The Borg Connexion: Notes on *Bjarnar saga*, *Egla*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Laxdœla**

Hermann Pálsson

In several of the *Íslendingasögur* the hero is little more than a boy when he sets out from home and leaves his native shore. The title heroes of *Grettis saga*, *Harðar saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga* (younger MS) go, or try to go, abroad at the age of fifteen; though eighteen appears to be a more common age for such a purpose in the sagas. However, a precocious lad at the tender age of twelve may think he is old enough to leave the nest (*Bandamanna saga*; *Gunnlaugs saga*, older MS), although an obstructive father is then likely to withhold his consent and the funds required for the journey. The adventures of the young Icelander in Norway and beyond serve to show what an exceptional man he is: no matter how formidable his adversary, our hero always gets the better of him. And when he comes back home from his extended excursion overseas, he has proved himself to be a real hero. A recurrent element in the youthful adventure is that the Icelander is either befriended or rejected (sometimes both) by royalty, but whatever happens between a king and his young Icelandic visitor, their dealings tend to redound to the latter's credit.

Although there is no apparent reason to doubt that the historical personages on whom the saga characters were based may have travelled to Norway and even beyond, the descriptions of their adventures abroad are essentially imaginary in character. Consequently, saga episodes dealing with the adventures of a young Icelander abroad relate to other fictions rather than to history. Such episodes correspond to what Northrop Frye calls the third phase of romance,[1] which always involves a major journey or quest. The most common type of enemy the Icelandic hero encounters in Norway is a berserk trying to bully a peaceable farmer into surrendering his daughter (*variants*: wife or sister), or else forcing him to fight things out in single combat. Being a much braver man than any of the Norwegians around, the Icelander takes up the challenge and kills the berserk in a duel. Thus the

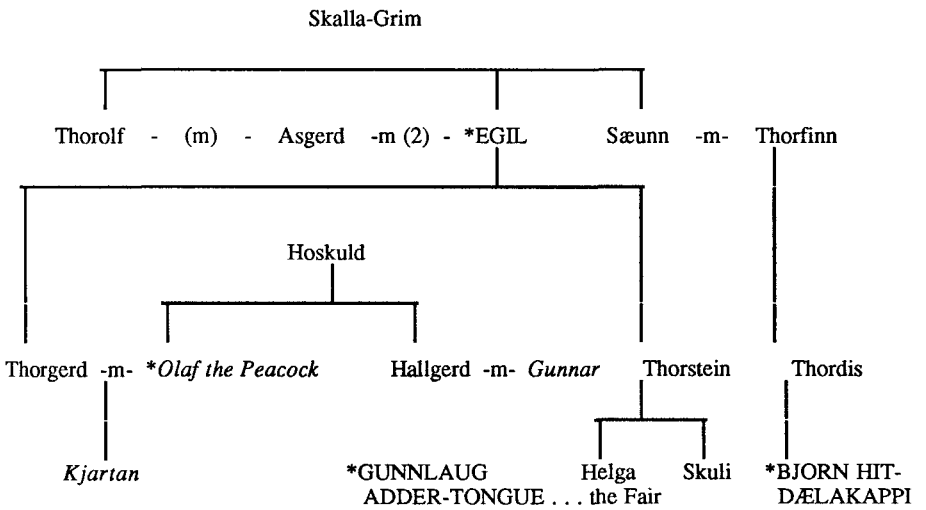
family honour is fully redeemed and the safety of the farmstead restored. The killing of berserks usually takes place in winter, as one would expect, for 'The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth' (Frye, pp. 187–88). Another archetypal kind of enemy in Norway is the savage bear that has come out of hibernation in mid-winter, frightening the local peasants out of their wits until the young Icelander comes along and puts an end to a dangerous situation.

Beyond Norway the hero may fight vikings in the Baltic or in the British Isles, and, as they constitute a major threat to peace and trade, the young Icelander performs a public service in killing them. Needless to say, such exploits earn him not only fame and fortune but also the gratitude of those he protects. A significant element in the account of the young Icelander abroad tends to be his firm commitment to law and order, while his adversaries represent chaos and lawlessness.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore four saga episodes in which the Icelandic hero travels beyond Scandinavia to a kingdom threatened by a formidable enemy. He plays an important role in the defence of the realm in question, and the grateful king rewards him generously for his help, even to the extent of offering him a permanent position in the kingdom, if not the throne itself. But the young Icelander, whether in Ireland, England, or Russia, politely declines the offer, as he prefers to go back to Iceland and live out his destiny in the land of his fathers. Such a role is acted out by Olaf the Peacock in *Laxdæla saga* (*LD*) and the eponymous heroes of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (*ESS*), *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* (*BSH*), and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (*GSO*). In each case the hero is a farmer's son from the west of Iceland, who either sets out on his journey overseas at the age of eighteen, or else appears to be eighteen, when he plays the role of a defender. Moreover, the four heroes have several other features in common, as will become clear in the course of the article.

