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Generational Models for the Friendship of Egill and Arinbjǫrn (\textit{Egils saga Skallagrímssonar})

\textbf{William Sayers}

\section*{Introduction}

Economics and politics, feud and honor are the recognized dynamics in the sagas of the Icelanders, marked by injections of happenstance and played out within the greater determining dimension of men’s fates, however this may have been conceived both subjectively and in community belief and opinion. Affection and friendship could be thought to have low status in this world of small-scale \textit{realpolitik}. Yet there is no lack in the sagas of both heroic camaraderie and lasting friendships. In counterpoint, however, these are always subject to the strain of the personal ambitions and the obligations of kinship and marital unions, as \textit{Njáls saga} so well illustrates in the persons of Njáll and Gunnarr.

The narrative line of \textit{Egils saga Skallagrímssonar} is so pervasively dominated by its larger-than-life protagonist and, from a more synchronic scholarly perspective, by themes of poetic creation, personal identity, self-promotion, material advancement, and litigation that it does not first come to mind when we consider the presumably unconflicted topic of friendship in the early Norse world. Yet the fraternal relationship of Egill and Arinbjǫrn, spanning nearly five decades, is the background to many crucial events in the saga, not least Egill’s successful courting of his widowed sister-in-law and childhood sweetheart, Ásgerðr, and the composition of Egill’s poem \textit{Hofuðlausn} [\textit{Head-ransom}] at the court of King Eiríkr in York. In the present essay this friendship is examined in its numerous ramifications and, in particular, through the differences yet complementarity of its two members as these further illuminate the poet-warrior and, possibly but not necessarily — for the saga is a literary arte-

Establishing Models

Tracing the evolution of the relationship of Egill and Arinbjörn through the saga will be preceded by the assumption of a theoretical perspective, with a view to structuring the discussion and, at a greater depth, identifying essential prescriptive, at times contradictory, components of male identity, if not masculinity, and the basis for personal ties between men in early Norse culture. This vantage point is essentially narratological and will first address saga events before the appearance of Egill and Arinbjörn. The early chapters of the sagas of the Icelanders frequently feature foundational or charter acts and motifs that are later expanded to thematic status, with pronounced ideological overtones, in the human generations and narrated events that follow. Seen in functional and paradigmatic terms, friendship puts a stamp on *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* from its very first lines (italics added).

Úlfr hét maðr, sonr Bjálfa ok Hallberu, dóttur Úlfs ins óarga; hon var systir Hallbjarnar hálftrolls í Hrafnistu, þóður Ketils hengs. Úlfr var maðr svá mikill ok sterkr, at eigi váru hans jafningjar; en er hann var á unga aldri, lá hann í víkingu ok herjaði. Með honum var í félagskap sá maðr, er kallaðr var Berðlukári, gǫfugr maðr ok inn mesti afreksmaðr at afli ok áradí; hann var berserkr. *Péir Úlfr áttu einn sjóð báðir, ok var med þeim in kærsta vinátta.*¹

[There was a man named Úlfr, the son of Bjálfi and Hallbera, the daughter of Úlfr the Fearless. She was the sister of Hallbjörn Half-troll from Hrafnista, the father of Ketil Hæng. Úlfr was such a big, strong man that no one was his equal. When he was a young man, he went on viking raids. With him in a *partnership* was a man named Kári from Berðla, a well-born man, most valiant, competent and daring. He was a berserk. *He and Ulf had a single purse between them and they enjoyed a close friendship.*)²

¹ *Egils saga*, ch. 1; all quotations are from the edition of the saga by Sigurður Nordal (1933), referenced, as here, by chapter number.
² The intentionally quite literal translations are by the author and care has been taken not to inflate the vocabulary associated with friendship. These renderings have profited by the full-length translations of Bernard Scudder, Christine Fell, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, and versions in other languages.
This raiders’ friendship is later translated into the marriage of Úlfr’s grandson, Úlfr Bjálfason (called Kveld-Úlfr), to Kári’s daughter Salbjorg. Admittedly a speculative observation, the image of the shared purse (sjóðr) may refer to the recurrent remarriage of often well-to-do widows in these chapters.

These early chapters represent more than simple prolepsis. The motifs of kinship, friendship, shared economic interests, and alliances effected through marriage, fosterage, and property deals are developed in chapters 1 through 27 of the modern edition of the saga. The greater backdrop is the relations between powerful farmers and the Norwegian king, Haraldr hárfagri. The families descended from Úlfr and Kári might be labeled independent/non-compliant and dependent/compliant, respectively, in consideration of their relations with the king. Readers familiar with the career of Egill and his complex relations with King Eiríkr blóðøx and his queen, Gunnhildr, will have many moments of recognition in the course of the narrative of these early years. What is particularly significant for present purposes is the role of Kári’s second son, Ǫlvir, who, thwarted in love, becomes a king’s man and court poet, and is later the intermediary between the suspicious and ultimately disaffected Kveldúlr and his son Grímr (later Skallagrímr, Egill’s father) and the king. Ælfr may be identified as Kveldúlr and Grímr’s advocate, who will “handle” the matter: “skulu vér mæla allt fyrir hónd þína, slíkt er vér kunnum” (Egils saga, ch. 24) (“We will say everything on your behalf, as well as we can”). Yet his mediation is unsuccessful, more because of Grímr’s intransigence than because of the inadequacy of his efforts. In this Ælfr prefigures Arinbjörn working on Egill’s behalf at Eiríkr’s court in York, the setting for the celebrated poem Hófuðlausn. Yet the saga is not over-determined in this respect, and Arinbjörn is not a biological, but only functional, descendant of Kári. In the scene before King Haraldr there is an interesting confrontation of rhetoric and reality. Ælfr’s advocacy is full-bodied and astute (“Ǫlvir talði langt ok snjallt, því at hann var orðfærr maðr” — [Ǫlvir spoke at length and cleverly, because he was an eloquent man] — but what commands the king’s attention is the man standing behind Ælfr, “a whole head taller than all the others, and bald” (“hófði hæri en aðrir menn ok skólótttr”, Egils saga, ch. 25).

Another important theme in these chapters is inheritance rights as

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3 On the strained, at times violent, family relations, see Ármann Jakobsson 2008; for correspondence in the heroic poems of the Edda, see Larrington 2011.
debated among half-siblings. Land claims will also figure prominently in the latter half of the saga. The detail of all this foreshadowing does not offer a point-by-point correspondence with that of later events, which would be too mechanistic to be esthetically satisfying; instead, we find the disappointed lover and poet Ǫlvir (who prefigures Egill on only this count) on the “other” side of the equation, among the “compliant” king’s men. A closer and thematically more important match is between, on the one hand, Pórólfr, Kveldúlfr’s elder son, and his nephew of the same name and the brother of the latter, Egill Skallagrímsson. Kveldúlfr’s remarks on station in life and the prudent limits of ambition are ignored by the older Pórólfr, and this informs the action of early chapters of the saga. Egill will also flout such advice, although in more individualistic fashion. The account of his birth and early years follows directly on the outcome of the non-reconciliation, despite Ǫlvir’s mediation, of Haraldr and Skallagrím, and the emigration to Iceland after a last plundering of the goods and resources of the king and his followers.

With this, the setting shifts to Iceland and the saga limns the familiar portraits of Skallagrím as farmer and smith, and of his sons, the fair, cordial, normative Pórólfr and dark, belligerent, verbally precocious Egill. Like the account of events that opens the saga and the chapters that follow, the description of Skallagrím sums up a mature life; those of his sons have a quasi-determinative, narratively propulsive effect on their subsequent lives and on the saga. The next block of chapters, while never far from issues of property ownership and relations with the Norwegian king, sets out the circumstances of the birth of Ásgerð Bjarnardóttir. While an irregular union had been charged by one party of half-siblings in the land dispute a generation earlier, the marriage of Bjǫrn Brynjólfsson and Þóra Hróalds dóttir is preceded by what is clearly an abduction (however willing the girl) and was initially without the approval of her father or brother, the chieftain Þórir, who is Skallagrím’s foster-brother, as Bjǫrn knows: “var þar allkært í fóstbrœðralagi” (Egils saga, ch. 25) [The fosterbrothership was very close]. Bjǫrn is also declared an outlaw by the king. The tangle of events and efforts to reconcile Bjǫrn with his father-in-law and with the king leads to the situation of Ásgerðr being fostered in the home of Skallagrím, along with Pórólfr and the younger Egill. Like Ǫlvir before him, Pórólfr engages himself as Bjǫrn’s advocate in seeking a reconciliation and approval of the union by both Þóra’s kin and the king. He also acquires an ally in the form of Eiríkr blöððox, the son of king Haraldr, to whom he makes the gift of a fine warship. During
this same period, the violence that is one of Egill’s characteristics makes an early appearance. Strained relations with his father prefigure future relations with political authority in Norway. Egill coerces his brother into allowing him to join a voyage to Norway and it is when Þórólfr is visiting the estate of Þórir that Egill meets his son Arinbjörn, who is the cousin of Egill’s foster-sister Ásgerðr. To the complex of relations formed by affinity, marriage, fosterage, political and economic interests is now added, in Egill’s case, the shared experiences of childhood and male friendship.

