The farmer does not have the means to resist the aggressive, quasi-commercial way in which Björgólfr asks for his daughter in marriage. The complex scene of Hildiríðr’s, somewhat forced, betrothal has far-reaching consequences in the saga plot, but what concerns us here is how this indicates both the possibilities and limits of social mobility through labour alone. The saga is asserting, in this example, that farmers can mingle with the elite and become property owners. However, the farmers will never truly belong to that upper segment of society if they come from a small family, and lack the (political) means to have a say in the complicated political marriage alliances that characterized elite society.

The situation is rather different in the case of farmers from an established lineage. It is interesting to compare how the saga introduces Kveld-Úlfr with the way it presents Hǫgni: ‘Úlfr was a wealthy man, both in land and in movable wealth: he became a *lendr maðr*, such as his male ancestors had been, and became a powerful man’.<sup>26</sup> Immediately after this presentation, the text offers details about how Úlfr surveyed the work of his labourers and gave them useful advice. He is said to have been *búsýslumaðr mikill*, this can be roughly translated as ‘a man greatly concerned with farm management’.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> It has to be noted that we consider this difference from a socioeconomic point of view, not a juridical one. Iceland at the time of writing of *Egla* lacked any legal distinction between free men. Conversely, the legal existence of slaves likely did not find any counterpart in the social structure, as slavery was likely extinct by the time the saga was composed. See R. Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven 1988), pp. 156–163 and S. Brink, *Vikingarnas Slavar; Den nordiska trældomen under yngre järnålder och äldsta medeltid* (Lund 2012), pp. 241–252.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Hann var maðr stórauðigr, allra manna fríðastr sýnum, vitr maðr ok ættsmár ok hafði hafizk af sjálfum sér.’ *Ibid.*, ch. 7, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Úlfr var maðr auðigr, bæði at lǫndum ok lausum aurum: hann tók lends manns rétt, svá sem haft hǫfðu langfeðgar hans, ok gerðisk maðr ríkr.’ *Ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem.*

Both of the aforementioned farmers rise through the ranks of Icelandic society, but their journeys are very different. Hǫgni exploits his own intelligence and labour to make his gains in the Icelandic hierarchy. By contrast, Úlfr has the advantage of a strong family tradition of service as *lendr maðr*, that is, to hold lands for a certain authority (like a king). However, Ulfr was not an aristocrat, in the true sense of the word, because there was no place for *otium* in his life. In fact, he is presented in constant *negotium*: a Viking in his youth, Úlfr is also interested in cattle-raising and craftsmanship, that is, in the direct structure of production. In this aspect, he resembles a hard-working farmer rather than a leisure-oriented aristocratic figure, a stereotype portrayed through the descriptions of the Karl and Jarl of the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*. Nevertheless, Ulfr's family tradition distinguishes him from a commoner like Hǫgni. Active and skilful estate management is also a trait shared by the descendants of Úlfr. Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, Skalla-Grímr and Egill are all described as good farm managers.<sup>28</sup> Þorsteinn Egilsson is shown checking on the labours of his dependants (much like his ancestor Úlfr had done).<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it ought to be added that self-exploitation, the kind which typifies entrepreneurs and 'big men,' is explicitly mentioned with regard to Skalla-Grímr, who is not only a good manager, but a very skilled and hard-working labourer himself.

The details of Grímr's many skills help to explain the ideological stance of the saga, as Grímr plays the role of founding father of the Mýramenn in Iceland. It would be misleading to think of *Egils saga* as a biographical text in the same sense that other sagas of poets are, such as *Hallfreðar saga* or *Kormáks saga*. The pragmatic division of the saga between a 'Þórólfs saga' and an *Egils saga* proper should not hide the fact that the saga possesses a narrative unity created through family links. With this in mind, Grímr's role has often been overlooked in studies of *Egla*, his position overshadowed by the roles of his elder brother and his younger son as protagonists, but it seems clear that his global role in the saga is of capital importance.

Grímr is described as a type of ancestral figure, but one who is far from being an illustrious aristocratic forefather. He is unheroic, isolationist, and driven by materialist concerns. He also differs from the wise, kind-hearted hero inspired by Christian ideals.<sup>30</sup> Grímr is a figure as distant from Sigurðr as he is from Njáll. Nevertheless, he fares better than most other men, and noticeably better than his elder and more glamorous brother. His main virtue is self-reliance. This is especially prevalent when compared with the already independently-minded Egill, who is often saved by the intervention of his

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 10, p. 28; ch. 29, pp. 75–6 and ch. 56, p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 83, p. 289

<sup>30</sup> The classical example of this type of hero in the sagas is Njáll Þorgeirsson, the main character of *Njáls saga*. Lars Lönnroth has shown how the effect of clerical learning and ideology affects the saga. See L. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A critical Introduction* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 104–64. Recently, Yoav Tirosh has pointed out that Njáll possibly planned the death of his own sons. His reading is intriguing, but it relies on evidence that can be interpreted differently. In particular, Njáll's seemingly strange behaviour in giving an unrequested, anonymous gift (that Tirosh interprets as an act of deliberate provocation) might be also a sign of a *caritas*, as opposed to the typical calculated, ambiguous nature of gift-giving. See Y. Tirosh, 'Víga-Njáll. A New Approach toward Njáls saga', *Scandinavian Studies* 86.2 (2014): 208–26, at pp. 210–16.