The relationships between the four characters involved are outlined in the following genealogy. The names of the three eponymous heroes are in capitals; other relevant names are italicized. In addition to the quartet mentioned above, the names of Kjartan Olafsson (*LD*) and Gunnar of Hlidarendi (*Njáls saga*: *NS*) are included. The dotted line linking the names of Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue and Helga the Fair serves to remind us of their tragic love.

The Borg Connexion



Boyhood and adolescence

The boyhood deeds of a saga hero may serve as a paradigm for his actions and attitudes in adult life. As the opening chapters of *BSH* are missing, we know very little about Bjorn's early life. However, the saga states briefly that Bjorn went to Borg at the age of twelve to stay with his cousin Skuli.

The author of *ESS* takes great pleasure in telling stories about young Egil, who is only three years old when he defies and disobeys his father and six when he commits his first killing; both incidents give a powerful impression of Egil's wilfulness. However, in *ESS* as elsewhere, the first significant turning point in the hero's progress comes later: 'When Egil was twelve he was bigger and stronger than most fully grown men, and there were few of them who could beat him at games. That winter, his twelfth, he played a great deal' (ch. 40). Late in the winter Skalla-Grim in a fury kills Egil's best friend and then goes for his own son, but Egil escapes unscathed, as his old foster-mother lays down her own life to save his, and in so doing prevents Skalla-Grim from becoming a filicide. Egil takes swift revenge by killing one of his father's men, the one Skalla-Grim particularly liked. A year later, at the age of thirteen, Egil forces his brother, Thorolf, to take him abroad in his ship. Egil is now to all intents and purposes an adult; his exploits abroad before he risks his life defending England will be considered later.

GSO makes it clear that the title hero as a boy is both precocious and somewhat difficult to cope with, though not made of the same stuff as Egil. 'When

Gunnlaug was twelve he asked his father to provide him with money to travel abroad, stating that he wanted to visit foreign parts to see the way other people live'. As has been noted[2] his father's response is much the same as Thorolf's in *ESS* when Egil wants to sail with him abroad:

> 'I'm not taking you abroad,' he said. 'If your father doesn't think he can control you in his own home, there's not much chance of my doing it overseas. People over there won't let you go on the way you do here.' (*ESS*, ch. 40)

> Illugi was against it and said people overseas wouldn't like him, considering the fact that he himself could hardly control him at home, as he wanted. (*GSO*, ch. 4)

But Gunnlaug does not give in easily and shortly afterwards tries to steal away early one morning, but his father forbids him to go abroad. Instead he goes to Borg, as will be mentioned later.

As is to be expected of someone whose mother is of royal Irish stock, Olaf the Peacock in *LD* is striking in appearance:

> Olaf grew up with Thord Goddi and became tall and strong. He was so handsome, his equal was nowhere to be found. When he was twelve years old he rode to the Assembly, and people from other districts thought it worth their while to come just to see what a fine figure of a man he was. Olaf's weapons and clothing were in keeping with this, so that he stood out from all other men. (ch. 16)

In spite of his splendid weapons, Olaf is never involved in fighting except when he defends Ireland against viking attacks.

After the age of twelve the hero may take things easy until he is eighteen and it is time for him to travel overseas. During those years Olaf the Peacock leads a quiet life at home; Gunnlaug divides his time at Borg between learning about the law from Thorstein and falling in love with his master's daughter, Helga the Fair; and Bjorn (also living at Borg until he is eighteen, though not necessarily at the same time as Gunnlaug) can spend even more time with his girlfriend, Oddny, as he shows no interest in the law.

But Egil Skallagrimsson follows a totally different pattern. As we have already seen, he breaks the convention by leaving Iceland at the age of thirteen and then spending several years overseas before the crucial struggle alluded to earlier. It is indeed a striking feature of *ESS* that we are never told explicitly what happened to the hero or what he did at the critical age of eighteen. Although the internal chronology of *ESS* at this point appears to be a bit blurred, it is clear that he is thirteen when he and his brother Thorolf go abroad; also they seem to arrive in England four years later, in the autumn or early winter. But there is nothing in the saga to indicate how long Thorolf and Egil had been staying with King Athelstan in England before the Battle of Vinheid. However, since there is nothing to suggest that the battle took place in winter, the reader may be expected to think that it was fought in the following summer, which would make Egil eighteen years old at the time. But such a sequence of events is contradicted later in the saga. Although the narrative makes it clear that Egil goes to Norway one year after the Battle of Vinheid, then marries Asgerd and arrives in Iceland with his bride a year later (when he should have been just twenty years old according to our reckoning), the saga manuscripts suggest a totally different chronology: 'He had been out of the country for twelve years' (ch. 16). It is, of course, conceivable that the original text had *vii* which a scribe misread as *xii*, but as far as I know, there is no textual reason for such a conjecture.