A Bond Formed

The future bond between Egill and Arinbjörn is given a first, programmatic presentation in Chapter 41, which takes the form of a capsule portrait of a promising young man, largely as viewed by an impressionable child. This authorial statement on the originary relationship between Egill and Arinbjörn seems an innocuous summary, which, however, gives narrative pause to the crescendo account of events from Egill’s childhood, as these are marked by the tension and sporadic violence of relations between Egill and his father, Skallagrímr. It was earlier stated that Eiríkr blóðøx was fostered by the chieftain Þórir. Thus, Arinbjörn is Eiríkr’s foster-brother and much later will, in turn, be the fosterer of his sons. More than Egill, Arinbjörn will have to negotiate the demands of ultimately rival emotional ties. The signpost presentation of Arinbjörn comes just before Egill’s first homicide beyond the home farm in Iceland.

Þórir átti son, er hét Arinbjörn. Hann var nǫkkuru ellri en Egill. Arinbjörn var þegar snimma skǫruligr maðr ok inn mesti íþróttamaðr. Egill gerði sér títt við Arinbjörn ok var honum fylgjusamr; en heldr var fátt með þeim bræðrum (Egils saga, ch. 41).

[Pórir had a son who was named Arinbjörn. He was somewhat older than Egill. From early on, Arinbjörn was an imposing young man, and very accomplished. Egill sought Arinbjörn’s company and was attached to him but things were rather cool between the two brothers (Þórólfr and Egill)].

Two relationships are adduced, one good and one poor, and both will feed saga dynamics. Several tensions mark this brief passage. The presentation is asymmetrical. The stated age differential and ascription
of manly properties (typically for the saga genre, quite unspecified) to Arinbjørn leaves Egill, already established in the saga, somewhat disempowered in these immediate narrative circumstances. No sense of Arinbjørn’s personality emerges from the account and it is the functional one-way relationship that is operative here. The succinct statement of childish admiration comes as a bit of a surprise, prompting the question of whether it can last when a personality like Egill’s is involved. The reference here to relations between the brothers might seem gratuitous and tacked syntactically on as a genre-typical litotic coda (“en heldr var fátt með þeim bræðrum”). Yet it is precisely the fact that Egill cannot or will not take his brother as a model that leaves the way open for Arinbjørn. The hint of fraternal envy and resentment casts a shadow over the narrative, if not necessarily over the nascent friendship of Egill and Arinbjørn, and is soon followed by other events and individual behavior whose interpretation demands the engagement of the saga public: Þórólfr’s suit of Ásgerðr and Egill’s reaction to it. The saga displays a number of overlapping triangular relationships, as if readily grasped, simple binary oppositions and complementarities were not adequate to capture complex human dynamics: Egill-Þórólfr-Arinbjørn, Egill-Þórólfr-Ásgerðr, Egill-Arinbjørn-Eiríkr, Þórólfr-Arinbjørn-Eiríkr.

In summary, the first third of the saga is writ over a large canvas of expansive royal politics in Norway and relations among prominent families as these are shaped by courting and marriage, legitimate and allegedly illegitimate offspring, fosterage, and, inevitably, land claims. Within the parameters of the saga (whatever the remote historical reality of the account), two generational prototypes for characterization are found: one genetic, the other generic. In the line of descent from the “original” Úlfr, one of the two Viking partners, is a succession of dark and light figures, often with recurrent names such as Úlfr and Þórólfr, which, despite the difference in personality may reflect blood-ties as well as sharing a common lexical root (úlf). As an example of the interlocking or concatenating “theme and variation” approach, three generations of Egill’s family, moving like double sinus curves, are characterized by transformative powers: Kveldúlf is a shape-shifter, subject to organic transformation; Skallagrím is a farmer (organic growth) but also a blacksmith, a craftsman in non-organic transformation, turning bog iron into tools (agrarian) and weapons (martial); Egill will grow up as a fighter with sword and spear, and as a craftsman in the less tangible matter of words, turning language into art. Further strengthening the genetic link are size, strength,
dark mood, and general suspicion of, and non-compliance with, hegemonic royal ambitions. Yet, all these figures are capable of friendship.

Descendants of Úlfr’s companion Kári illustrate generic (or saga-specific) narrative strategies, realized less through the filiations of kinship than through the recurrence of character types and functions, which occur naturally in human societies, partly in response to societal needs, but more intentionally in the composition of sagas of Icelanders. Thus Ólvir, the advocate of the non-compliant, less advantaged players in the power struggles with Norwegian kings, finds a later counterpart in Arinbjörn, his successor not in genetic terms of family inheritance but in mediation, in the interlocking motif deployment typical of the stylistic economy of the saga genre. These two kinds of generational modeling — genetic and generic — can be labeled, with less critical jargon, as constructed on lines of family (historical) and function (narrative). The generational paradigms that inform the first third of Egils saga will also serve as heuristic protocol for the exploration of the maturing friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn.

There is limited volume of recent scholarly literature on the topic of male friendship in the medieval North, where there were a number of quasi-institutionalized forms of friendship: foster-brothership (assuming compatibility), blood-brothership (based on oath and ritual), félagskap (partnership with economic implications), the chieftain-client bond (economic, political), as well as those based in affinity, shared likes and dislikes, emotional rapport, sexual relations (we assume, in the dearth of evidence), and many others. We must also bear in mind that two friends may see a friendship in very different terms, of which a donor-recipient paradigm is only one.

First Years

With the companionship of Egill and Arinbjörn now established by the sagaman, Egill feigns illness (we assume), in order not to attend the marriage of Þórir and Ásgerðr. Then, during this same stay in Norway, he accompanies Þórir’s rent-collector to a farm owned by Eiríkr, where he kills his host Bárðr on grounds of deficient hospitality and attempted poisoning. Eiríkr and Gunnhildr were expected at the farm and the ale in question had been reserved for them. Throughout the saga, direct and
indirect discourse are used in subtle ways that affect our appreciation of the narrative. Dialogue does not so much occur at moments of high tension and drama as it identifies such moments, perhaps just before they are actualized, with statements that range from the apparently inconsequential to the gnomic and proverbial. Here Bárðr is the deceiver and is thus allowed to appear garrulous, with repeated instances of direct speech. Then the king literally commands the floor of discourse, asking in direct speech where the host is. At the ensuing but grotesque drinking party, to which Egill and Þórir’s men are now invited, Egill extemporizes three poems. The first is addressed to Bárðr, the others to all present or to none. Egill’s discourse is then situated in a higher register than the others’ and he is not otherwise ascribed direct speech in this episode. But the motifs of drunkenness, vomiting, flight and pursuit inevitably recall Óðinn’s theft of the poetic mead and thus tie into Egill’s versifying under these macabre circumstances. Bárðr and Gunnhildr put their heads together and determine to poison Egill because of the affront he has given the royal couple through his mocking ability to consume ale. With a magical rite involving blood and runes Egill exposes the attempted poisoning, leaves the room, and stabs the king’s man Bárðr to death in the doorway when he follows him. As modern readers we cannot fail but link this murderous rage to Egill’s disappointment over the loss of Ásgerðr, an interpretation that the saga will itself later vindicate.

After his successful flight and the killing of more king’s men, Egill’s adventures are recounted the next day to Þórólfr, Þórir, and Arinbjǫrn. “Arinbjǫrn lét vel yfir þessum verkum, sagði foður sinn skyldan vera til at sætta hann við konung” (Egils saga, ch. 45) [Arinbjǫrn applauded the deeds and said it was his father’s duty to make terms with the king]. This is Arinbjǫrn’s first intervention on Egill’s behalf, here deferentially conveyed through his father. This looks back toǪlvir’s mediation earlier in the saga and associates Arinbjǫrn with a motif and course of action that will be reiterated through the following third of the saga. Here, however, it is Þórir who appropriately conducts negotiations. In direct speech Þórir gives Egill an explicit warning, saying that he has his family’s disregard for the king’s anger and that this implicates others. He will try to achieve a settlement, which will entail payment for the dead men from his own pocket. Egill and Arinbjǫrn remain in the background at the estate. But Arinbjǫrn is credited with the statement that “eitt skyldu yfir þá líða alla” (Egils saga, ch. 45) This has, typically one might say, been inflated in many translation to a notion of one “fate” affecting them all. Less porten-
tously, they would share the experience of the outcome of the settlement attempt. Yet it does underline Arinbjörn’s assumption of responsibility for Egill, who offers no comment. The violence subsides.

