

Egils saga, *Heimskringla*, and the Daughter of Eiríkr blóðøx*

H*eimskringla*—or more precisely, the manuscript *Kringla*—has long dominated scholarship in two areas: medieval Norwegian history and saga studies. Although it is known to be based on earlier writings,¹ *Heimskringla*'s popularity in both medieval and modern times has caused it to be held up as a standard against which other historical writing is judged. The fact that it is attributed to Snorri Sturluson, a well-known literary figure and a prominent player in the power politics of thirteenth-century Iceland, adds to its attraction. Since the proposed author is also given credit for one of the best known (and perhaps the earliest) of the Icelandic family sagas—*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*²—as well as the *Edda*, we appear to have examples of the works of a known author unparalleled in medieval Iceland. The temptation to draw biographical or literary-historical conclusions on the basis of these attributions is almost irresistible. It should, however, be resisted. In the following I will argue that Snorri's authorship of *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* should not be taken for granted, and that recent arguments reversing the traditional dating of the two works should be rejected.

If *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* are assumed to have been written by Snorri, scholars are faced with certain questions. Textual critics must explain why, although *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* have many passages in common, there are also signifi-

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1. As Theodore Andersson has pointed out, "*Heimskringla* is by no means a first formulation, but a final fusion. It is a synthesis in a very narrow, almost editorial, sense" (1993, 12). Lars Lönnroth sees its author as "primarily a patron of literature and the centre of a large network of scribes, informants and collectors of traditional material" (1965, 14). In spite of these caveats, Snorri's authorship of *Heimskringla* is still spoken of in the same way as Sturla Þórðarson's authorship of *Íslendinga saga*, in contrast to the enterprises of the compilers of *Sturlunga saga* and *Flateyjarbók*.

2. The suggestion that Snorri Sturluson was the author of both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* was first made by Grundtvig in the introduction to his translation of *Heimskringla* (Grundtvig 1818, xxix). The idea was kept alive by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and received its first scholarly treatment at the hands of Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1904). Since receiving the stamp of approval of Sigurður Nordal in his edition of *Egils saga* as the initial volume of the series *Íslensk fornrit*, Snorri's authorship of both works is often accepted without comment. For the history of scholarship on the subject, see Ólason 1968.

cant differences between them. Literary scholars and historians must account for the fact that the two works evince opposite attitudes toward the kings of Norway, who are the heroes in *Heimskringla* and the villains in *Egils saga*. Finally both works must be provided with a plausible context in terms of Snorri's life and activities.

The most recent studies of these questions are those of Jónas Kristjánsson (1977) and Melissa Berman (1982). Regarding the textual relationship between the two works, both Berman and Jónas Kristjánsson show conclusively that it is impossible to derive either *Egils saga* or *Heimskringla* from the other; instead, both must depend on a common source which was also used in *Hálfðanar þáttur svarta* in *Flateyjarbók* (Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 1:561–76). This conclusion confirms that reached by Gustav Gjessing, who argued that the source used was Ari Þorgilsson's *Konunga ævi* (1873, 67–72, 110–12; 1885). Where Berman and Jónas Kristjánsson differ from previous scholarship is in their view of the relative chronology of *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* and their dates of composition. The general consensus had been that *Egils saga* was the earlier work. Jónas Kristjánsson, followed tentatively by Berman, argues that *Egils saga* was composed after *Heimskringla*, when a disillusioned Snorri returned from Norway to Iceland in 1239. He bases his argument on the fact that *Egils saga* clearly makes use of a work like *Heimskringla*, while *Heimskringla* contains no references to Egill's family. This argument loses force in view of the evidence (adduced by Jónas Kristjánsson himself) that *Egils saga* makes use not of *Heimskringla* but of a common source; the differences in choice of material in the two works, as well as their differing attitudes towards the kings of Norway, can be explained by the aims and interests of the author(s). Jónas Kristjánsson plausibly suggests that *Heimskringla* was composed with a Norwegian audience in mind, *Egils saga* for an Icelandic one (1977, 471–72).