friend Arinbjörn, who was forced to intercede on his behalf on several occasions. On the contrary, Grímr does not depend on anybody, be it lord, relative or friend. In addition, he seems not to want anybody to depend on him, championing a ‘mind your own business’ attitude consistently along the saga text. Grímr is described as being close to the labourers of his household. We are told that he enjoys fishing with his men and that he liked (or loved: *kærstr*) one of his foremen.<sup>31</sup> His land claim in Iceland is large, but he distributes much of it among his own men and relatives, such as his father-in-law Yngvarr and his son-in-law Þorfinnr.<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that his distribution of land generally shows no regard for social rank, being instead based on his own personal ties. He grants lands, for example, to a prominent man like Yngvarr, to a member of his son’s retinue like Þorfinnr, and to men of his own household like the brothers Grani, Grímr and Grímólfr.<sup>33</sup> Even a freedman named Gríss is put in charge (*varðveitti*) of a sheep-farm at Borg.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, Egill used his father’s land distribution to legitimise his own lordly ambitions in the later part of the saga. This is clearly seen in his speech at the *Þing* during the dispute involving his son and Steinarr, the grandson of Áni, one of the men who obtained a land grant from Grímr. Egill declares: ‘I will begin this speech when Grímr, my father, came to this country and took all the lands of Mýrar and around the district and made for himself a home in Borg and intended to have that land as his own, but gave to his friends the outlying available land that where around, where they later settled’.<sup>35</sup> Egill then mixes the argument of actual misdeeds committed by Steinarr with the argument of customary ownership and insists on the point of inheritance, arguing that Þorsteinn’s farm was the same that Egill himself inherited from his father, and that Steinarr and his father, Qnundr, have the farm that Grímr gave to their ancestor Áni. This seems, for Egill, to aggravate the actions of Steinarr. In this scene, the saga does not seem to present a conflict between individuals, but between lineages. Moreover, the ultimate defining factor is the original ownership of both farms, which hails back to Grímr’s land claim.

The ideas behind Egill’s reasoning are those of balanced reciprocity and of lordly redistribution. Thus, Egill attempts to claim superiority on the grounds of a pre-established notion of higher standing based on the land grant(s) made by his father. As in the case of competitive gift giving, the donor is placed above the receiver, at least until the moment when receiver can pay back with an equivalent

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 5. This behaviour contrasts clearly with the typical use of space as a means of distinction which characterized aristocracies: ‘The lord wanted to distance himself from the rest of the household by spending more and more time in private, both inside the residence and in the landscape, by moving the residence away from the village to a more secluded and isolated place’. See M. Hansson, *Aristocratic Landscapes*, p. 127.

<sup>32</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 40, p. 102.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 28, pp. 72-5; ch. 30, p. 78; ch. 56, p. 151.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 24, p. 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 29, p. 76.

<sup>36</sup> ‘*Hef ek þar upp þat mál, er Grímr, faðir minn, kom hingat til lands ok nam hér ǫll lǫnd um Mýrar ok víða herað ok tók sér bústað at Borg ok ætlaði þar landeign til, en gaf vinum sínum landakosti þar út í frá svá sem þeir byggðu síðan.*’ *Ibid.*, ch. 82, p. 287.

or higher counter-gift. It is in this way that the specific ideological role of land comes into play in the saga.

Ideologically, land was seen as unique, as working by rules different from those that apply to other goods. This is rather unsurprising considering its role as the main means of production: all wealth was ultimately dependant on land control. Besides, societies that practice agonistic gift-giving have been thought traditionally to be in a period of transition from purely non-commodified social relationships to purely alienated forms of production.<sup>36</sup> The prevalence of the gift as a tool for political manoeuvring in this kind of society is well-known, and much attention to its role in medieval Scandinavia has been devoted by scholars during the last four decades.<sup>37</sup> The core principle which makes gift-giving such a powerful way to establish forms of domination is the notion that the giver is somehow present inside the gift. This idea, originally coined by Mauss, received strong criticism from fellow anthropologists, who accused the French author of being mystified by the categories of local informants (the controversial issue being the *hau*, the 'spirit of the gift').<sup>38</sup> This led to the creation of several 'realist' interpretations of gift-giving theory, ranging from Levi-Strauss' structural reading, Marshall Sahlins' materialist interpretation, or Bourdieu's decisionist understanding.<sup>39</sup> This 'demystified' gift has gained followers among medievalists, many of whom began to abandon Mauss' holism towards a more utilitarian approach roughly at the same time anthropologists have started to revise the criticism and reassess positively the value of the Maussian *hau* theory.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> This line of thought can already be detected, concerning medieval 'Germanic' societies, in the founding fathers of holistic economic sociology, Marx and Mauss. Their ideas are evident in the influential work of the Soviet medievalist Aaron Gurevich, and they are particularly noticeable in his reading of medieval Scandinavian societies.

<sup>37</sup> Among others see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den Vennlige Vikingen: Vennskapets Makt I Norge og på Island 900-1300* (Oslo, 2010), pp. 25-30 (who provides a concise overview). W. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 77-109, likely remains the most influential discussion. The most detailed recent survey is H. Monclair, *Lederskapsideologi på Island I det Trettende århundret* (Oslo, 2004), pp. 61-134. A somewhat earlier, but useful discussion is Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Frá Goðorðum til Ríkja: Þróun Goðavalds á 12. og 13. öld* (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 81-95.