Egill spends the summer raiding in the Baltic and in the fall is invited by Arinbjörn to stay for the winter. Þórir considers this a rash invitation. At this point and in direct discourse, Arinbjörn blossoms as a mediator and fixer. His remark is worth pausing over.

“Ráða máttu vel, faðir,” segir Arinbjörn, “því við konung, at hann telí ekki at um vist Egils; þú munt bjóða Þórólfi, mági þínum, hér at vera, en vit Egill munum hafa eitt vetgrið báðir” (Egils saga, ch. 48).

[“Father,” says Arinbjörn, “you could well advise the king that he not object to Egill’s stay. You could invite Þórólfr, your kinsman by marriage, to be here, and Egill and I will both have the same winter quarters.”]

Arinbjörn begins by flattering his father, Þórir, that he could succeed in offering the king the same practical advice that he now gives him (it is not a question of an emotional appeal to Eiríkr). Since Þórólfr is a friend of Eiríkr’s, the winter household would not be thought a den of plotters against the king. Implicitly, Egill would be outnumbered and thus disempowered; explicitly, Egill would be under close wraps and would be obliged, bearishly, to hibernate — with Arinbjörn. Arinbjörn slips in a bit of determinative word-play (and word-magic), since grið “domicile, home” also means “truce, peace”. The winter stay becomes a winter peace. Þórir is swayed by his son’s counsel and understands that he will have his way. Here it is the sagaman’s pun: “En af þessi rœðu sá Þórir, at Arinbjörn myndi þessu rœða.” In the early part of the saga, externally directed advocacy is matched by intra-familial counsel, seniors advising juniors. Eiríkr, too, is won around but not before Gunnhildr raises strong objections in the stylistically heightened form of direct speech. She will continue as Egill’s chief antagonist, her Sámi magic matched against his verbal art. Another triangle emerges here in the king’s suggestion that Gunnhildr had once given Egill’s brother Þórólfr all her royal favor(s). Only in the case of Gunnhildr does any overt reference to sexuality occur, despite instances of abduction.

On a later occasion, plans are being made for attendance at a summer pagan religious festival. Þórir, too, is attentive to triangles: Gunnhildr’s conniving, Egill’s impetuousness, Eiríkr’s severity (Scudder 2000: 78). He does not want Egill to attend but cannot dissuade him, unless Arinbjörn also stays behind. His son agrees. Arinbjörn approaches his
friend: “Síðan sagði Arinbjǫrn Agli, at hann mun heima vera — ‘ok vit báðir,’ sagði hann; Egill kvað svá vera skyldu” (Egils saga, ch. 49) [Then Arinbjǫrn said to Egill that he would be staying home — "the two of us," he said. Egill said that it would be so]. Here we have indirect discourse to reflect the speaker’s intention for his own person and then the surprisingly intimate dual “ok vit báðir,” in direct speech. The affective value of his proposal almost outweighs the intentional content, with direct speech again reserved for important moments that are not always those of superficial exterior action. It is noteworthy that Egill not only is shown not to object and is not given direct speech at this juncture but also that he has not been accorded any direct speech in the saga thus far, with two important exceptions: 1) the extemporized verse, in its own register, and 2) an exchange with a freed captive on a raid in Kurland, far from Norway and its politics. In this half of the saga, Arinbjǫrn is the speaker, as if it were a modern situation in which an advocate urges his client to “let him do all the talking”. A comparable situation of “authorial restraint” is found in the deferral of a full physical portrait of the mature Egill until the midpoint of the saga and then at the court of Athelstan in England (Egils saga, ch. 55). Egill stays home from the religious festival, at which Þórólfr will make sacrifices in his interest, and the attack on the brothers planned by Gunnhildr is diverted to Þórólfr’s men. Later, Egill takes the ship of one of Gunnhildr’s brothers in retaliation, as the mutual antagonism escalates.

Advocate and Brother-in-law

In the course of the brothers’ mercenary service in Athelstan’s army, Þórólfr is killed at the Battle of Vin Moor in 948 and Egill puts considerable, albeit non-verbal, pressure on the English king to provide compensation (Magnús Fjalldal 1996). For this interaction, he requires no mediator or advocate, which accords well with Egill’s untrammelled freedom of action when away from Norway, where he is both circumscribed and represented by Arinbjǫrn. Meanwhile, Þórir has died and Arinbjǫrn has inherited his lands and office; he is fully the king’s man, emotionally and politically. Although things are quiet for the time, Arinbjǫrn is now in a more exposed and stressful situation as concerns his friendship with Egill and fealty to the king. Nonetheless, he invites Egill and his men to stop over with him on the latter’s return from the British Isles. Ásgerðr, who
has been staying at her cousin Arinbjórns estate, learns of her husbands death from Egill, although the conversation is only summarized and reported. Egill offers to look after her and her daughter, and she responds fittingly. Then follows one of the most subtly orchestrated episodes of the saga.

Egill is gloomy (as he, strategically, was at Athelstans court) and advertises his melancholy by sitting with his head in his cloak (otherwise an Odinic touch). On one occasion, Arinbjórns asks the cause of his unhappiness (ágleði), a question designed to sympathize, flatter, and display interest in Egills more active self. “[N]ú þó at þú hafir fengit skaða mikinn um bróður þinn, þá er þat karlmannligt, at bera þat vel; skal maðr eptir mann lifa, eða hvat kveðr þú nú? Láttu mik nú heyra.” (Egils saga, ch. 56) [“Now, even though you have suffered a great loss in your brother, it is manly to bear it well. Man lives on after man, and what are you composing just now? Let me hear it.”]. Perfunctory consolation, man-to-man counsel and proverbial wisdom, then a total and flattering shift in topic from Egill the mourner to Egill the creator. The proposed rapid move on the emotional scale is followed by an intimate invitation to the poet to share his thoughts and craft. Here Arinbjórns is mediating between two sides of Egills own character and situation warrior and poet, loner and family man, landless second son and sudden heir, mourner and (as we shall see) suitor proposing a stake, the poem, that all these internal parties will find of interest.

The scene follows saga conventions of a hearers near-immediate comprehension of the allusions, kennings, word-play, and disjointed syntax of skaldic verse, and Arinbjórns, asking to which woman the love poem is addressed, continues with another leading and encouraging question: “[H]efir þú fólgit nafn hennar í vísu þessi” [“Youve concealed her name in this verse, havent you?”]. With this hint, modern scholars have also seen Ásgerðr, a compound of ás “god” and garðr “enclosure” in “berg-Óneris foldar faldr” [head-dress of the rock-giants earth]. Egill utters what seems an impromptu verse on such onomastic encryption and then, finally finding a direct voice in the saga, makes a full, forward-driving but also flattering statement that suggests some prior strategizing. Both he and Arinbjórns are entering into negotiations through indirection.

“Hér mun vera,” segir Egill, “sem opt er mælt, at segjanda er allt sínum vin; ek mun segja þér þat, er þú spyr, um hverja konu ek yrki; þar er Ásgerðr, frændkona þín, ok þar til vilda ek hafa fullting þitt, at ek næða því ráði” (Egils saga, ch. 56).
[“This is a instance,” said Egill, “as is often said, of one being able to say everything to his friend. I will tell you, in response to your question, which woman I am composing verse about. She is Ásgerðr, your kinswoman, and in that regard I would like to have your assistance in realizing this plan.”]

Not only is this Egill’s first utterance in direct speech in Norway, it is also the saga’s first use of the word vinr “friend”. Egill’s apparent unburdening seems to move very fast but, in the context of a love-poem, as soon as he names the woman it must be assumed that his intentions are honorable marriage. All this would appear to come as little surprise to Arinbjǫrn, who must have anticipated the outcome of his initial remark and smoothly replies that he thinks it a fine idea and “skal ek vís leggja þar orð til, at þau ráð takisk” [“I will certainly put in a word so that this plan is successful”]. From the words of the poem we have advanced to the “good word” that one friend puts in for another. But we must recall that Arinbjǫrn stands to gain little by this arrangement and will pursue it at considerable risk. Arinbjǫrn is a deal-maker but is not coercive. Well aware that the ultimate decision as to the marriage is his, he avoids a chieftainly fiat through individual discussions with Ásgerðr and with her father Bjǫrn, both of whom defer to his decision. Thus, at the near-exact mid-point of the saga, with considerably less violence than marks his preceding and remaining career and with the ongoing counsel, support, and mediation of Arinbjǫrn, Egill wins his childhood sweetheart. Still ahead of him, however, is the pursuit of her land claims. Egill returns to Iceland after twelve years absence and settles down a wealthy man, in part by retaining all the compensation paid for the death of Þórólfr.