In a response to Kristjánsson 1977 and 1990, Kolbrún Haraldsdóttir (1991) has pointed out that reliable conclusions about the relationship and dating of these texts must be based first and foremost on careful textual comparison. She reviews the evidence for a common source and advocates the traditional ordering of three works attributed to Snorri: *Egils saga*, the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, and *Heimskringla*. (The *Separate Saga* is generally agreed to have been composed before the main body of *Heimskringla*.) There is additional evidence that *Egils saga* and the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* predate *Heimskringla*: their accounts of the final years of Eiríkr blóðøx and of the marriage of his daughter, Ragnhildr.

It will be worthwhile to summarize the relevant information concerning the activities of Eiríkr and his sons starting with the the synoptic histories: *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* by the monk Theodoricus (Storm 1880, 1–68), *Historia Norwegiae* (Storm 1880, 69–124), and *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum* (Einarsson 1985, 1–54). These works represent an earlier stage of historical writing than *Heimskringla*. All of them know that Eiríkr died in England, but they differ in their accounts of the route by which he arrived there. Theodoricus, who is known to have used Icelandic traditions, has Eiríkr sail to England and die on the same day as he is received by King Athelstan (Storm 1880, 7). Theodoricus is aware that

Eiríkr's son Haraldr gráfeldr was brought up by King Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark (Storm 1880, 11).

Historia Norwegiae identifies Eiríkr's wife, Gunnhildr, as the daughter of King Gormr of Denmark. In this version Eiríkr flees to England, where he is received and baptized by Athelstan and then put in charge of Northumbria. When the Northumbrians will suffer him no longer, he dies on Viking expedition in Spain, after which Gunnhildr takes her children to her brother in Denmark (Storm 1880, 105–6).

Ágrip, which has a close textual relationship to both Theodricus and *Historia Norwegiae* and was itself used by the authors of *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, has Eiríkr flee “first to Denmark” [til Danmarkar fyrst] (Einarsson 1985, 8), although this text apparently knows nothing of Gunnhildr's Danish connection. It makes her the daughter of one Qzurr lafskegg (whose homeland is not mentioned) rather than Gormr. After following the career of Eiríkr's brother Hákon to its end and discussing his battles with Eiríkr's sons, *Ágrip* returns to Eiríkr, commenting that “when he fled the land” he went west to England. As in *Historia Norwegiae*, Gunnhildr bears the ultimate blame for the revolt of the Northumbrians against Eiríkr, who dies in Spain; she and her sons then return to Denmark, where they remain until the sons are mature [rosknir menn mjök svá at aldri] (Einarsson 1985, 12).

The synoptic historians were interested primarily in Norwegian events and only incidentally in Eiríkr's activities overseas. The longer sagas of the Norwegian kings incorporate poetry regarding foreign campaigns, as well as genealogical lore which recorded the fact that Eiríkr and Gunnhildr had a daughter who married a son of the earl of Orkney. This information is incorporated in different ways in *Fagrskinna*, the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, and *Egils saga*.

Fagrskinna's initial description of Eiríkr and his family resembles that of *Ágrip* in naming Qzurr lafskegg (here from Hálogaland in northern Norway) as Gunnhildr's father. It lists the couple's six sons and a daughter, Ragnhildr, “who married to the Orkneys” [gíptisk í Orkneyjar] (Einarsson 1985, 74). The fact that the name of the islands is in the accusative indicates that Ragnhildr ended up in the Orkneys, but says nothing about where the wedding took place. If it had occurred on the islands themselves, the dative rather than accusative case would have been used. In a later passage (Einarsson 1985, 76) we are told that Eiríkr went to England and was received by Athelstan—his baptism is also mentioned, as it is in *Historia Norwegiae*. Inserted abruptly and without introduction of any sort is the statement that “The sons of Earl Torf-Einarr are Arnkell, Erlendr, Þorfinnr hausakljúfr. Hávarðr, a son of Torf-Einarr, married Ragnhildr, the daughter of King Eiríkr” [Þeir eru synir Torf-Einars jarls Arnkell, Erlendr, Þorfinnr hausakljúfr. Sonr Þorfinns, Hávarðr, fekk Ragnhildar, dóttur Eiríks konungs] (Einarsson 1985, 77). Since both the preceding and following sentences describe the military activities of Eiríkr blóðøx, we must assume either that an account which introduced the earl's family has been omitted, or that the sentence just quoted has been interpolated. It is loosely connected with the following passage, which informs us that one summer Eiríkr harried Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and then England. He was defeated and slain in