<sup>38</sup> Mauss interpreted a Maori explanation that the strength of a gift was that it was inhabited by a spirit that wanted to return to the original owner, which was mixed with the spirit of the owner himself (this might have been a confusion by Mauss himself, as Raymond Firth noted in his evaluation of the *Essai sur le don*). Levi-Strauss held that the *mana* (and similar ideas, like the *hau*) was a 'floating signifier' (*signifiant flottant*) which existed to make sense of the structure for the natives and that Mauss failed to transcend (as his own structuralism, Levi-Strauss held, did). Sahlins saw the *hau* as a native explanation for notions of productivity and fecundity. Bourdieu focused on how gifts were used strategically, thus reinstating the agents (rather than the role of the gift itself) to the centre of the stage. For a good overview of the problem, see H. Miyazaki, 'Gifts and Exchange', in D. Hicks and M. Beaudry (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford 2010), pp. 246-64.

<sup>39</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l'Œuvre de Marcel Mauss* (1949; repr. Paris, 2012); M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1974), pp. 149-74; P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), especially pp. 4-8.

<sup>40</sup> See for example several texts in G. Algazi, V. Groebner and B. Jussen (eds.), *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen, 2003). This line of thought is influential in Norse studies due to the enduring impact of William Miller's well-known *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* and his subsequent works. The theo-

Alienation remains the core problem unsolved by a 'realist', strategy-oriented, interpretation of gift-giving.<sup>41</sup> Land and labour are two obvious candidates to measure the degree of alienated (which in this context equates partially with commodified) perception of objects in any given society. Pre-industrial societies, and, in fact, even most capitalist societies, treat them as special; that is, they are subject to special norms when compared to movable wealth, and they often hold a strongly symbolic value. Property owners often have an aura of respectability and prestige that is not directly related to their total wealth in purely material terms. In contrast, labour is more often than not the least commodified productive force; it is most often undifferentiated from the labourer.<sup>42</sup>

*Egils saga* portrays the aforementioned difference between labour, land and other goods. It can be argued, therefore, that the labour from and the land claim of Egill's family did not generate wealth that could be in any meaningful way dissociated from a sense of moral and legal superiority. Egill and Grímr earn their wealth and their prestige at the same time and through the same actions - they appear as the same phenomenon. Moreover, such prestige is not derived from their use of wealth, but instead from the fact they do not obtain it from anybody else. It is meaningful because it is independent. These cases are radically different from those of pure acquisition of wealth, such as in the cases of the protagonists of *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Bandamanna saga* or *Ólkofra þáttur*.<sup>43</sup> In the cases of those sa-

retical bibliography on the issue is very large. A good recent discussion of the current trends in gift-theory is L. Cligget and R. Wilk, *Economies and Cultures: Foundations of Economic Anthropology* (Boulder, 2007), pp. 153-72. On the core underlying issue under discussion (the concept of value) see D. Graeber, *The False Coin of Our Own Dreams: Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (London, 2001).

<sup>41</sup> We use the term in a classical Marxist sense, that is, the process by which men are separated from the product of their labour. That process logically needs to have started with the conceptual separation between producer and product. The history of this separation has been of much interest to economic anthropologists and of much less interest to students of modern industrial economies (where the distinction is usually taken for granted). Anthropological traditions drawing on modern economical models (such as a theory of value depending on utility) risk carrying an anachronistic element when they assume that the transfers of goods under pre-industrial conditions follows the same basic principles as exchange carried in a market-based society in which agent and object are clearly separate entities. Assessing the degree of this separation in medieval Iceland would require a long study, but the widespread presence of both gift-logics and commercial logics point towards a situation of coexistence or transition. The implied argument is that underlying structures of an economy affect the meaning of the mental categories through which the agents in a system operate. For example, concerning price, Helgi Þorláksson provides an excellent analysis (using substantivist categories) of how its meaning diverges in different types of economic organizations. See Helgi Þorláksson, *Vaðmál og verðlag. Vaðmál i utanlandsvið-skiptum og búskap Íslendinga á 13. og 14. öld* (Reykjavík, 1991), pp. 31-84. Such views, likely influenced by the formalist tradition in anthropology and by microeconomics, focus on the individual decision-making process when analysing economic phenomena. This creates the methodological need for a clear-cut division between agent and object, which logically discourages considerations about the nature of personhood and alienation. The historicity of this distinction therefore remains hidden, and it is replaced by some (explicit or implicit) assumptions on individual human nature.

<sup>42</sup> Medieval attitudes to wealth and labour, have been described by A. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (1972; repr. London, 1985), pp. 211-86. This text sometimes makes too broad generalizations, but it gives a solid general perspective, and his analysis includes many references to the Scandinavian contexts.

<sup>43</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, 'Social Ideals and the Concept of Profit in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (Middlesex, 1992), pp. 231-45. Of wider in-

gas, the men in question obtained wealth that did not generate any moral superiority, because it was the wealth of the already commodified structures of commerce. Moreover, Grímr and Egill are also different from figures such as Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson and from clever manipulators such as Auðunn and Refr (from *Auðunar þáttir* and *Gautreks saga* respectively), two different types of men whose wealth and prestige are the effect of concessions by superior authority. They are never independent in their means, because their means were not created *ex nihilo*, but derived from the royal will, and therefore never conceived as fully freed from the person of the monarch. The humble Auðunn succeeds where Þórólfr fails by simply accepting, and manipulating his own inferiority.<sup>44</sup> Þórólfr, when faced with the choice of remaining a loyal servant at court or keeping his place as a big landholder, unwisely chooses the latter.<sup>45</sup> However, the moral of the story is not one of pride preceding the fall, but one of political realism. The equally proud and stubborn Grímr and Egill both manage to die rich and peaceful simply by avoiding dependence on royal wealth (and, for Grímr, by keeping a safe distance from the monarchs). In *Egla*, we are still in a world of verisimilar political struggles between men and king rather than in a parable.