In a modus operandi by now familiar, Arinbjǫrn also engages to support Egill’s land claims on the death of Bjǫrn, the father of Ásgerðr, when Egill returns to Norway to challenge Berg-Ǫnundr, Bjǫrn’s son-in-law, who has seized the entire estate with the approval of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr. Arinbjǫrn makes a realistic assessment of Egill’s chances, noting that Gunnhildr is his greatest enemy. But it is Egill, not he, who proposes a course of action, which signals his maturity. “Konungr mun oss láta ná lǫgum ok réttendum á máli þessu, en með liðveizlu þinni þá vex mér ekki í augu at leita laga við Berg-Ǫnund” (Egils saga, ch. 56) [“The king will allow us to have a lawful trial and justice in this case, and with your support I won’t hesitate about going to law with Berg-Ǫnundr”]. This will be the only instance of Arinbjǫrn’s legal support, also a development from his personal interventions of the past. Ænundr refuses a settlement
that would have the two daughters share in the inheritance and Arinbjǫrn appeals to the king, who warns him against further support of Egill. In echoing Egill's words and in his choice of personal pronouns Arinbjǫrn reveals how closely associated he is with Egill's case: “Þú munt láta oss ná lǫgum af þessu máli” [“You will allow us to have a lawful trial in this case”].

At the court, Egill's summary of the case is given by the sagaman in indirect discourse, in a rhetorical strategy that lends it greater credibility, if less emotional impact. Berg-Ǫnundr, on the other hand, is granted a long, emotional harangue in direct speech with extraneous charges and unwarranted attestations of royal support, basing his claim on the status of Þóra at the time of her elopement with, or abduction by, Bjǫrn, far in the past. Arinbjǫrn participates in the pleading before the court by promising to bring witnesses to Þórir's reconciliation with Bjǫrn and recognition of Ásgerðr's inheritance rights. Gunnhildr, here the opponent of both Egill and Arinbjǫrn, intervenes verbally, criticizing Eiríkr's lack of decisiveness, while quite ignoring the facts and merits of the case, and then orchestrates a disruption of the legal proceedings so that no verdict is delivered. In a recourse more characteristic of the younger warrior he had been, Egill then publicly challenges Berg-Ǫnundr to a judicial duel, which the latter avoids. Here the public discourse is at its richest and no fewer than four participants are credited with direct discourse. Arinbjǫrn succeeds in drawing Egill off and advises on his escape from the pursuing king's men.

After the aborted legal proceedings, Egill reverts from the language of law and pleading to one more akin to poetry in terms of effect. He puts a ban or hex on the contested land itself, denying its human use. Later, he will address the landvættir or spirits of the land and attempt to shame them into banishing Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from all of Norway, erecting a níðstǫng or pole of shaming to reinforce the curse. Shame elides legitimacy. Independently, Gunnhildr has employed her own brand of magic, as in other sagas, here to the effect that she, Eiríkr, and Egill will meet again, at which time she hopes to exact revenge for the mounting series of offences and injuries Egill has dealt the royal cause, including the death of her son Rǫgnvaldr. While the sagas offer little specifics on the practices of seiðr (if this is Gunnhildr's art and not some differing kind of Sámi sorcery), as in Egill's hex and his verse, language is an important medium for effecting the curse. Magic and language intersect again in the Head-ransom episode (see below). Arinbjǫrn may be seen as having
pulled Egill in one direction, toward law, Gunnhildr in another, toward magic. Egill has also been made an outlaw by the king, with the result that he can be killed with impunity. Outlawry must have created an existential insecurity for the early Northmen. Arinbjörn remains a king’s man, and we recall that this is both the political support that he could offer as a chieftain’s son and also has an emotional component.

**Confronting the King**

Eiríkr contests the throne of Norway with his brothers, not stopping at fratricide. Yet he is ousted and takes refuge of a sort in the Norse settlement in York in England. Since the curses of literature are inevitably effective, Egill is drawn back to Britain and as the result of a storm at sea comes ashore near York. Shunning subterfuge, which is unlikely to succeed because of his size and appearance, he goes directly to York, ready to face the king but hoping to meet Arinbjörn first. This sets the stage for the celebrated *Head-ransom* scene, which then stands, in terms of language use, personal safety, threat of sanction, etc., in contrast to the formal legalese, linear narrative, and temporary immunity of the earlier court episode. Yet, like the law, where the construction of argument is as, or more, important than the facts, there is a formal framework that does not of itself dictate content. Egill is entirely in the king’s physical power but the king will be under considerable societal pressure in choosing a course of action in response to Egill’s strategy, public acts, and utterances. Glory, potentially shared, not justice, is the stake. There is an obvious *quid pro quo* implied but the contract remains to be negotiated.

Egill makes his way from the sea coast to York and finds Arinbjörn in his residence. “[É]n nú skaltu fyrir sjá, hvert ráð ek skal taka, ef þú vill nökkurt líð veita mér” (Egils saga, ch. 59) [“And now you will have to say what course of action I should follow, if you want to furnish me with any help”]. Arinbjörn is as clear-sighted as Egill about his chances but asks only whether Egill has arrived without being identified. Without explaining, he leads Egill to the king’s hall. Then, “Nú skaltu, Egill, færa Eiríkki konungi hófuð þitt ok taka um fót honum, en ek mun túlka mál þitt” [“Now Egill, you are to go before the king and offer up your head and

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4 On the conventional name for the poem, see Clunies Ross 2004; on parallels, Finlay 2011.
grasp his foot, and I will plead your case”). The operative verb here, fœra, is also used of formally presenting a poem. Arinbjǫrn makes a very full statement, which will not be reproduced here. In narratological terms it prepares the public and Eiríkr for the specific content of Egill’s poem but in terms of literary history may well have drawn in salient points (long, unforced sea voyage, desire for reconciliation, honor accorded the king) from the poem itself. For present purposes the key words here are sættask and fá sætt “to achieve a settlement”.

Then, like a skillful advocate, Arinbjǫrn also flatters the king, appealing to his nobility of spirit. Initially, Eiríkr rejects any notion of settlement and so tells Egill directly. Gunnhildr, typically, suggests Egill be killed on the spot. Arinbjǫrn counters with a proposition that appeals to sentiments other than those of revenge prompted by the queen. “Ef Egill hefir mælt illa til konungs, þá má hann þat beta í løfsorðum þeim, er allan aldr megi uppi vera” [“If Egill has spoken ill of the king, then he can compensate for it with words of praise that will live for all time”]. Speech will be matched to speech. Arinbjǫrn also puts down Gunnhildr’s objections, appealing to the king’s alleged better nature and observing that a killing at night is accounted murder. Eiríkr agrees that Egill may live until morning and orders that he reappear then. Arinbjǫrn is quite explicit in informing the king that he finds him in the wrong, and his comments provide a succinct résumé of dealings between Egill and the Norwegian kingship. “En hvert mál, er maðr skal dœma, verðr at líta á tilgørðir” [“Every case that one may have to adjudicate should be considered according to its circumstances”].

Back at his lodgings Arinbjǫrn reviews the situation and opines that the king’s mood seems to have softened, in that he is prepared to prize fame over vengeance. Arinbjǫrn recommends that Egill compose a praise poem and thus redeem his head. He says that his kinsman Bragi had done similarly in the distant past but Sigurður Nordal, the editor of the saga, judges “frændi minn” an error for “frændi þinn”, i.e., Egill’s distant kinsman, although no such line of descent has been traced. Kinship and the experience of a comparable situation of royal displeasure shared by Egill and Bragi Boddason would illustrate the generational model proposed for important portions of the narrative of Egils saga in both its genetic and generic or saga-specific implications and realizations. A friend like Úlfr and Kári of the “original” generation and ready to share a common fate if not purse, Arinbjǫrn has a predecessor as mediator in Òlvir just as the Egill, a poet bartering art for life, has in Bragi. As throughout the story, the ultimate goal is peace with the king (“svá at þér kœmi þat í
fríð við konung” [“so that you achieve peace with the king”]). The basic incongruity of the situation is not lost on Egill: “Freista skal ek þessa ráðs, er þú vill, en ekki hefi ek við því búizk at yrkja lof um Eirík konung” [“I will try this advice, as you wish, but never was I prepared for composing eulogies about King Eiríkr”].