Travel abroad

In order to get the necessary funds to travel abroad, Olaf the Peacock agrees to let his mother marry Thorbjorn the Feeble. After the wedding 'Olaf took out of the undivided estate thirty hundreds in wares which were not to be paid back' (ch. 20). In due course he puts out to sea, and when he reaches Norway he goes to the court of King Harald Grey-Cloak. As far as Bjorn and Gunnlaug are concerned, their stories at this point are remarkably similar: each is betrothed to, or engaged to marry, the girl he loves, on the understanding that he will claim his bride within three years. As we have seen already, the two heroes are staying at Borg; both put out from Gufuárós and both go first to the court of Earl Erik Hákonarson. Skuli of Borg is a friend of the earl and sends him a message asking him to take Bjorn in. But in *Gunnlaugs saga* Skuli is actually staying with the earl and commends Gunnlaug ('my fosterbrother') to him.

It is at the Norwegian royal court that the reader discovers the age of the hero:

> Then the king asked Olaf how old he was. 'I'm eighteen years of age now,' replied Olafur. (*LD*, ch. 21)
>
> Thord asked, 'Have you tried to find out how old Bjorn is?'
> 'No,' said the king.
> 'He's eighteen years of age now.' (*BSH*, ch. 3)
>
> '. . . how old are you, Icelander?'
> 'I'm eighteen years of age now.' (*GSO*, ch. 6)

In *GSO* the earl lays a curse on the hero that he will not see another eighteen years. Gunnlaug reacts sharply to this and insults the earl, who orders him to leave the country immediately. However, the earl forgives him later and welcomes Gunnlaug on his next visit to Norway.

From Norway the Icelandic hero travels to the country where he is destined to make his mark on European history. Leaving Norway in a hurry, Gunnlaug sails straight to London where he offers a poem of praise to King Ethelred, becomes his retainer, and stays with him over the winter. He kills in single combat a certain ruffian, referred to as a 'viking' as well as a 'berserk', for which deed he becomes famous in England and beyond. Then Gunnlaug goes away, returning to England a couple of years later, after visiting Dublin, Orkney, Gautland, and Sweden. He spends the following winter with Ethelred, but, in the spring when he asks for permission to go, the king refuses to grant him leave, since England is under threat of invasion by King Knut of Denmark, and it is clearly Gunnlaug's duty to defend the realm against such a powerful enemy. It is not recorded that the Danes knew England was being defended by Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue, but *GSO* states that they make no appearance for a whole year. By the time King Ethelred thinks it safe to allow Gunnlaug to leave, it looks very unlikely that there will be any wedding bells for him.

It has been suggested that Gunnlaug spent the winters 1002–03 and 1004–06 in England (*IF*, III, lix), but that would contradict the chronology of the saga itself, which claims that his second visit to England took place shortly after King Knut came to power in Denmark (1018). Attempts to reconcile Gunnlaug's stay in England with actual history appear to be a waste of time.

The hero of *Bjarnar saga* travels in the opposite direction and reaches the kingdom of Russia (*Garðariki*) where he spends a winter with King Valdimar, who

has been identified with King Vladimir the First, ruler of Kiev from 980 to 1015. During Bjorn's stay there, a powerful warrior called Kaldimar, a close kinsman of Valdimar, claims the kingdom for himself. All the native Russian subjects of the king are terrified, and only the teenage Icelander has the stomach to face the crisis. He agrees to fight Kaldimar in single combat and emerges from the duel as victor, though severely wounded. After he recovers, the king gives him all the military outfit belonging to the late Kaldimar, including the sword Mæring. It is this single brilliant performance that earns Bjorn the nickname *Hitdælakappi*, 'the Hitardale-Champion'. From Russia, Bjorn goes first to Norway and then west to England, where two other residents of Borg, Egil and Gunnlaug, had previously added to the glory of Borgarfjörður. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that Bjorn kills a 'flying dragon' (*flugdreki*) one day in the south of the English Channel, when accompanying King Knut the Great, the very man Ethelred the Unready had most feared in the time of Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue.