However, we can see that, to a large extent, the means used by the Mýramenn are not the typical means by which medieval aristocracies legitimised themselves. Bournazel distinguished between three kinds of memory used by medieval aristocracies to uphold their ancestry.<sup>46</sup> He called the first a 'heroic' type. This form has a shrouded (*embrumée*) connection to a historical past, is presented (by definition) as 'very ancient', and the historicity of these ancestral heroes is fabled if compared to the closer ancestors, even if it still appears more plausible than in a mythical type.<sup>47</sup> The second type is based on the inheritance of Roman functionaries, and was typically used by Mediterranean elites. Finally, a third type derived from the 'creation by an adventurer', a man who appeared out of the blue to give the fundamental impulse to the nobility of an estate and a family. Briefly speaking, ancestors could have been heroes, functionaries, or adventurers.

For *Egla*, the second category is obviously absent, and the first and third categories apply imperfectly. Though the Mýramenn lineage is historically ancient and its founding fathers were larger-than-life men (as exemplified by their superior strength and their likely lycanthropy), they were not heroic in the normal sense of the word – they were real men. Grímr, for example, does not do much in the way of heroic deeds, and he dies of old age. While Egill can boast more in the way of battle prowess, his infirmity and loss of virility in his old age place him far apart from traditionally heroic figures

terest (and somewhat imprecise), but still worth reading is A. Gurevich, 'Representations of Property During the High Middle Ages', *Economy and Society* 6.1 (1977): 1–30. K. Lunden, *Økonomi og Samfunn* (Oslo, 1972) used the sagas to illustrate this classical substantivist distinction.

<sup>44</sup> On the motivations and strategy of Auðunn, see W. Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear* (Leiden, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 16, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> E. Bournazel, 'Mémoire et parenté: le problème de la continuité dans la noblesse de l'an mil', in M. Parisse and X. Barre I. Altet (eds.), *Le Roi de France et son Royaume autour de l'an mil* (Paris, 1992), pp. 113–4.

<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note that Bournazel exemplifies this difference with references to the Eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, likely by influence of the studies on that poem made by Gurevich.

such as Sigurðr or Gunnarr.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, their manners are not those of knights, courtiers or heroes. Instead, Grímr is noticeably rustic in behaviour and appearance, and Egill is often single-mindedly greedy and prosaic. In addition, it should be noted that the heroic, handsome and virtuous side of the family fails to leave any lasting legacy. *Egils saga* appears to be not just unheroic, but possibly even antiheroic. The ‘adventurer’ prototype clashes with the historicism of the saga style. Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr do not appear in Iceland out of nowhere. Instead, they have precise reasons for moving there, and are not motivated by curiosity but by need. This pattern also applies to other figures in the *Íslendingasögur*: for example, we can mention that Eiríkr the Red settled Greenland because of his outlawry from both Norway and Iceland rather than by the will to discover which characterizes a stereotypical explorer.

A possible explanation for this inability of the typology presented by Bournazel to fit into any reading of the sagas may, at least in part, be related to the usual problems associated with applying general typological tools to cultural traits specific to the medieval North. However, we would suggest there is another explanation: *Egils saga* is not describing a purely aristocratic memory of lineage, but instead memorialising the lineage of wealthy farmers. If one assumes that the saga was written for an Icelandic public, overt pretensions of aristocratic pride might have caused problems with the majority of the population. We know that many prosperous farmers from the Sturlung Age resented the aspirations of the relatively new elite of ‘big chieftains’ (*stórgoðar*), who might have needed some degree of negotiation and personal charisma, in addition to wealth, to keep their standing.<sup>49</sup> If *Egla* was written to legitimise the territorial ambitions of one of these big chieftains (possibly Snorri), it would likely have been of help to present the ancestors as farmers, possibly even if as the *best* farmers.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 85, pp. 294–6.

<sup>49</sup> There is no consensus on the sources of the power of the chieftains. The issue was debated by two major Icelandic historians during the 1980s in several articles. See for example Gunnar Karlsson ‘Völd og auður á 13. öld’, *Saga* 18 (1980): 5–30 and Helgi Þorláksson’s answer in ‘Stéttir, auður og völd á 12. og 13. öld’, *Saga* 20 (1982): 63–113. The debate was inconclusive, but historiography has often returned to it, particularly in the work of Icelandic historians, such as Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Sverrir Jakobsson, Viðar Pálsson, and also in more recent works by Gunnar and Helgi.