battle along with Arnkell and Erlendr, sons of Torf-Einarr, and five kings; the memorial poem mentioning the kings is quoted (Einarsson 1985, 77–79). After Eiríkr's death, Gunnhildr departs for Denmark with her sons, as she does in *Historia Norwegiae* and *Ágrip*. There they receive sanctuary from Haraldr Gormsson, who fosters Haraldr Eiríksson at his court while his older brothers go harrying (Einarsson 1985, 80). It is not until the twentieth year of Hákon's reign that the Eiríkssons appear to challenge his claim to the throne (Einarsson 1985, 81). Thus Fagrskinna mentions Ragnhildr's marriage without having Eiríkr actually set foot on the Orkney Islands and allows a significant interval to pass between Eiríkr's death and the arrival of his sons as claimants to the Norwegian throne.

In the brief history of St. Óláfr's kindred which introduces the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, Eiríkr actually stops off in the Orkneys to gather troops before attacking England. Athelstan then offers him Northumbria as a means of resolving the conflict between Eiríkr and Hákon, Athelstan's foster son. Eiríkr's death is said to have occurred on a Viking expedition in the west [í vestrvíking] (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 2:430). Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's children are then listed, first their sons and then their daughter Ragnhildr, here said to have married Earl Arnfinnr, son of Earl Þorfinnr. From this brief account one might infer that the wedding took place (or at least that it was arranged) when her father was in the islands recruiting troops.

Egils saga's account of Eiríkr's movements on his departure from Norway makes this assumption. It follows the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* in having Eiríkr go to England via the Orkneys and explicitly inserts Ragnhildr's marriage to Earl Arnfinnr at this point (Nordal 1933, 176). His daughter disposed of, Eiríkr harries in Scotland and England. Athelstan moves against him, but hostilities are avoided and an agreement is reached whereby Eiríkr is to hold Northumbria from Athelstan and defend it against the Scots and Irish. We are told that Egill Skalla-Grímsson avoided the Orkneys, which he believed to be under Eiríkr's power, but that due to the spells of Gunnhildr he ran up against Eiríkr in York. After his adventure there, he learned that Eiríkr had been slain on a Viking expedition in the west [í vestrvíking] and that Gunnhildr and her sons were in Denmark (Nordal 1933, 211).

Egils saga also includes information (presumably from the common source mentioned above, as it recurs in *Heimskringla*) that Eiríkr's son Haraldr gráfeldr was born about the time Haraldr hárfagri appointed Eiríkr as his successor (Nordal 1933, 163). The older Haraldr died three years later (Nordal 1933, 164), and Eiríkr ruled one year after that before Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri arrived from England (Nordal 1933, 175). He ruled for an additional winter along with Hákon, then fled to England. From this information we can calculate that Haraldr gráfeldr was not much more than five years old when his father became king at York.

Before examining *Heimskringla's* text, let us assess the evidence so far. The earliest texts (Theodricus, *Historia Norwegiae*, and *Ágrip*, all of Norwegian provenance) send Eiríkr blóðøx to England directly or (in *Ágrip*) via Denmark, as does Fagrskinna. Fagrskinna is the only Norwegian work which is aware of the existence and Orkney marriage of Ragnhildr Eiríksdóttir, and it presents this information in

isolation from any narrative which might date or locate the event it describes. In all these texts Gunnhildr is an important figure, and at least some of her sons grow up at the Danish court. The Icelandic texts, the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* and *Egils saga*—which are either unaware of, or uninterested in, the fate of Gunnhildr and her sons—state or imply that Eiríkr married off his daughter in the Orkneys en route to a harrying expedition. In these texts, Athelstan's offer of Northumbria is a response to aggression rather than a generous offer to an exile with whose family he is on good terms.