It has caused some embarrassment to keen saga scholars that *Nestor's Chronicle* fails to substantiate the claim of *BSH* that Bjorn saved the Russian kingdom from disaster when the Russians themselves were unable to cope with the situation, though there have been some serious, if far-fetched, attempts to reconcile *BSH* with Russian history during the reign of King Valdimar.[3]

As was indicated earlier, the young Icelandic hero may have no other apparent reasons for going abroad than a powerful urge to see the world and have his prowess put to a demanding test. But in *LD* (as also in *Víga-Glúms saga*) he undertakes the journey for the specific purpose of visiting his maternal grandfather. So when Olaf the Peacock puts out from Norway he sets sail for Ireland where, after an unpromising start, he wins the affection and admiration of his grandfather, King Myrkjartan. He is still only nineteen years old when he shows the Irish what he is made of:

> The king was seldom at peace, for at that time there was constant warfare in the British Isles, and throughout the winter he repelled attacks by Vikings and raiders. Olaf and his men were on the king's ship, and whoever came up against them found them a rather formidable company to deal with. The king used to consult Olaf and his men on all decisions, for he found Olaf to be both shrewd and resolute in all hazards. (ch. 21)

Indeed, it comes as no surprise when the king of Ireland chooses Olaf as his

successor:

> '. . . I've found Olaf to be a man of such prowess and accomplishments that we don't have his equal here. And so I want to offer him my kingdom after my death, for Olaf is better fitted to rule than my own sons.' (ch. 21)

Olaf declines the offer, saying, 'it is better to have a brief honour than a lasting shame', but Myrkjartan is not the only ruler to appreciate the exceptional qualities of Olaf the Peacock. After spending next winter in Norway he asks King Harald's leave to go to Iceland that summer:

> 'It would please me more,' replied the king, 'if you were to settle here with us, and have whatever position you yourself desire.'
> Olaf thanked the king for the honour he was offering him, but said he preferred to go to Iceland. (ch. 22)

A visit by an Icelander is often much appreciated by a foreign king, even with no kinship involved. King Harald Gormsson of Denmark is so impressed with Gunnar of Hlidarendi (who later marries Olaf's sister) that 'he offered Gunnar wife and wealth if he would consent to settle there'. Gunnar thanked the king, but said that first he had to return to Iceland to see his kinsmen and friends. 'Then you will come back to us,' said the king. 'Fate will decide that, my lord,' said Gunnar (*NS*, ch. 31).

Scholars disagree as to the historical value of *LD*'s account of Olaf's trip to Ireland. In the Introduction to his German translation of the saga,[4] Rudolf Meissner states it is sheer fantasy, but Einar Ól. Sveinsson[5] and others have tried to make sense of the account in terms of early Irish history.

Egil Skallagrimsson differs in many ways from the other three farmers' sons from the West of Iceland whose prowess serves to save European civilization. By setting out on the long journey at the early age of thirteen he breaks a literary convention, and then in Norway it does not take him long to make a bitter enemy of King Eirik Blood-Axe. But what is particularly striking about Egil is that by the time he comes to the kingdom he is destined to save, he is already an experienced warrior, having fought against vikings and others under the banner of his brother Thorolf in the Baltic, Scandinavia, and Friesland. As one would expect from a king

who is faced with some powerful enemies, King Ethelred is pleased to learn that such outstanding Icelanders are willing to give him a helping hand:

> Thorolf and his brother Egil sailed southwards to Saxony and Flanders where they learned that the King of England needed troops and the rewards were likely to be high. So they made up their minds to go, and travelled over autumn till they reached King Athelstan. He gave them a good welcome and it seemed to him their support would be a great asset to the army. They hadn't been talking to him long before he made them an offer to guard his frontiers, whereupon terms were agreed and they became Athelstan's men. (*ESS*, ch. 50)

Egil's prowess is put to the ultimate test in the Battle of Vinheid, where he and his brother defend England against an invasion by the Scots, the Welsh, and other hostile peoples. After Thorolf is killed in the battle, Egil takes charge and fights with great spirit until the victory is won.

After the battle King Athelstan gives Egil two chests full of silver, asking him to take them to his father in compensation for Thorolf's life.

> 'As compensation for yourself I want you to take either land or movables, whichever suits you best, and if you choose to stay long with me, I offer you a place of honour and worth. You only have to say what you want.' (ch. 55)

Later, when Egil has expressed his intention to go to Norway and look after his brother's widow, King Athelstan is disappointed:

> 'It's for you to decide whether you go or stay, Egil,' said the king, 'if you think you've urgent matters to deal with. But I'd like it best if you were to settle down here, and choose whatever position you want.' (ch. 55)

The Battle of Vinheid in *ESS* is usually identified with the Battle of Brunanburh, which was fought at an unknown place in 937, but such an identification makes a complete mess of the chronology of *ESS*, once again suggesting that the saga is not history but fiction.[6]

Return of the hero

According to medieval writers the pursuit of 'happiness' or 'good luck' consisted of two essential elements: first, people should choose a laudable goal, then pursue that goal with absolute steadfastness and dedication. An outstanding example of such a combination is *Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka*: an indigent young Icelander sets himself three goals: (a) to present King Svein of Denmark with a polar bear as a gift, (b) to go on a pilgrimage to Rome, and (c) to go back to Iceland in three years' time to look after his old mother. Auðun lets neither obstacles nor temptations stand in his way; he attains all three goals and becomes a man of great good luck. In the story the three goals are revealed one by one; only after the completion of the first is the second revealed, and the third only after the second.