Arinbjörn’s assistance extends beyond direct mediation with the king. When Egill is distracted from the composition of the poem by a swallow twittering outside the loft, Arinbjörn sits guard, after having seen an avian shape-shifter slipping away, widely seen as an emissary from Queen Gunnhildr. The next day, Arinbjörn continues to argue Egill’s case, first by emphasizing how much the king and he have meant to each other and how well one has served the other. Arinbjörn does not simply appeal to the king’s mercy. As before, the key term is sætt “settlement” not a pardon or some unilateral royal act that would permit Egill to depart unscathed. In this Arinbjörn will be frustrated. Arinbjörn is even ready to stake his own life, in a challenge that does not depart from the profit-and-loss perspective of these negotiations but has a degree of emotionality that encompasses all three men and is rare in the sagas:

“… vit Egill munum nú veitask at, svá at jafnsnimma skal okkr møta báðum. Muntu, konungr, þá dýrt kaupa líf Eglils, um þat er vér erum allir at velli lagðir, ek ok sveitugar mínir; myndi mik annars vara af yðr, en þú myndir mik vilja leggja heldr at jórðu en láta mik þiggja líf eins manns, er ek bið.” (Egils saga, ch. 60)

[“… Egill and I will now back one another up so that the two of us will have to be faced at the same time. You, king, will buy Egill’s life dearly if you want to kill us all, my followers and me. I expected more of you than that you would sooner have me laid low than let me have the life of one man when I’m asking for it”.

The king recognizes that Arinbjörn is quite prepared to thus raise the stakes. When he falls silent, Egill begins to recite his composition.

This is not the context for a discussion of the historicity of the poem and its circumstances of composition. To a modern reader, it is richly ironic, since the praise, however conventional, seems out of all proportion to the accomplishments of Eiríkr in his murderous squabbles with his

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5 Discussed in Theisohn 2009, who goes on to propose, instead, a visit by Óðinn in support of the poet’s creative effort. The possibility that the ‘swallow episode’ reflects, albeit poorly, a lost skaldic stanza by Egill is explored in Sayers forthcoming. On the interplay of rhetoric and magic, see Meylan 2010: 154–57.
brothers and his raids in Scotland and northern England (Swanson 1994). Egill is not here or elsewhere a satirist, nor does he indulge in sexual slurs like some other poets. The Egill of the saga (and everyone else) is well aware of how hypocritical the poet is but this seems not to count, since the poem will be an artifact that will have a future value independent of the drama of its composition.

At the risk of some overreading, there are phrasings in the poem that undercut the exaggerated praise. The most notable is in the first stanzas, when Egill speaks of the ship-load of praise poetry that he has brought, the sea being a meta-metaphor for the mead of poetry. Egill does not convey his load of praise in a sleek and aggressive langskip or war-ship but on a tubbier knorr, a merchant’s cargo vessel. Thus, despite the martial imagery that follows, with the beasts of battle running wild through the poem, this is a commercial undertaking, the means to an exchange, and as such is demeaning to a king. The fact that praise (mærð) is loaded on the stern (skutr) of the vessel, and not in the hold, cannot fail to recall Óðinn’s theft of the mead of poetry and flight from Suttungr’s hall in the form of an eagle that discharges, for future poetasters, some dribbles of the creative elixir from his rear. In addition, in two stanzas Egill states that he has heard of Eiríkr’s warrior exploits (st. 3, 7) and thus does not accord them the status of facts. Óðinn granted victory to the king (st. 3) but the god is known, from Lokasenna, for his partiality, giving the day not to the brave but to the lucky or devious. Stanza 16 show the king free with his gold but fiercely possessive of his land, when the reverse is true, Eiríkr has been exiled from Norway (fulfilling Egill’s curse) and is not otherwise known for his generosity. Egill’s poem comes from his depths of his mind (“af munar grunni”) but equally “ór hlátra ham”, from “the seat of laughter”, again, the mind. Despite the poetic conventions of heiti, bynames, and the figure of metonymy, by which any of maid, ale-dispenser, mother, widow can stand for woman, the capacity for laughter, especially mocking laughter with which the Norse word is associated, is hardly an appropriate verbal proxy or kenning for the poet’s mind when eulogizing a monarch. Yet, in seeking out the hidden riches of a poem from the larger narrative context in which it is now set, we may overvalue certain terms while perceiving irony where none was meant, where even the conventions of the drápa make it impossible.

The drápa employs runhenda or end-rhyme. Composing in 948, Egill would have been one of the first Norse exponents of this metrical form. Yet the poem has a known antecedent in this respect, a verse composed
by Skallagrímur (Egils saga, ch. 2, poem 2) on the release of some of King Haraldr’s men who had been kept prisoner. This has been identified as a “chiastic version of the situation in which Egill finds himself”, in which the poet’s role is reversed, the captor turned captive (Swanson 1994: 111–112). It has counterparts in Arinbjörn’s recall of Bragi, an even more distant ancestor in the same fraught situation, and the recurrent deployment of such motifs as the thwarted poet-lover (Ǫlvir, Egill), the intercessor (Ǫlvir, Arinbjörn), the expansionist king (Haraldr, Eiríkr, later Hákon) that move the plot forward, while also recalling the determinative effect of the past on the future.

The king remarks only that the poem was well declaimed, not that its content was accurate or its form praiseworthy. Egill is permitted to leave with his head but there has been no reconciliation (sett). Later, when Egill is safely at the court of Athelstan, he improvises a stanza in response to the king’s query, in which Eiríkr is called sanndsparr “spare with fairness”, an evaluation that negates much of the head-ransom poem. The sense of grim play is also suggested by yet another impromptu verse that Egill speaks after Eiríkr has heard his eulogy. He thanks the king for his head: who ever received a finer gift? While life itself is surely the most precious possession of us all, Egill sets the value of his head, his mind, and poetic craft very high indeed.

Friendship in Balance

The ransoming of Egill’s head marks one high point in the saga and it is both appropriate and thematically consistent that the saga pause over the aftermath of the narrow escape in York. Although not a public act and thus not open to social approbation, Egill gives Arinbjörn two heavy gold rings that he had from Athelstan. This gift might be said to be won by, and be reflective of, Egill’s acts in present time and is, for Egill, uncharacteristically generous.6 Since it is in the nature of reciprocal gifting that one not reply in kind and can thus preclude invidious comparison, Arinbjörn gives Egill a sword that he had received from Egill’s brother Pórólfr. The weapon has its own biography and line of descent. Its distant origins lay with Ketill hangr, who had used it in duels, thus providing a

6 On gift-giving in the saga, see Barreiro 2010 and 2012.
neat tie to Egill and his inheritance case. Ketill, in turn, was descended from Egill’s remote ancestor, Úlfur inn óargi, Kári’s partner. Along this diachronic coordinate, the sword passing between the families sews their fortunes together like a basting needle, in much the same way as a young woman given in marriage. The sword has gained in value as the deeds of successive generations are attached to it. It has remained very sharp, a symbol for the acute relevance of distant events and persons, at least in the economy of the saga. All its prestige is ultimately reflected onto the friendship of the two men as well as on the institution of gift-giving. The sword, although mute and requiring an interpreter, has a recollective function, like Arinbjörn in his reference to Egill’s ancestor in a similar situation. The past can then be put to an instrumental purpose. Arinbjörn’s repeated intercession on Egill’s behalf has been in the nature of a gift, albeit an intangible one. Here it is memorialized in concrete form and represents Santiago Barreiro’s contention (2012) that emphasis is not on what one can do with gifts, but on “what gifts do regardless of individual choice”, that is, not through strategizing or acting instrumentally. After the exchange, the theme of the present essay is also highlighted: “skilðusk þeir með kærleik inum mesta” [They parted in the greatest friendship]. The York episode also marks the beginning of a shift in the relationship of the two men in terms of the donor and recipient of services. Arinbjörn will continue in his customary role for one more intercession, at the same time as the volume of direct discourse accorded Egill, a sign of enhanced agency for more than physical acts, increases.

Not only land but quarrels are inherited. Egill takes his inheritance case before Hákon Haraldsson, the new king, purportedly a ruler more concerned with justice than Eiríkr, but he is unsympathetic to Egill’s claim. After the court visit, Egill acknowledges his debt to Arinbjörn in a stanza, which prepares for his intercession on behalf of Arinbjörn’s sister, nephew, and niece. Egill prevents a coerced marriage of the girl to a Swedish berserk, Ljótr inn bleiki, who has been fighting duels in the area and increasing his property holdings. When Egill takes over the dueler’s role and kills Ljótr, he continues the repayment of his debt to Arinbjörn but also adds to his legal problems, since the estate of a dead foreigner would normally fall to the king, although the winner of a duel also had a claim to it. But Egill is also a foreigner. Motifs associated with Egill’s advancing age also now appear in his verse, fitted onto the

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7 On social memory in the saga, see Byock 1988a.
iconic mentions of the poet’s head. The previous land claim involving Ásgerðr’s inheritance also moves toward resolution, when Egill’s kills Atli inn skammi, the brother of Berg-Ǫnundr, who has taken over the latter’s estate. Just as with Egill’s lack of success before the law in its more developed manifestation, when the judge, plaintiffs, and witnesses obliged him to a recourse in its more primitive form (the judicial duel), so Egill must kill his charmed opponent, on whom iron weapons do not bite, by tearing out his throat with his teeth in the fundamental mode of physical struggle. Ásgerðr’s lands now secured, Egill returns to Iceland and there is another hiatus in the action.