Heimskringla presents yet another scenario. Once again, Haraldr hárfagri lives three years after appointing Eiríkr his successor and is said to have given his name to his grandson and “sprinkled him with water,” although this event is not assigned to any particular year (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:147). As in *Egils saga*, Eiríkr goes first to the Orkneys, where he gathers troops before harrying in Scotland and England (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:152). Eiríkr's relationship to Athelstan is here described as friendly, reflecting the situation in the synoptics rather than that of the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, *Egils saga*, or an earlier passage in *Heimskringla* itself. The enemies anticipated by Athelstan are the Danes, not the Scots and Irish of *Egils saga*. Eiríkr and his entire family are baptized as part of the agreement.

We are then informed of Athelstan's death and the succession of his brother Edmund, which caused Eiríkr to set out on his final, fatal expedition. He collects from the Orkneys Arnkell and Erlendr, sons of Torf-Einarr, who are slain in his final battle (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:154). Some of the five kings who accompanied him are named, although the *erfidrápa* is not quoted. When they learn of Eiríkr's death, Gunnhildr and her sons [þau Gunnhildr] head to the Orkneys and “settled there for a time” [staðfestusk þar um hríð]. In fact, they took over and used the Orkneys as a base for raiding. *Heimskringla* cites a verse by Glúmr Geirason describing this activity in which the unnamed protagonist is “just a child” [barnungr] (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:155). Exactly what this term implies is difficult to ascertain. Ingibjörg Sturludóttir, thirteen years old at the time of her wedding feast at Flugumýri, could still be considered “barn at aldri” [a child in age] (*Íslendinga saga* chap. 174; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:494). The chronology of the saga suggests that Haraldr gráfeldr Eiríksson was about seven years old. When Gunnhildr and her family hear of the hostilities between Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark and Hákon Haraldsson of Norway they marry Ragnhildr to Arnfinnr, son of Þorfinnr. At this time “Gamli was oldest [of Eiríkr's sons] by a little bit, but nonetheless he was not a mature man” [Gamli Eiríksson var þá nokkuru ellstr, ok var hann þó eigi roskinn maðr] (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:162).

There is no way of knowing to which of Eiríkr's sons Glúmr's poem refers; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson suggests that it is really about Eiríkr himself (1941–51, 1:156 note to verse 60). There is, however, a definite tension between the early account of Eiríkr's sons harrying in the Orkneys and *Heimskringla*'s subsequent statement (agreeing with Fagrskinna, with which it has certain verbal similarities) that Haraldr Gormsson adopted Haraldr gráfeldr, who grew up at the Danish court. In Denmark,

some of Eiríkr's sons "went on harrying expeditions when they were old enough, and obtained wealth for themselves, and harried on the Eastern Way. They were handsome men early on, and mature in power and accomplishments rather than years" [Sumir Eiríkssynir fóru í hernað, þegar er þeir hófðu aldr til, ok qfluðu sér fjár, herjuðu um Austrveg. Þeir váru snimma menn fríðir ok fyrr rosknir at afli ok atgørvi en at vetratali] (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:162).

Aside from the contradiction, what is striking about both these accounts is their concern with the age—or rather youth—of Eiríkr's family when they depart from Britain. They would have been that much younger when they arrived there. To the compiler of this text, a marriage for Ragnhildr at such an early date may have seemed out of the question. The second stay in Orkney may have been invented, and Ragnhildr's marriage dated to that occasion, to make the narrative conform to the author's conception of their ages. Such revision would be consistent with his practice in the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason as shown by Theodore Andersson (1977).

I am concerned not with the actual ages of Eiríkr's offspring, but rather with the implications of the statements concerning Ragnhildr's marriage for the authorship of three works—*Egils saga*, the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, and *Heimskringla*. Assuming all three are by a single hand, the agreement concerning Eiríkr's itinerary and the actual or implied dating of Ragnhildr's marriage in *Egils saga* and the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, compared with the addition of a second stay in Orkney and explicit statements about the precocity of Eiríkr's sons in *Heimskringla*, suggests that the first two texts are more closely related to each other than either is to *Heimskringla*. The agreement between the *Separate Saga* and *Egils saga* could be presumed to reflect the state of that author's knowledge at an early stage of his historical studies, when he was interested only in specific members of the royal family—Eiríkr blóðøx in *Egils saga*, St. Óláfr in the *Separate Saga*. To an author concerned primarily with St. Óláfr or with Eiríkr's conflicts with the descendants of Skalla-Grímr, received tradition or an educated guess suggested a stopover on Eiríkr's trip from Norway to Northumbria as the appropriate occasion for his daughter's marriage. The author of *Heimskringla*, however, had to examine in detail not only the life of Eiríkr but that of his son Haraldr gráfeldr. He would thus have had to give serious consideration to the age of Haraldr and his siblings and would have been aware that they grew up at the Danish court. While I can imagine the author of *Egils saga* or the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* revising his earlier ideas as he worked out the chronology of Haraldr gráfeldr's life and placing Ragnhildr's marriage as late as possible, I cannot imagine the author of *Heimskringla* jettisoning his carefully worked-out chronology for a simplified one that made the age problem even worse. In any case, *Egils saga*'s account of Eiríkr's movements agrees not with *Heimskringla* but with the *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr*, which scholars agree preceded *Heimskringla*.