A hero with two separate and potentially conflicting goals in mind is not only unlikely to attain both objectives, but the literary convention shows that he invariably turns out to be a tragic character. In this connexion it is worth bearing in mind that two of our heroes leaving Iceland for fame and fortune abroad, Bjorn and Gunnlaug, are also committed to another goal beyond their exploits in foreign parts: both have pledged themselves to come back to Iceland in three years' time to claim their brides. The actual reasons why Bjorn and Gunnlaug fail to turn up for their weddings in time need not concern us here beyond the obvious conflict between the hero's duty as a warrior and his commitment to the girl he left behind in Iceland.

The two other heroes follow a different pattern, each taking a wife and settling down on a farm in the west of Iceland. Two years after the Battle of Vinheid, Egil marries his brother's widow, and two years after defending Ireland against the Vikings, Olaf the Peacock makes a proposal of marriage. Until now Olaf has had no connexion with Borg, so it comes as no surprise that his bride is the daughter of Egil Skallagrimsson: thus the Defender of Ireland becomes the son-in-law of the Redeemer of England. Through this marriage Olaf the Peacock establishes certain obvious relationships to other important heroes: his wife Thorgerd is aunt to Helga the Fair, Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue's beloved, and to Skuli of Borg who is foster-father to their cousin, Bjorn the Hitardale-Champion. The significance of Olaf's central position in the total range of saga heroes becomes even more obvious when we consider other links: his sister is the wife of Gunnar of Hlidarendi, the most heroic figure in *NS*; Olaf's son, Kjartan, is the central figure of *Laxdæla* taken as a whole, and Olaf's grandson, Bardi Gudmundarson, the principal character of *Heiðarviga saga*. Other heroic figures close to Olaf include Bolli (nephew and foster-son, *LD*), Hrut (uncle, *LD* and *NS*), Vermund (son-in-law, importer of

Swedish berserks in *Eyrbyggja*, and a minor character in *Grettla*).

The Borg connexion

One of the striking features shared by the four heroes is a connexion with Borg in Borgarfjörður. This important farm was founded by Egil's father and remained the home of his descendants in direct line at least down to the second half of the eleventh century: Skallagrim – Egil – Thorstein – Skuli – Egil Skulason. What happened to Borg next is not known for certain, but it is tempting to assume that after Egil Skulason's death the farm passed on to his son, grandson, and great-grandson: Halldor – Egil – Halldor. However, in the late twelfth century the owner of Borg was the Priest Bersi Vermundarson the Wealthy (d. 1202); on his death Borg came into the possession of his son-in-law, Snorri Sturluson, who farmed there for several years, probably from 1202 to 1206. A direct descendant of Egil Skallagrimsson, a man called Egil Halldorsson, was then a member of Snorri's household. It is conceivable that Bersi the Wealthy bought Borg either from Egil Halldorsson or his father Halldor Egilsson. In his *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Thordarson (1213–84) records a dream of Egil Halldorsson in which Egil Skallagrimsson gives a warning that Snorri must not go away from Borg as he intended.[7] Considering the fact that *ESS* was probably written by Snorri Sturluson (though after he moved house to Reykholt), it is tempting to regard Egil Halldorsson as Snorri's principal informant. As Sigurður Nordal (*IF*, III, xxvi) and Ólafur Lárusson[8] have argued, local family traditions about a tenth-century ancestor could hardly have enjoyed more favourable conditions anywhere else in Iceland than they did at Borg.

According to *ESS* Egil lived all his life at Borg, apart from the time he spent overseas and his declining years when he stayed with his niece and stepdaughter at Mosfell. Borg is the focal point in *ESS* taken as a whole. Egil marries his foster-sister (and sister-in-law) who was brought up at Borg. His son and successor, Thorstein, plays an important role in *GSO*, and some of the incidents in that saga are actually set at Borg. Although there is no previous mention of any connexion between Gunnlaug's family and Borg, the saga bluntly tells us that Gunnlaug rode off from home one morning and 'arrived at Borg in the evening. Thorstein invited him to stay which he acccepted' (ch. 4). Gunnlaug is twelve at the time, and over the next six years he stays alternately at Borg and at home with his father.