<sup>50</sup> On Snorri’s cultural project as an integral part of his power building (through perspectives clearly influenced by Bourdieu) see Torfi Tulinus ‘Snorri et Bourdieu: Vers une sociologie de la production littéraire en Islande Médiévale?’, in C. Péneau (ed.), *Itinéraires du savoir de l’Italie à la Scandinavie (X–XVI siècle. Études offertes à Élisabeth Mornet* (Paris, 2009), pp. 345–68; Viðar Pálsson ‘Var engi höfðingi slíkr sem Snorri. Auður og virðing í valdabárattu Snorra Sturlusonar’, *Saga* 41 (2003): 55–96; K. Wanner. *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda*. Of course, the author himself does not need to have been a farmer, in much the same way a modern politician representing, for example, workers or peasants is usually neither a worker nor a peasant himself but commonly a member of the middle class or the elite. That would not prevent the appropriation of gestures, manners or the creation of a biography for such leaders that enhances the links between him and the lower ranks of society. This type of strategy is well-known among ethnographers concerned with the economics of inequality in stratified agrarian societies. A good example is the kings of Dahomey, who paid taxes to the crown like every subject; see M. Herskovits, *Economic Anthropology* (New York, 1952), p. 442. In one of the most highly-stratified ancient societies, the Inca presented their overlordship over local communities as reciprocal, kin-based prestations, see A. Kolata, *Ancient Incas* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 103. This did not prevent the Inca claiming divine status for himself at the same time. This kind of ideology obviously helped to mask the reality of inequality between the king

This portrayal seems rather unique for a medieval text, but it should be noted that despite its apparent uniqueness this type of reading of the saga does suit the relatively egalitarian structures of thirteenth-century Iceland.<sup>51</sup> In other words, we can perceive a portrayal of ancient leaders as combining aristocratic and farmer-entrepreneurial traits that is congruent with the type of society that produced *Egla*.

## INHERITANCE: TRANSFERS OF WEALTH AND THE CREATION OF A LINEAGE

A last element of identity shared by the Mýramenn is the intergenerational transfer of wealth through inheritance mechanisms. This is not an exclusive trait of Egill's family of course, but instead is a very common practice in the saga: there are more than twenty mentions of inheritance transfers in the whole text.<sup>52</sup> Geospatially speaking, these mentions of inheritance occur in both Iceland and Norway – the core cultural centres of action (and self-identification) in *Egils saga*. However, most inheritance transfers occur in Norway rather than in Iceland, thus suggesting that *Egils saga* was composed by someone who attached strong meaning to lineage and to the past (especially as regards Icelanders' Norwegian lineage and past). This impression is reinforced by some of the cases referring to the same goods and estates that are transferred several times. The inheritance of Björgólfr is the most prominent example of such a 'chain of inheritance'. His inheritance is transferred in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters before eventually leading to the struggle between Þórólfr and the sons of Hildiríðr.<sup>53</sup> The inheritance of Björn *hóldr*, originally owned by his grandfather and namesake, is also transferred multiple times; in chapters thirty-two, forty (and possibly forty-one), and fifty-six, when it is disputed between Egill (on his wife's behalf) and Berg-Önundr. Finally, the inheritance of Skalla-

and groups through the propagandistic manipulation of modes of transfer of goods, even if they appear blatantly contradictory to a modern reader.

<sup>51</sup> On the issue of equality, compare for example a classical pro-'egalitarian' view, such as J. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London, 2001) with the critical stance of Orri Vésteinsson 'A Divided Society: Peasants and the Aristocracy in Medieval Iceland', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 117–40. The main issue seems to be the degree of inequality in the context of medieval European societies, rather than its absolute presence (which is taken for granted). On the socioeconomic aspect of the issue, closely related to the concept of peasant society, see C. Wickham, 'Problems of Comparing Rural Societies in Early Medieval Western Europe', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series 2 (1992): 221–46; C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 519–88, and Sverrir Jakobsson 'From Reciprocity to Manorialism: On the Peasant Mode of Production in Medieval Iceland', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 38.3 (2013): 1–23. Also relevant are several contributions to the dossier 'Nordic Civilisation in the Medieval World' in *Gripla* 20 (2009), which discuss the notion of an 'egalitarian North' in its social and political aspects.

<sup>52</sup> Inheritance transfers are conducted in chapters 7, 8, 9, 18, 26 (two cases), 32, 40, possibly in 41, 55, 56 (twice), 58, 62, 63, 64 (thrice), 77, 79, 80 and 87.

<sup>53</sup> These transfers happen in *Egils saga*, ch. 7, p. 17 (from Björgólfr to Brýnjólfr); ch. 8, p. 21 (from Brýnjólfr to Bárðr) and ch. 9, p. 24 (from Bárðr to Þórólfr). The struggle between Þórólfr and the sons of Hildiríðr begins in ch. 9, p. 26. It leads to the death of Þórólfr in ch. 22, p. 54 and of the Hildiríðarsynir in ch. 23, p. 58.

Grímr is also transferred on multiple occasions within his family.<sup>54</sup>

Narratively speaking, inheritance plays a very significant role which (most likely) mirrors its social and ideological importance. Most often, the possession of inherited wealth indicates both social and economic standing. Moreover, inheritance is a core element of the many disputes in the saga and, therefore, allows for several avenues of literary exploration, especially in a subgenre that was typically structured around (legal) conflict. Analytically speaking, the process of inheritance is also intimately related to the creation and accumulation of land, which in turn has a direct effect on the control of the labour and surplus that the land produced. Both of these factors fuel most of the political exchanges in the saga. The conflict surrounding Björgólfr's inheritance is for the most part outlined during the '*Þórólfs saga*' section, while Egill's struggle with Berg-Qnundr is largely found later in the text in *Egils saga* proper, which interestingly also outlines Egill's own heritage. Moreover, the legacy of Skalla-Grímr's settlement among the heirs to the estates near Borg is crucial to understanding the feud between Þorsteinn Egilsson and Steinarr Qnundarson in the final part of the saga, as we have discussed in the previous section. Because most transfers of inheritance involve the core means of production and reproduction of economic life (landed estates), the centrality of these inheritance stories are naturally closely linked to the role that wealth played in defining a lineage's authority and reputation.