The death of Eiríkr occasions Arinbjǫrn’s return to Norway, where he is reinstated by Hákon but is not above suspicion for harboring loyalty to Eiríkr’s family in the form of his ambitious sons. Both Egill and Arinbjǫrn are survivors of Norwegian dynastic rivalries, although in rather different fashion. For reasons unspecified by the saga, Egill then visits Norway and, continuing the motif of repayment, presents Arinbjǫrn with a fine sail, which can be seen as an outcome of his settled, land-based wealth, since it is the product of sheep-herding and largely women’s domestic work, although no less valuable for that. In a stanza Egill praises Arinbjǫrn’s generosity — he had given Egill clothes of silk and English cloth — and says that he “never had a better friend” (“getk aldri vin betra”, Egils saga, ch. 67). Soon, Egill once again feigns melancholy in order to attract his friend into the world of his practical problems, as ever founded in the accrual of land and wealth. This time, representative of his waning power, Arinbjǫrn is reluctant to go before the king to plead Egill’s case but nonetheless takes on the task. He fails. His influence with the Norwegian throne is spent, although Hákon does not move against him. Because Egill is unable to take possession of Ljótr’s estate without the king’s agreement, Arinbjǫrn pays Egill in silver for the intervention that saved his sister and her family. At this point in the saga one might assess Egill’s debt to Arinbjǫrn as very nearly paid off. Egill has been active in a variety of modularities for the acquisition of wealth and well-being: as raider and robber abroad, plaintiff before the law, judicial dueler, taciturn negotiator for compensation before Athelstan, finally, through the exchange of tangible and intangible goods (Helgi Þorláksson 1992, Sayers 1995).

In a rather surprising turn in light of the saga’s earlier reticence as to what the two friends did together other than pursue royal favor and land claims, Egill and Arinbjǫrn go raiding together in Saxony and Frisia. By
this time Arinbjörn has thrown his support behind Haraldr gráfeldr Eiríks-
son as the rightful claimant to the Norwegian crown. His store of influence
with royalty, as might come to Egill’s assistance, is now almost entirely
depleted and the situation of the friends is to a considerable extent reversed
from that which dominated the first half of the saga. With the backing of
King Athelstan, the now experienced Egill even offers to become King
Hákon’s man (with a view to winning support for his land claims) and
serves as an advisor to Þorsteinn Þóruson, Arinbjörn’s nephew, who has
been charged with a risk-filled tribute-collection assignment in Värmland.
Negotiations with the king’s representatives lead to Egill’s participation
in the tax collection trip instead of Þorsteinn, the secret hope of the kings’
men being that the Icelander will be killed in one way or another and
thus removed as an obstruction to Norwegian royal policy. Again here
Egill is standing in for a member of Arinbjörn’s family, repaying years
of advice with risk-taking and physical action. His actions in Värmland
against overwhelming odds and the successful delivery of the tribute
help in having Þorsteinn reinstated in the king’s good graces. Egill has
again assisted Arinbjörn’s kin. Before returning to Iceland he appoints
an agent to sell off his Norwegian lands, if buyers can be found, thus
disengaging himself from Norwegian affairs and consolidating his wealth
and resources in Iceland, where the last fifth of the saga will play out.

In Iceland Egill loses his son Bǫðvarr in a shipwreck. In an artful
episode that recalls in inverted fashion the scene in York, Egill’s daughter
Þorgerðr coercively tricks her father back into living and composing an
elegy for the fallen son and brother. A wealthy man, Egill lives to old
age in Iceland. When Arinbjörn’s protégé Haraldr Eiríksson becomes
king and Arinbjörn can resume his chieftainship, Egill composes a poem
in praise of Arinbjörn. The story does not provide a motivation for this
composition but within the narrative economy of the saga it might be seen
as Egill’s contribution to consolidating the position to which Arinbjörn has
returned by showing him a brave and just chieftain. Thus, Egill reinforces
Arinbjörn’s position as “head” of the province. There is little personal in
the poem, although Egill does thank his friend for saving his head and
life. The glory that the poem will generate may be seen as repayment.
There is a recurrent theme of generosity, as accords well with the two
friends’ relations and would also enhance Arinbjörn’s role as leader and
patron. Wordplay on the name Arinbjörn yields the intimate term “hearth-
bear”. As before, poetic creation and Egill’s role in it also bulks large in
the poem. Arinbjörn and Egill’s friendship with him are memorialized
in a poem that will outlast the grave mound. Human memory and the abstractions of language thus paradoxically prove more durable than mere physicality.

Soon thereafter news reaches Egill of Arinbjörn’s death in the internecine war for the Norwegian kingship. This occasions another elegiac stanza on how the number of great men is dwindling. For a last time, patron’s generosity is matched by poet’s praise. At this juncture, Arinbjörn’s capacity to aid Egill has also been fully expended. Unlike his friend Egill, Arinbjörn does not end on the winning side. Thus concludes, in rather abstract and disincarnated form, the friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn, which has stretched over more than four decades. Freed of his legal cares and independent of the Norwegian crown, Egill forms a new friendship without political benefits but with a fellow poet, Einarr skálglamm Helgason. This may be thought a less contingent bond, more truly expressive of personality and needs in early old age.

A Mythic Model?

Like Óðinn and Týr, principal gods in the Norse pantheon, Egill and Arinbjörn complement each other as much as they stand in contrast. Fortuitously, perhaps, Egill and Arinbjörn occupy space in the saga in the same proportion as Óðinn and Týr in our extant sources for Norse mythology, in that the latter of each pair is only sketchily known and in the tradition is associated with only one dynamic type situation, although one with distinct parallels, as when Arinbjörn puts his life on the line before Eiríkr in York like Týr placing his hand in Fenrir’s maw. From the structuralist perspective that this comparison with the Norse pantheon invokes, the attributes of Egill and Arinbjörn could be listed under any

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8 A mythic model for the friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn could be elaborated but it would be based more on complementarity of function than any known collegiality between these gods. Týr’s slim dossier makes such an exercise impractical in the present context but, if it were to be undertaken, a better understanding of Týr’s primary function among the gods would be necessary. One approach to this question would be to determine just what Týr gains by putting up his hand as surety with Fenrir. Since Óðinn gained ‘knowledge’ from the surrender of an eye, surely Týr won more than the temporary fettering of the wolf Fenrir. Since the god is also called no settler of disputes, his enhanced function may have lain in the sphere of lawyering and litigation (and not law and contract as suggested in earlier scholarship).
number of headings but, in the ideological context of the saga, and in view of its purported author, Snorri Sturluson, and his ambivalent stance in Norwegian-Icelandic relations, some of the most illuminating pairs of rubrics would be Norway and Iceland, kingdom and commonwealth, dependency and independence. Here Norway is the norm and Iceland the exception. In terms of the two personalities involved in this friendship, the most salient of these pairings are royal councilor and free agent; courtier and warrior; political influence and personal fame; legal protection and royal favor, and outlawry; moderation and immoderation; conventional vs unconventional courses of action; formal public speech and poetry; patron and poet; engagement in royal interest and occasional benevolence toward the little man; generosity and close-fistedness; engagement exclusively in Norway and engagement in the wider exterior world (albeit for personal gain); killer and savior; adept of word and other magic and plain-speaker. Common concerns are, nonetheless, many: personal fame, material well-being, the elaboration of strong family structures.

In all of this, Egill sees himself as under the Odinic aegis in its several associations, with conflict, death, heightened emotion, and poetic creation. It is more difficult to recognize a human reflex of Týr in Arinbjǫrn, save in the characteristic role of mediator in contractual relations, here landholding under expansionist royal rule, with the vital component of readiness to engage a personal stake. In Egill’s case, there are, in addition, more evident reflexes of divine function and meta-function: battle fury and the means to its record, inspired poetry; legal property ownership and management, and the means to its acquisition, litigation and judicial duel. Of the figures of myth one cannot properly speak of character development. Similarly, Egill does not so much mature in personality terms as shift operational strategies, attempting to exploit the law, where it will provide a more assured reward, but always ready to combine this approach with his accustomed violence, as in the judicial duels.

At the moment when he puns on the name Ásgerðr in his indirect suit for her hand, he begins a reorientation toward settled life, the exploitation of wealth, and family, as if the name Egill, too, had a hidden meaning or as if he had shifted allegiance from Óðinn to Týr (advantageous legal outcomes but not necessarily reconciliation). Arinbjǫrn is a more static character, remaining true to the end to Eiríkr Haraldsson and his sons.