In due course Skuli Thorsteinsson inherits Borg, and while he is in charge of

the farm, his cousin Bjorn stays with him there for six years, between the crucial ages of twelve and eighteen. Bjorn's grandmother came from Borg; she was in fact Egil's sister. According to *BSH* it is Skuli who helps Bjorn to go abroad, sending with him a gift and a message to Earl Eirik of Norway. In *GSO*, on the other hand, Skuli is actually staying with the earl when Gunnlaug comes to Hladir and commends him to the earl: 'He's the son of one of the finest men in Iceland, Illugi the Black of Gilsbakki, and he's my fosterbrother' (ch. 6).

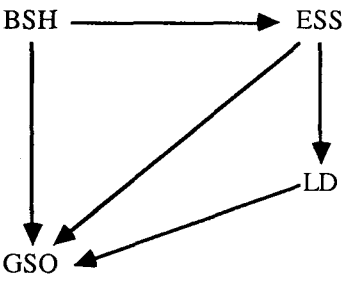
Olaf the Peacock is the only member of the quartet without any connexion with Borg before he sets out on his long journey abroad; but a year after his return to Iceland this deficiency is rectified when he marries Thorgerd Egil's daughter, of Borg.

It is interesting to note that before going abroad Kjartan Olafsson does not consult his own father, as one would expect; instead, he travels south to Borg to his uncle Thorstein, and with his blessing and encouragement Kjartan decides to go abroad with a skipper who had stayed the previous winter with Thorstein at Borg. It comes as no surprise that, like Bjorn and Gunnlaug, Kjartan puts out from Gufaros, which serves as an anchorage only in *ESS*, *BSH*, *LD*, *GSO*, and *Stefnis þáttr*. According to *ESS* and *LD*, Thorstein had a church built at Borg, and *ESS* states that he was buried there. After Kjartan's death, *LD* tells us, Olaf the Peacock 'sent messengers south to Borg to tell Thorstein Egilsson what had happened' (ch. 50). And a week later 'Thorstein took Kjartan's body home with him, and Kjartan was buried at Borg' (ch. 51).

Dating and literary relationships

The precise dating of the *Íslendingasögur* is largely a matter for speculation, and our four sagas are no exception. However, Sigurður Nordal has argued that *BSH* was written in the period *c.* 1215–25 (*IF*, III, lxxxix–xc), *ESS* about 1220–30 (*IF*, III, liii–lxx, xciii) and *GSO* 'not earlier than 1270–80' (*IF*, III, lx). According to Einar Ól. Sveinsson (*IF*, V, xxv–xxiv), *LD* dates from the period 1230–60. As for their literary relationship, it is well known that the author of *GSO* appears to have used the other three sagas, and that *LD* depended on *ESS*; moreover, Bjarni Einarsson has shown[9] that certain details in the York episode of *ESS* appear to have been borrowed from ch. 8 of *BSH* and that the penultimate chapter of *ESS* must have been inspired by the last part of ch. 9 in *BSH*. As will be noted later, there is also yet another passage in *ESS* which seems to be influenced

by *BSH*. Briefly, the literary relationships between the four sagas can be summarized as follows:



Notwithstanding all the splendid scholarship that has been lavished on the thirteenth-century 'Family Sagas' over the past one hundred and fifty years, we are still very much in the dark as to the stuff that went into their making. While there can be little doubt about certain specific borrowings by one saga author from another, most of the antecedents of individual sagas still remain a mystery. It is facile to talk about a preliterate oral tradition going back to the tenth and eleventh centuries when the sagas are supposed to have taken place, but to what extent can we infer from the sagas in their present form the nature of such a putative tradition, not to speak of the reality behind that tradition? Should we feel free to assume that 'the family traditions of the *Mýramenn*' (i.e., Egil Skallagrimsson's descendants) about their tenth-century progenitor must have remained an unchanged family heirloom down to the thirteenth century? Or is it more reasonable to think in terms of *creative* (as opposed to *passive*) tradition-bearers, whose intellectual training demanded that images of the past should be modified in accordance with current ideas or literary narrative convention? Is it possible that Snorri Sturluson (the most likely candidate we have for the authorship of *ESS*) had at his disposal genealogical and other information relating to Egil which had been committed to vellum in the twelfth century? There are no simple or obvious answers to such questions, though it is by no means unlikely that national pride and interest in the beginning of Icelandic society may be the ultimate reason why four farmers' sons from the west of Iceland would be credited with such great exploits in Ireland, England, and Russia.