Interestingly, inheritance is often described as involving a degree of choice in which the giver arranges the conditions in which the inheritor will inherit. This degree of choice could even occasionally reach beyond family ties. For example, Bárðr asks the king for permission to 'let me to decide over my inheritance'.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the saga describes some instances of, what appear to be, anticipated forms of inheritance, which are not explicitly named as such but do resemble this form of inheritance. Such cases are those in which a transfer or share of management of the family farm or the concession of land to a child before one's death was undertaken.<sup>56</sup> Other cases of anticipated inheritance come in the form of granting control over farms in Iceland: from Egill to Þorsteinn, for example, (in chapter seventy-nine), and from Qnundr to Steinarr (in chapter eighty). Even if the inheritors in these cases would have been the same if the property was transferred after the death of the titular farmers, the anticipation might have reinforced a sense of stability and endorsement from father to son.<sup>57</sup> Moreo-

<sup>54</sup> This property is transferred in chapters 56, 58, 77, 79 and 87.

<sup>55</sup> *Látið mik ráða fyrir arfi mínum. Egils saga*, ch. 9, p. 24. The scene happens in Norway, and it is possible that it reflects a situation that was seen as foreign by an Icelandic audience or author.

<sup>56</sup> Skalla-Grímr does both of these things in chapter fifty-six, benefiting his daughter Sæunnr and Egill. Sæunnr also obtains this as dowry, even if it is not explicitly named as such in *Egla*. In Iceland, dowry (*heimanfylgja*) was not mandatory, but it was common among the wealthy. Brideprice (*mundr*), paid by the family of the groom, was the required payment for a valid marriage, but the saga does not mention it in this case. See K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 94–5.

<sup>57</sup> By contrast, Skalla-Grímr actively seeks to prevent Egill from inheriting some of his movable wealth immediately before death, by hiding wealth in a secret spot. The motive seems to be that he is rather offended with his son, because Egill did not share with his father the compensation paid for Þórólfr by the English king (*Egils*

ver, such a move might have granted the inheritors a social and economic standing that they would have obtained only later by normal means. On the other hand, with the exception of Bárðr, the chosen men are the same ones who would have been the legal heirs, and therefore the degree of choice seems to be limited to timing and did not extend to choosing beneficiaries. It is therefore likely that this type of transfer was, both literarily and materially, much more important than most gifts or concessions in its impact regarding the status and means of the receiver.

Anticipated transfers of inheritance might have been a specific trait of the elites, a shared, common practice among medieval Icelanders, or a specific trait of *Egla*. In any case, it was understood that certain traits ‘ran in the blood’ in the same way that goods passed from one generation to the next, which is congruent with a society without fully alienated forms of property. In fact, it would have been surprising if Egill did not inherit some of Grímr’s personality traits as much as he inherited his father’s farm. It was understood that traits were inherited from both mother and father, which made sense given the cognatic nature of medieval kinship. What is more interesting is that each important character in the saga has a good share of diversity in his or her personality: Egill resembles Grímr as much as he diverges from his father, for instance. In fact, personalities in *Egla* are unusually well-developed: this text was seen as a milestone in the development of individualism in a well-known study by Gurevich.<sup>58</sup>

In other words, inheritance reinforces the idea of lineage, but still allows for variation and choice. This reading of inheritance in the sagas is congruent with the emphasis made on personal skill as a labourer as one of the means of social mobility. This literary representation reconciles itself well with the idea that medieval Icelandic forms of leadership resembled those anthropology labels as *big men*; entrepreneurial men who use personal charisma, exploitation of self- and household labour and constant redistribution of goods to create an unstable form of leadership.<sup>59</sup> This contrasts with ideas of chiefly lineages, which emphasized collective belonging and stability, and often have a well-regulated logic for the transfer of power (and often, also of wealth).<sup>60</sup> However, given the emphasis on lineage

*saga*, ch. 57, p. 174). The immediate impact of this move on the already wealthy Egill should be seen as more symbolic than concrete, but it is interesting to note that (negative) emotions are expressed through the (denial of) transfers of wealth. Egill behaves in a similar way before death, but in his case the motivation seems to be derived from a desire to have malicious fun (ch. 85, p. 297).

<sup>58</sup> A. Gurevich, *The Origins of European Individualism* (London, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> The distinction goes back to M. Sahlins, ‘Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and Polynesia’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5.3 (1963): 285–303. As with many terms coined originally to understand the structures of a specific society, big man has become a concept of widespread use and somewhat of a generic ideal type, used often as part of a typology of types of leadership, by influence of texts such as T. Earle, *How Chiefs Come to Power* (Stanford, 1997). The influence of substantivist and neo-evolutionist anthropologists is noticeable in the work of some scholars in the Old Norse field, such as Helgi Þorláksson or Jesse Byock.