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9 On Snorri and *Egils saga*, see Torfi Tulinius 2004.
10 On social ideals and possible profitable undertakings, see Helgi Þorláksson 1992.
This bond, like that with Egill, seems to have an almost exclusively emotional basis, although Arinbjǫrn’s chieftaincy is dependent on the king. We know very little of his life, aside from his support of Egill, and he does not enjoy discrete space in the saga. But then the entire saga is experienced through Egill’s idiosyncratic lens, as the extemporary poems well attest. Nor does Queen Gunnhildr, Egill’s fiercest enemy, evolve as a character, although her hatred grows in intensity. With the sexual promiscuity, to which her husband alludes and which is known from other sagas, she might be put under the sign of Freyja.

The affinity of Egill and Arinbjǫrn seems set by the childhood infatuation of the former and does not truly evolve, only become denser in incident and thus memory. The generational model for the friendship of the Icelander and Norwegian that has been proposed, with its emphasis on categorization and complementarity, is useful in illuminating the richness of this relationship but cannot truly reveal hitherto hidden features of the saga. It does, however, assist in understanding a human bond that has received little prior attention. If Snorri were indeed the author, some awareness of mythological “antecedents” in the form of Óðinn and Týr is highly possible, especially in light of the saga convention of elaborating on distant, originary stories. The timelessness of myth, its synchronicity, undergirds a world-view in which past, present, and future are not simply in diachronic linear sequence but also imbricated in other causalities. In a saga telling, the present also dictates the presentation of the ancestral past.

The generational models followed in Egils saga are not particular to it but are a convention of northern tale-telling and perhaps also of this culture’s understanding of human history. The early chapters of other works serve a similar proleptic purpose, setting out both an ancestral generation (often pre-settlement) and establishing what appear to be unremarkable details (proto-motifs) that grow toward thematic status over the course of the saga. Throughout the saga there are correspondences along lateral axes (parallel functions, relationships, etc.) and plot-related consequences of these affinities along a temporal axis. Genetic correspondences among the characters are most pointed in the early chapters devoted to Egill (affinities with both father and grandfather). Here, too, are the major contrasts, as between dark Egill and his fair brother, Þórólfr. Egill finds cause for poor relations with both his father and his brother. The generic or genre-related aspect of narrative organization is to introduce situations requiring mediation and appropriate intercessors such as Ǫlvir who, in the partial atmosphere of the saga, are supportive of Kveldúlf and his
descendants, while their counterparts in dispute are more categorically identified as ill-disposed advisors to the Norwegian king, usually acting through deceit and with murderous intentions. Such functional figures are drawn from the communal memory to serve saga ends.

The friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn has a rich generational antecedent, in that their fathers were foster-brothers, so that the two lineages were allied even before the ties of marriage represented by Ásgerðr’s unions with Þórólfr and Egill. Thus, the two families continued to produce members with the human potential for friendship (genetic linking) and this bond, man-to-man, is repeated narratively (generic linking). Both of the models essayed here (genetic/historical, generic/narratological), plus the suggested binary divine paradigm, contributes to illuminate the tight interlace of narrative and richness of theme in Egils saga.

Reciprocity in Narrative

A comprehensive account of other features of narrative technique that stage male friendship in Egils saga is beyond the scope of this study but a number of other binarisms that recall the pair of Norse friends may be mentioned, beginning with prosimetrics. The interspersed extemporized verses have a “reflective function”, adding an emotional wash to accompanying events (Swanson 1994: 107). The longer poems, more studied creations, are integrated into the narrative in more dynamic fashion, in particular the Hofudlausn poem, on which the plot turns. The use of direct and indirect discourse runs in parallel to the prosimetric disposition but there is no true correspondence between poetic utterance and other direct speech, in that the latter is not usually so much reflective of past acts as vivifying the atmosphere of action in the present, primarily by directing the reader’s attention to significant and decisive moments. Such direct speech may contain sententious observations on human dynamics, usually ill-heeded in the conventions of the saga, or have a kind of spotlighting effect, expressive of the character’s immediate concerns, while also providing a cue to readers at a pivotal moment in the saga. This function of direct speech is especially apparent in the scenes of mediation in which dialogue is not simply reflective of attitudes toward the ongoing

11 See O’Donoghue 2005 for a recent discussion, with review of prior scholarship.
action but actually propels it, with, on occasion, as many as four active voices (Egill, Arinbjǫrn, Eiríkr, Gunnhildr). In the matter of voice and Egill’s selective reticences, it is noteworthy that among women only Queen Gunnhildr is accorded direct speech in the saga, with the exception of a few scenes in farmhouses where there is no royal presence, e.g., Egill’s intervention on behalf of Arinbjǫrn’s sister and her children in the duel with Ljótr. The movement into direct speech, often startling yet organic in the midst of reported speech, has a functional opposite in the frequent laconism of the sagas, for which the reader or listener is required to work out the emotional background to acts, e.g., Egill’s indisposition on the day of Ásgerðr’s wedding.

As a further binary construct and on a larger scale, Egils saga alternates between large-dimensioned scenes of raiding and war beyond Norway and Iceland (England, Lappland and Permia, Frisia, Saxony, Värmland) and tense, multiply constrained indoor scenes in farmhouses and makeshift royal halls. In all this, the teleological thrust of the saga runs on a track of land claims and the acquisition of material wealth, which are accompanied by disputes with Norwegian kings and the creation of poetry, although such disputes do form a tightening, around Egill’s neck. Friendship does not drive the plot but only prevents its too-early resolution and perpetuates its tensions, the sequence of intercessions never truly effecting reconciliation but allowing Egill to survive, recover position, and fight another day.

Egils saga is ostensibly the biography of a poet but has an important and substantial — in terms of volume — foreword, a miniature family saga. As a one example of the rigorous maintenance of motif, the narrative arc is punctuated with spheres: from the first duck egg as the poet’s reward, through countless references to the craggy head of the poet, on to the pools of hot springs where his treasure chests are hidden at the saga’s close, and his spherical skull still intact in its last lines. What began with the detail of a common purse concludes with the extremes of selfishness, as precious metal is recommitted to the ground by the aged poet turned dragon. But, with the friendship of Egill and Arinbjǫrn as a buffer zone, the saga is also a history of the relations between Norwegian kings, bent on hegemonic rule, and well-born families, which acquiesce or go

12 On the model of miscegeneration between male Æsir and female giants, Egill might be thought to have some giant blood in his veins, referenced repeatedly by his mountainous size, craggy features, and darkness of complexion. On animal affinities, see Ármann Jakobsson 2011.
Generational Models for the Friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn

into exile as the settler generation of Iceland. Questions of the historicity of *Egils saga* to one side, these events of the ninth and tenth centuries are writ even larger in those of the thirteenth century, in which personal ambitions and animosities in Iceland have swollen to the dynastic and factional level. Simply put, the friendship between Egill and Arinbjörn symbolizes the ideal relationship between Iceland and Norway as conceived by Snorri as political agent. The reality of the matter is that Norwegian-Icelandic relations are more similar to those between Egill and Eiríkr or Hákon, with Snorri himself, descended from Egill but now in the role of Arinbjörn, a role in the end even less consequential.

Just as Egill’s poetry is largely about himself and the very composition of verse (early noted in Lie 1958) so the prose saga is to a large degree about composing and performing poetry, its role in politics and personal gain, its value to both poet and patron in the pursuit of honor and glory. Artistic freedom would be a concept foreign to Norway in the tenth or thirteenth century and Egill is too materially crass to make of him a martyr to that cause, but, never a court poet, he does maintain the independence of his art, rejecting in all but one instance the constraints of patronage, save that of a friend. Here, too, Iceland’s integrity is problematized on the microcosmic level of the individual. Egill’s verse is self-referential, like that of several other skalds, especially those around whom stories have coalesced, but speaks more about poetic inspiration and composition.

The Nature of Norse Friendship

Two assessments of the friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn have been made in recent critical scholarship. In a passing remark in a longer study devoted to autobiographical memory Russell Poole (2014: 119) calls the bond between the two men a “pragmatic friendship”, a term drawn from anthropology and indicative of an instrumental function as generally found in strategic political and economic alliances formed for the mutual benefit of two parties. Santiago Barreiro, in fuller discussions of gift-giving in *Egils saga* (2010, 2012), rejects the idea of instrumentalism or the pursuit of an ideological goal, and emphasizes the emotional link between the two men. Less theoretical and closer to Egill’s world is the conception

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13 Also relevant here are Viðar Pálsson 2010, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2010, Byock 1988b,
of “horizontal bonds of friendship among elite power groups”, standing in contrast to “vertical links emanating from the monarchy and the church” that Lars Hermanson posits for twelfth-century Denmark. This could well describe the situation that Þórir and his fellow-Norwegian chieftains found themselves in, when Haraldr hárfagri initiated his program of national unification under a strong kingship. Egill would qualify for inclusion in such a paradigm only by virtue of his paternal family, but emigration was chosen over accommodation either with other chieftains or with the king. Hermanson has since examined these lateral bonds and finds them inspired by the discourse of friendship emanating from the monastic community. Yet it is doubtful that the saga author modeled the friendship of Egill and Arinbjǫrn on any awareness of a pervasive monastic collegiality. And Egill’s prime-signing at the court of Athelstan in no way affects the later course of the saga and may simply have been a condition of employment as a fighter, like a valid union card.