Chapter 56 of *ESS* describes first Egil's marriage to his brother's widow and then proceeds to provide information relating to *BSH* and *GSO*. As was indicated earlier, *BSH* is older than *ESS*, so it is not surprising to find the following passage

in *ESS*:

> That winter Thorfinn married Sæunn, Skallagrim's daughter, and in the spring Skallagrim gave them a farm at Longriver Foss, including the land between Long River and Alft River, from Leiru Brook up into the mountains. Their daughter Thordis married Arngeir of Holm, son of Bersi the Godless. *Their son was Bjorn the Hítardale-Champion.*

This paragraph contains information which must have been included in the now lost beginning of *BSH*. The corresponding section in *Landnámabók* (*LB*) derives from *ESS*. Although *LB* lists Thorfinn the Strong as one of the original settlers, there are perfectly good reasons why *ESS* should mention his settlement here rather than in chapter 28, where other settlements are described. Thorfinn was Thorolf's standard-bearer; he fights bravely at Vinheid and, like Egil, after the battle marries a girl from Borg. It should also be noted that the reference to Bjorn the Hitardale-Champion is appropriate at this stage, not only because he is Egil's grand-nephew, but the heroic adventures of Egil in England remind us how Bjorn earned his nickname in Russia.

Two passages in *ESS* dealing with Egil's descendants (chapters 79 and 87) include a reference to his grand-daughter, 'Helga the Fair over whom Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue and Poet-Hrafn quarrelled'. This suggests that the author of *ESS* knew the central plot of *GSO*. What is no less significant, however, is a statement in chapter 56 of *ESS*, only a few lines after the reference to Bjorn the Hitardale-Champion:

> By this time the district was becoming widely settled. Hromund, brother of Grim the Halogalander, was then farming in Thverarhlid, as were members of his crew. He was the father of Gunnlaug, father of Thurid Sowthistle, *mother of Illugi the Black.*

The only reason I can suggest for the placement of this piece in chapter 56 instead of chapter 28 is that its presence at this point will remind the reader of Illugi the Black's son, Gunnlaug Adder-Tongue, the lover of Egil's grand-daughter and the defender of England. One would have expected the author of *ESS* to include Hromund in the list of settlers earlier on in the saga, not least because of the fact that his brother Grim is said to have been on Kveldulf's ship and given land by

Skallagrim.

According to Sigurður Nordal's chronology, Grim the Halogalander came to Iceland *c.* 891, so one is bound to wonder why Grim's brother should crop up in the narrative after Egil's marriage, which is supposed to have taken place in 939, nearly half a century later.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson draws attention to certain verbal similarities between *ESS* and *LD* (*IF*, III, xl–xli).[10] There can be little doubt that the author of *LD* must have used *ESS* which, as we have seen, was the older of the two. Particularly intriguing is the description of Olaf the Peacock:

> There was a man called Olaf, the son of Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson and of Melkorka, the daughter of King Myrkjartan of Ireland. Olaf lived west at Hjardarholt in Laxriverdale, in the Dales of Breidafjord. He was very rich and the most handsome man in Iceland at the time, a man of great distinction. Olaf asked for the hand of Thorgerd, Egil's daughter, a fine looking woman, very tall, intelligent and proud, but usually rather quiet. *Egil knew all about Olaf* and realized that it was a fine match, so Thorgerd was married to Olaf and went to live with him at Hjardarholt. Their children were Kjartan, Thorberg, Halldór, Steindor, Thurid, Thorbjorg, and Bergthora who married Thorhall the Priest. Thorbjorg married first Asgeir Knattarson, and later Vermund Thorgrimsson. Thurid married Godmund Solmundarson and their sons were Hall and Killer-Bardi. (*ESS*, ch. 78)

In contrast to this detailed account of Thorgerd and her husband and children, Egil's other daughter is dealt with in a summary fashion: 'Ozur Eyvindarson, the brother of Thorodd of Olfus, married Bera, Egil's daughter' (ch. 78). Nevertheless, Ozur belonged to a distinguished family, and important people in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries traced their pedigrees back to him and Bera, Egil's daughter. Like Olaf the Peacock, Ozur is supposed to have been of royal Irish stock: according to *LB* (*IF*, I, 392–93) his great-grandmother, Kormlod, was the daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland. However, notwithstanding Olaf's bastardy, no one could doubt his superiority over Ozur, who had neither been offered the throne of Ireland nor defended the realm against viking attack.

The passage about Olaf the Peacock and Thorgerd in *ESS* does not only agree

with *LD* in most significant details, but also it shows striking verbal similarities with corresponding statements in *LD*, as was implied above. It is of little consequence that *ESS* mentions Bergthor as one of the Olafssons, whereas *LD* has instead two brothers called Helgi and Hoskuld. But there is another and more notable discrepancy. In *ESS* Olaf is already farming at Hjardarholt when he marries Thorgerd, and after the wedding she goes to live with him there. But in *LD* Olaf stays with his father at Hoskuldsstad the winter before the marriage, and that is where they go after the wedding. A year later, Olaf starts farming at Goddastad, and it is only afterwards that he founds the farm at Hjardarholt. According to the design of *LD*, Olaf's youthful adventures abroad did not allow for enough time to enable him to farm at Hjardarholt (or anywhere else for that matter) before marriage. He is supposed to be eighteen when he arrives in Ireland and twenty when he comes back to Iceland; then he marries Thorgerd in the autumn of the following year, at the age of twenty-one.