<sup>60</sup> The Norwegian historian Hanne Monclair has studied how the transition from the first to the second type (exemplified by the *Rex Iustus* ideology) can be perceived through Old Norse literature: H. Monclair, *Lederskapideologi på Island i det trettende århundret: En analyse av gavegiving, gjestebud og lederfremstilling i islandsk*



and inherited means, *Egils saga* does not represent its prominent men as classical *big men*. Moreover, the chosen heirs are, in general, the same persons that would inherit in the family. Therefore, the ideology in this text seems to be a mix of both big-man and chief types: both inheritable family aspects, structurally-expectable patterns and individualized personal traits play a role in the presentation and legitimation of powerful men.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have commented on three main aspects of shared identity among the Mýramenn family in *Egla* which emphasize the connection of these men to the settled landscape in Iceland and to a shared common past rooted in Norway. The narrative links this group of men with features visible in the countryside during the thirteenth century, explains their superior standing amongst other farmers by way of their labour prowess, and upholds their long ancestry and wealth by recurrent references to the way the land and goods were acquired and transferred amongst them. These textual features add several layers of legitimacy to the link between these men and their land, which could have been used by some of their descendants to bolster their own claims of territorial superiority.<sup>61</sup> However, it is not possible to confirm the often-mentioned association between the saga and Snorri's faction. Moreover, even if such a link was real, it is hard to know how deep the impact of such an ideological and literary project was. Unfortunately for the Sturlungar, their ambitions did not endure and they disappeared soon after the incorporation of Iceland as a tributary land of Norway in 1262/4. Despite their ultimate failure as a political project, there is some evidence that Egill was still a very evocative ancestor for thirteenth-century residents of the Borgarfjörðr region. This is particularly evident in a story narrated by Sturla Þórðarson in the sixteenth chapter of his *Íslendinga saga*. In this story, we are told that Snorri, while still living at Borg, made an agreement with Magnús, the aging priest who controlled the church centre at Reykholt. According to the saga, the sons of Magnús were too young to manage the *staðr*, and were short of money so Snorri took control of the property with the

*sagamateriale* (Oslo, 2003). She holds that *Egils saga* is close to the early, entrepreneurial/patronal leadership ideology, as evidenced hospitality and feasting. This is coherent with a presentation of gift-giving of a competitive type: 'I de tidlig nedskrevne sagaene, det vil si i *Egils saga*, *Hungrvaka*, *Þorláks saga*, *Páls saga* ok *Ljósvetninga saga*, finner vi en klart focus på gjengavens betydning, på gjensidighet og på balanse. Gave-episodene fremstilles med en kalkulert rivaliresende, til dels aggressiv valor, og oppretholdelse av symmetri, samt fremheving av persoling likeverd, er fremtredende trekk.' (Ibid. p. 132; 'Samlet må det konkluderes at gjestebudene vi får presentert i *Egils saga*, overordnet fremstilles som å vært av entrepenør- og patron-typen.' Ibid., p. 153.)

<sup>61</sup> These could be Snorri Sturluson or his associates, but it is also possible that those opposing Snorri's ambitions (probably among his own relatives) could have used their own link to Egill and Skalla-Grímr to reaffirm their links to the area. In a similar vein, Axel Kristinsson has argued that *Bjarnar saga*, alsowritten in the area around Borg likely during the mid-thirteenth century, represents a text of reaction by a smaller family of chieftains (the Hítðælir) against the ambitions of the Sturlungar, which upholds the memory of a local in order to enhance local solidarity. See A. Kristinsson, 'Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28.1 (2003): 1-17, at pp. 11-12.

promise to take care of the old priest and his wife. Snorri's plan seems evident: to move his residence from Borg to the prestigious centre in Reykholt. Then, one of his men dreams of Egill Skalla-Grímsson. The ancestor talks to the dreamer and asks: 'Does Snorri, our kinsman, intend to move out from here?'<sup>62</sup> The man answers, 'so it is said'.<sup>63</sup> The dream-Egill then says that it is a bad idea, 'because little have men ruled over the things of us the Mýramenn when we prospered, nor does he [Snorri] need to look down upon this land'.<sup>64</sup> Before disappearing, Egill delivers a stanza in which he insists that his way of acquiring lands was through his sword, while the men of the present prefer to avoid fights.

In this story, an obvious contrast is made between the ways of Snorri and those of his ancestor. If Snorri composed *Egla*, Sturla might have been using a good deal of irony to contrast his uncle and teacher with Egill. However, this story could also be interpreted as actually supporting Snorri's moves against a voice of violent tradition. If we judge from his portrayal in *Egils saga*, Egill was far from a role model, and he does not fear resorting to violence to defend his property. Along the same line, the message that he delivers in the *Íslendinga saga* is far from one of peace and moderation. Winning land by violence should have seemed frighteningly contemporary to Sturla, given the conflict-ridden events of his own time. However, it was also the message from an outdated era, a time of warriors such as Egill, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi. The tale highlights the contrast between Egill and Snorri's manoeuvring to acquire property. However, it can also be noted that the speech of the dream-Egill contrasts with the ways in which Egill acquired his lands in Iceland according to his own saga. The Egill of *Íslendinga saga* glorifies violence, while in *Egla* he simply acquired his farmland from Grímr through inheritance. Moreover, he could not keep a long-term hold on his property acquired violently in Norway. Therefore, while it seems that Egill was seen as an important ancestor for the Mýramenn, the specific aspects of his (literary) personality that were highlighted by the men of the thirteenth century might have depended on context, ideology, or personal stance. Moreover, we might add that not all the men who could potentially have used them as illustrious ancestors necessarily seem to have done so. A good example of such omission is a genealogy of the Sturlungar published in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, which traces the family lineage back to Adam through a list of local, royal, mythical and biblical figures but it completely avoids the early Mýramenn.<sup>65</sup>

In conclusion, the author of *Egla* seems to have made specific choices on how to retell the past and

<sup>62</sup> This man is named Egill Halldórsson. According to the saga, he belonged to the lineage of the Mýramenn descended from Skalla-Grímr. Both the name of the character and the explicit reference to the Mýramenn seem to reinforce an idea of continuity of lineage. 'Ætlar Snorri, frændi várr, í brott heðan?' Sturla Þórðarson, *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, eds. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús, Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols. (Reykjavík, 1946), ch. 16, p. 241.