Invariably in the sagas, the child is the father of the man. The capsule narratives met at the beginning of sagas, in this case the friendship of Úlfr and Kári, narratively foreshadow richer developments in the accounts that follow. The overlapping historical and narrative antecedents of foster-brotherhood between members of the two families of the saga proper predispose the reader to see an emotional basis for the friendship of Egill and Arinbjǫrn, one that does not preclude an instrumental dimension later in life such as the involvement of Arinbjǫrn in Egill’s land claims and dealings with kings. There are comparable emotional ties between their fathers, the foster-brothers Skallagrímr and Þórir, and a closer parallel in Bjǫrn Brynjólfsson’s attachment to Pórolfr Skallagrímsson. The pause in the narrative account and the authorial intervention at the first appearance of Arinbjǫrn must be seen as establishing the emotional prime mover in the friendship that develops. Despite the incongruity when viewed from the perspective of Egill’s later career, this can only be seen as hero worship: “Arinbjǫrn … var nǫkkuru ellri en Egill; Arinbjǫrn var þegar snímma skóruðir maðr ok inn mesti íþróttamaðr. Egill gerði sér títt við Arinbjǫrn ok var honum fylgjasamr …” (Egils saga, ch. 41). Yet, even in childhood, Egill does not model himself on Arinbjǫrn — too aware, perhaps, of his fundamentally differing personality — but rather seeks


a comparable level of success in his chosen undertakings, not least of which is the pursuit of material gain as evident in his early desire to go raiding and acquire wealth. Nor does Arinbjörn ever successfully dissuade Egill from a planned course of action. The friendship is a freely chosen relationship that emerges in a near-empty space, with no cause for rivalry or prospect of unilateral gain. Love and loyalty, and later kinship through marriage, assure its longevity. It is also asymmetrical. Arinbjörn initially gains little, aside from flattering attention. Responsibility rests chiefly on one side of the equation, gratitude on the other, and the childhood pattern of loyalty and trust seems to remain intact. It should be noted that Arinbjörn never visits Iceland nor is Egill in a position to host him in Norway. Despite the frequent and lengthy winter visits of Egill, saga conventions do not allow us to see how the friends spend their politically inactive time together. Thus, the friendship is far from instrumentalist from Arinbjörn’s perspective, at least until late in the saga. To project the instrumentalist/emotional dichotomy onto a larger scale that encompasses relations between states, Iceland and Norway, the distinction might be recast as political/cultural. In light of his artistic and political activities in Norway, Snorri Sturluson must have thought the cultural bond of the two nations more than firm enough to permit some negotiated link under the aegis of royal rule.

The firm authorial exercise of these same criteria of relevance also entails that the bond of Egill and Arinbjörn gives little purchase for an inquiry into male-male desire, same-sex acts and activity, or even the targets of sexual desire in its all-encompassing sense. The bond is certainly homosocial, while still being fully conventional.15 The sagas are not prudish in sexual matters, as Unnr’s graphic account of the penile dysfunction of her husband, Hrútr, another lover of Queen Gunnhildr, well illustrates in Njáls saga. But evidence and relevance are totally lacking for a homoerotic dimension to Egils saga, even for the least anxiety or longing in this respect. Beyond that, Arinbjörn is not shown in any mentoring role, is not shown as a warrior (or poet). Yet the age differential must of necessity persist, and Egill is always the headstrong and stubborn younger man, Arinbjörn his moderate and moderating senior. In a world not of two sexes but of “men” and “others” (effeminate

15 On the wider question of masculinity and male-to-male friendship, see Jaeger 1999, and as realized in the riddarasögur of the North, Bagerius 2009. Still relevant for these questions is Byock 1988b.
men, women, children, the infirm and elderly, animals), manhood lies in the possession and, as needed, exercise of power. This is the true locus of desire and the contingent targets of such power, procreation to one side, may be variously women or men. The issue of manliness or male gender adequacy, which is narrativized in the sagas as the discrediting of a rival in love or at law, finds expression in defamation and allegation, not in the narrative account of real acts. With sex seen as something that one person does to another, the same-sex acts that may be depicted in a rude carving are more about displays of power than the fulfillment of lust.\(^\text{16}\) The passive man of the couple (“the one who stands in front”) suffers stigmatization more than the active one (“he who stands behind”) does condemnation. Alleged male rape by trolls is also emasculating on the double count of passivity and the loss of bodily and even species integrity. The \textit{níðstöng} or pole of defamation that Egill erects in order to have the land spirits drive Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from Norway is intended to shame supernatural powers into ejecting the couple but neither the pole nor Egill’s curse targets the sexuality of the royal pair, not even the queen’s voracious, aggressive, socially destabilizing heterosexuality. At the very most, it might be suggested that the threat to Egill’s honor that would necessarily accompany same-sex activity in a world without personal privacy would have deterred Arinbjörn from acting on any desire, simply because of the value he placed on the deep friendship of the two young men.

Rather surprising, perhaps, for saga intrigue, there is no attempt by Egill’s enemies to discredit Arinbjörn or otherwise come between the friends. This and other close focusing makes the friendship seem the stronger and more inviolate. As seen above, various dynamic triangular relationships put the bond under strain, most noticeably as concerns Arinbjörn, who has emotional as well as political ties with pretenders to the Norwegian throne. The friendship between men has a counterweight in the enmity, mostly one-sided, between Gunnhildr and Egill, which does not exclude a similarly one-sided sexual attraction. Like Loki in many of his adventures, Gunnhildr promotes violent change, acting outside the framework of conventional male relations. She is then also an intermediary, like Arinbjörn, but her counsel is never sought and she is never recognized by Egill through public address. The two ambitious and acquisitive personalities may have more in common than they care to recognize. Her foil is the compliant Ásgerðr.

\(^{16}\) Clark 2009: 51–53, citing Clover 1993; see, too, Meulengracht-Sørensen 1993.
Conclusion

The friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn is a successful one, of mutual profit. Yet, like the intercessions of Ǫlvir, its effects beyond the personal fortunes of the two individuals is limited. At best, armistice and grudging tolerance are won in the broader socio-political context. Reconciliation does not prove possible, settlements are not lasting, even though land claims are successfully pursued in the legal forum. As with Iceland and Norway, a relationship in which the former can provide the latter with court poets but not until the thirteenth century with political allies, Egill, despite his ability to serve a king such as Athelstan in a mercenary capacity, cannot be reconciled, nor could his family, with the hegemony attempted by Haraldr hárfagri and his descendants. From a different perspective, Egill is self-reliant and self-sufficient, his own man, in all contexts but Norway and its outpost in York.

As noted above, the friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn does not drive the narrative of *Egils saga* except in the sense that it permits one of its parties to survive until the next crisis, crises provoked by its opposite, enmity. In the quest for an elusive equilibrium between Egill and Norwegian kings, Arinbjörn is a pivot, a possible means to equilibrium, not a motor force. The friendship proper, if not its facilitating narrative function, then has a curiously encapsulated nature and has gone little noticed in contemporary scholarship. As consequences of the saga’s laconism with regard to all but plot essentials, its understated emotionality, and of the purposes to which the boyhood bond is put in the later lives of the two men, the friendship eludes the neater theories of medieval western European gift-giving and male bonding. Less a complex or fraught relationship than one caught in a greater dynamic, it remains a potent symbol, with antecedents in the Age of Settlement, of idealized relations between Iceland and Norway in the fractious thirteenth century.

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Generational Models for the Friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn

Summary

The friendship of Egill Skallagrímsson and Arinbjörn Þórisson in Egils saga Skallagrímssonar is projected against two models encompassing generation in its...
various senses. One is genetic, based on the recurrence of thematically important personality traits across human generations. The other, a generic or saga-specific model, contributes to the analysis of type scenes, recurrent roles, etc. as saga-writing conventions. While Arinbjørn mediates between Egill and Norwegian royal power over four decades, promotes the economic interests of his childhood companion, and even protects his life, the friendship is not primarily instrumental or pragmatic in nature but has, rather, an emotional basis in shared early memories and family alliances. On a personalized scale, the relations between Egill and Norwegian kings run in parallel to those between Iceland and Norway in the fraught thirteenth century, when Snorri Sturluson, the putative author of the saga, also sought a role as mediator, one ultimately less successful than that of Arinbjørn.

**Keywords**: Old Norse-Icelandic literature, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, friendship, mediation, narratology, direct speech

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