ESS does not state explicitly where the wedding took place, though the wording 'so Thorgerd was married to Olaf and went to live with him at Hjardarholt' certainly implies that it was celebrated at the bride's home (Borg), as indeed was the normal custom. But in *LD*, where Olaf's royal connexions went to the author's head, we are told that in 'deference to the men of Laxriverdale it was conceded that the bride would be brought to them; the wedding was to take place at Hoskuldsstad seven weeks before winter' (ch. 23).

As seems to be implied in *ESS* ('Egil knew all about Olaf and realized that it was a fine match'), the author must have had in mind something particularly praiseworthy about Olaf, even though he does not spell it out. The reader is reminded of *LD*:

> Olaf's voyage brought him great renown, and now his true lineage was made known: that he was the grandson of Myrkjartan, king of the Irish. This was soon known throughout the country, as was the honour that had been bestowed on him by the great men he had visited. (ch. 22)

Although our knowledge about the antecedents of the four sagas under consideration is very limited indeed, it would be tempting to assume that the author of *ESS* based his account of Olaf and Thorgerd on a written source which may have included a reference to Olaf's trip to Ireland, though probably at a more mature age than *LD* would make us believe. We are also in the dark about information,

written as well as oral, at the disposal of the author of *LD*, but his treatment of Olaf the Peacock was bound to be different from that of *ESS*, as he was restricted by the exigencies of narrative art: Olaf's role in *LD* was too great for the author to ignore or overrule the literary convention.

Studies of the *Íslendingasögur* have in recent times been based on various different assumptions about early Icelandic society and the nature of narrative art in Norse and Germanic speaking areas. A great deal of wisdom is to be found in such studies, but, as a native Icelander, I have sometimes had reason to regret that saga research is apt to ignore the special cultural and intellectual conditions prevailing in early Iceland: a remote community, isolated by a cruel sea and cut off from its origin and neighbours, striving to combine filial loyalty to the past with a devout commitment to an alien culture from southern Europe and beyond. In order to make sense of their own society and at the same time to justify themselves in the eyes of Europe, the learned men of twelfth-century Iceland set out to create an acceptable image of their background. It would be a serious mistake to think that the genealogies alluded to in the *First Grammatical Treatise* (*c.* 1150) as one of the four literary kinds practised in Iceland at the time must have been strictly confined to bare names and family relationships. The much quoted statement in the *Thórðarbók* version of *LB* appears to reflect ideas current in the twelfth century: 'People often say that writing about the Settlements is irrelevant learning, but we think we can better meet the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know the truth about our ancestors.'[11] However, the ultimate aim of learned men in medieval Iceland was not only to present their forebears as brave and noble men but, at the same time, to fit them into suitable roles for medieval romance.

NOTES

* I have used the central idea of this paper on three previous occasions. First, in an address given in the Town Hall of Copenhagen during the Sixth International Saga Conference 1985; and then the following year in lectures offered at the Universities of Cambridge and Southampton. Quotations in English from *Njáls saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Egils saga* (*Egla*) are taken from the Penguin Classics series. Other renderings of saga passages are my own. Anglicized forms of Icelandic names are used throughout this article.

1 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 186–95.

2 *Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, edited by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit (*IF*), III (Reykjavík, 1938), 59.

3 See R. C. Boer, *Bjarnar saga Hitdœlakappa* (Halle, 1883), pp. xxi–xxii; Sigurður Nordal, *IF*, III, lxxvi–lxxix .

4 Rudolf Meissner, *Laxdæla saga* (Jena, 1923), p. 11.

5 *Laxdæla saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *IF*, V (Reykjavík, 1934), lx–lxii.

6 For studies of the historical implications of the Vinheid episode, see A. Campbell, *The Battle of Brunanburgh* (London, 1938); Sigurður Nordal, *IF*, III, xxxviii–xlvi; Gwyn Jones, 'Egill Skallagrímsson in England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 38 (1952), 127–44; Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík, 1975), pp. 229–53.

7 In *Sturlunga saga*, edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols (Reykjavík, 1946), I, 241–42.

8 *Ætt Egils Halldórssonar og Egils saga* (Reykjavík and Copenhagen, 1937).

9 *Skáldasögur* (Reykjavík, 1961), pp. 245–47.

10 See also my *Leyndardómar Laxdælu* (Reykjavík, 1986), pp. 75–76.

11 *The Book of Settlements*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg, 1972), p. 6.