<sup>63</sup> 'Þat er mælt.' *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> 'Því at lítt hafa menn setit yfir hlut várum mýramanna, þá er oss tímagadisk, ok þurfti hann eigi ofsjónum yfir þessu landi at sjá.' *Íslendinga saga*.

<sup>65</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, Vol. I (834–1264), ed. Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen, 1857–1876), pp. 501–6.

select (or invent) certain historical traits to present the descendants of Grímr, likely in an attempt to uphold the political agenda of his own faction. The author represented the Mýramenn as a group of high-ranking, well-established men who could stand face-to-face with aristocrats and kings. Nevertheless, they were still a family of farmers who progressed in a new, untouched land, through their own labour and that of their ancestors, leaving behind marks of their presence in the Icelandic landscape. We have considered *Egils saga* as both reflective of the social conditions of the time of composition and as a presumably programmatic text that aimed to use narrative to intervene in those conditions by upholding a type of ancestry which combined traits of both aristocratic and entrepreneurial modes of leadership. Such traits, however, have to be seen as in mutual tension, which are congruent with a society in a noticeable structural transition towards increased stratification, such as Iceland during the Sturlung Age. It is not unlikely that people like Snorri and his brothers, who were at the same time extremely powerful men able to lead an aristocratic lifestyle and the sons of an originally modest local *goði*, were able to use, ambiguously, the language of (well-off) farmers as well as the language of the aristocracy.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the Sturlungar family itself included members of different rank, and of varying fortunes. Therefore, it is possible that the contradictions that can be detected in the portrayal of the Mýramenn were intentional, as different traits assigned to these men could have aimed to generate identification among the different social strata present in a given family.<sup>67</sup> The same ambiguity characterized the exact definition of who was included as a member of a lineage such as the Mýramenn. This, in turn, sits well with the bilateral structure of the Icelandic kinship system, which gave each individual more flexibility to define his (meaningful) ancestry than the clear-cut groups found in unilateral systems. Hastrup's useful distinction between 'lineage' and 'stock' seems particularly pertinent here: while technically speaking the Mýramenn lineage could be defined as the descendants of Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr, what mattered most for medieval writers seems to have been the stock.<sup>68</sup> In other words, each man was able to strategically use the more convenient ancestry in any given situation. The men in *Íslendinga saga* referred to above considered themselves of Mýramenn lineage (as part of their stock of ancestors), while the author of the cited genealogy of the Sturlungar seems to have avoided the identification altogether and instead chose to list other ancestors from different lineages, even if it is unlikely that a literate person writing genealogies ignored the link between Skalla-Grímr and the sons of Hvamm-Sturla. What we see, then, are the claims of belonging to a lineage as strategic choices reflected in literature, rather than as an objectively defined group.

<sup>66</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense, 1999), pp. 104–5.

<sup>67</sup> This, of course, complicates the matter of attribution much further and makes a precise attribution extremely difficult. Besides, Arved Nedkvitne has warned against the problems of anthropological approaches that assume a too homogeneous view of society and mentality. We have attempted to show how a literary text might express political and ideological concerns present in the society producing it, but without trying to simplify contradictions, which are constitutive of any social order. See A. Nedkvitne 'Beyond Historical Anthropology in the Study of Medieval Mentalities', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 25.1–2 (2000): 27–51.

<sup>68</sup> A lineage has a constant ancestor for all members of it. The ancestors of a stock are defined by each individual, that is, they are ego-centred. K. Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, p. 71.

In broader terms, we would like to add that the perspective here used tends to reaffirm the pertinence of anthropological approaches to studies about Norse society.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, it reinforces the notion of a clear structural distance between medieval Icelandic society and the often structurally simpler societies which were studied by classical ethnography.<sup>70</sup> However, it has to be noted that most of the concepts that became of widespread use among scholar using the anthropological tradition were induced from the analysis of such type of societies. Therefore, it would be pertinent to ask if they are still useful for the analysis of medieval Scandinavian societies or if, alternatively, we should try to create specific theoretical tools to understand our field of study.

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<sup>69</sup> Helgi Þorláksson has recently rekindled the discussion on the use of sagas as sources to understand social structures and has established a certain criteria for comparison with societies studied by anthropologists. See Helgi Þorláksson, 'Sagas as Evidence for Authentic Social Structures', unpublished paper delivered at The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past, Aarhus Universitet, 10 August 2012.

<sup>70</sup> This is by no means a uniform trend. Structurally complex societies, such as those labelled chiefdoms or agrarian states present extremely interesting cases of comparison and there is also a large amount of scholarship on many of those, especially in recent decades. For example, the use of historical anthropology is particularly widespread in studies of the pre-Columbian societies of the Americas, which to my knowledge have not been much compared with medieval European societies.

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