Of course if it is not assumed that *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* are by the same author, the difficulty vanishes; the existence of a common source solves the problem. To my mind, neither the assumption of common authorship of *Egils saga* and

Heimskringla nor the identification of that author with Snorri Sturluson should be taken for granted. The similarities that caused scholars to identify *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* as proceeding from the same pen are no more than could result from copying a manuscript whose style might have influenced copyists even when they were not using it as an exemplar. Further, it has recently been argued by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (1995) that the attribution of *Heimskringla* to Snorri Sturluson depends on the assumption that the early translators, Laurents Hanssøn and Peder Claussøn, both knew a lost manuscript ascribing the work to Snorri. Jørgensen points out that if this were the case, the publisher of Claussøn's translation would not have had to use Hanssøn's translation of the prologue. The attribution thus rests solely on Hanssøn's statement, unsupported by any manuscript evidence.

The acceptance of Snorri as author of *Heimskringla* despite the paucity of evidence is the more striking because the name of another Icelander *is* associated with the text by medieval manuscript evidence: Ari Þorgilsson inn fróði. In Codex Frisianus (AM 45 fol.) the heading that follows the prologue reads: "Her hefr vpp konvnga bok eftir savgn Ara prestz froða. Oc héfr fyrst vm þriþivnga skipti heimsins. En sidan fra avllvm Noregs konvngvm" [Here begins the book of kings according to the account of the priest Ari the Learned. And it begins with the division of the world into thirds, and then (tells) about all the kings of Norway] (Unger 1871, 3.1–3). Codex Frisianus has been dated to ca. 1300–1325, less than a century after Snorri's death (Degnbol et al. 1989, 432).

The suggestion that Ari was the author of the lost text used by *Egils saga*, *Heimskringla*, and *Flateyjarbók* was made by Gustav Gjessing as early as 1873. It is rejected by Jónas Kristjánsson (1977, 452–53) on the grounds that it is based on a single phrase common to the first two works, "stukku ýmsir [i.e., Jarl Hákon and the sons of Gunnhildr] ór landi," which is preceded in *Heimskringla* by an attribution to Ari of the chronology of Jarl Hákon's reign and the hostilities between him and the descendants of Haraldr hárfagri. This is indeed a weak argument on which to hang an authorial attribution—although perhaps no weaker than the reasoning which has attributed *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga* to Snorri for all these years. More recently Else Mundal (1984) has argued that the emphasis given to Ari in the prologue suggests that his work was a major source for *Heimskringla* rather than merely a chronological framework; the redactor of Codex Frisianus clearly thought that this was the case.

Ari cannot have been the author of *Heimskringla* in its entirety. The prologues to *Heimskringla* and the earlier *Separate Saga of St. Óláfr* show that he had reliable information about the reign of St. Óláfr. The prologue to the *Separate Saga* begins with a description of Ari's writings, only later discussing skaldic verse as a historical source. This order is reversed in the prologue of *Heimskringla*, where the discussion of Ari's contribution immediately precedes the description of the world. Arguably this prologue could itself have suggested his authorship to the scribe of Codex Frisianus. Then again, that scribe may have used a manuscript which made the attribution. At the very least, his heading should serve as a reminder of the

complexity of a work which relies extensively on earlier writings and of the uncertainty involved in assigning medieval works to individual authors.

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