

Egil's Saga:

Traditional evidence for Brúnanburh
compared to Literary, Historic and
Archaeological Analyses

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Cover image: Egil Skallagrimsson. From the 17th century Icelandic manuscript AM 426 fol., Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Egil_Skallagrimsson_17c_manuscript.jpg)

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Dedicated to my wife and daughter

This research into the Battle of Brúnanburh and Egil's Saga was commenced after the death of my elder cousin in a car accident in 1969. My family came from Northern England, went to Castle Hedingham, Essex and then to the East Midlands. I came to Egil's Saga late in life and this enabled me to pursue the subject in greater depth.

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My wife and daughter have been long suffering and most understanding of my research, but it was my mother who first stirred an interest in the origins of both families, coupled with other curious events, meeting various people who became friends, some of whom seemed to know about my family.

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INTRODUCTION

The Saga. Although regarded as a family saga, the style of *Egil's Saga Skalla-Grímssonar* is Homeric rather than Hesiodic. Such a refinement indicates that individuals have added to and created a type of 'literary palimpsest', embellished the 'hero' (a dark, violent poet) and content owing to its oral inheritance. [Nordal, S. (ed) 1933; see also MSS AM162 A fol 0 (mid 13th century); though the chief MS: Möðruvallabók [M] AM132 fol., Reykjavík (14th century) was employed by Bjarni Einarsson 2003]. Thus, it raises problems not only for the Saga but also for the veracity of the Brúnanburh context (AD 937). Unlike *Höensa Þorirs Saga*¹, which is Hesiodic in style, simple evidence has not been embroidered or aggrandized it retains its original format. Therefore, on this basis Egil's Saga cannot be regarded as an historical work² for its style is semi-fictional prose with skáldic verse - *dróttkvætt*, it becomes a type of 'genre fiction', slanting towards a novel, an early 'Scandinavian Noir'.

Romantic and political ideals of the past Age prevail; they affect the present and can disturb historical accuracy; even the authenticity of this saga can be questioned for it was collated three centuries after the events portrayed. Torfi H. Túlunius³ describes a framework to verify the narrative, "a more dynamic way, a generic system organised by five principles: genealogy, geography, (both spatio-temporal and concrete), the others are religion, the supernatural and social status". For Torfi's structure does not ignore but rather compliments Sigurður Nordal's⁴ 'time' categorization of prose: *samtidssagaer* (contemporary time's sagas describing events in the time range of composition), *fortidssagaer* (olden time's sagas AD 850-1100) and *öldtidssagaer* (ancient sagas before the settlement of Iceland); interestingly, Túlunius' 'elemental' framework may illuminate differences inherent in Egil's Saga. The article reconsiders the paradigm.

RAISON D'ÊTRE

Therefore, the author separates Túlunius' two areas - (a) the spatio-temporal / concrete and (b) the paranormal / fantastic in the saga, to verify reality from weird for a conceptual framework. What results is most interesting for it demonstrates the 'mishmash' of events and images creating 'Form' in Egil's Saga.⁵

¹ Morris, W. & Magnusson, E. 1903 *Höensa Þorirs Saga. (The Saga of Hen Thorir)*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Byway Press.

² See Einarsson Bjarni 2003 *Egil's Saga*. Saga Book. Vol. XXVII. Viking Society for Northern Research. U.C. L. He describes the 'histography of the conflated MSS'.

³ Torfi H. Túlunius 2000. "An Attempt at Application: Interpreting Egils saga." *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth Century Iceland*. Transl. Randi C. Eldevik. Odense: Odense University Press, pp 234-89. 529.

⁴ Nordal, Sigurður. (ed) 1933 *Egil's Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, Íslandk Fornrit ii, Reykjavík. p181; see also Oskar Bandle (Ed) 2002. *The Nordic Languages Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft. An International Handbook of the History of North Germanic Languages*. Vol 1. Band 22.1, Walter de Gruyter. Berlin. Pages 824-5, 832). This is not to diminish Nordal's valuable work of 'time' categorization of prose but to analyse the conceptual framework underpinning the saga.

⁵ Egil's Saga was collated c. AD 1242/3.

This article confirms various incongruities within the above areas highlighting that the veracity accorded by some scholars, who hold the accuracy of this saga as absolute, must be treated with extreme caution. While different family lineages and social aspects are discussed, one was found to be skewed in the saga. Is there reciprocity in the story for the traditions of *Brúnanburh* when compared to historical sources? If distinct mismatches can be shown through historical, geographical and genealogical sources then we have no alternative but to disregard Egil's Saga as a material source for *Brúnanburh*. Yet, conversely these incongruities can validate correct events.

SNORRI'S CHARACTER AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Guðrún Nordal's post-graduate lecture (1991-2)⁶ in the Scandinavian Studies Department at University College London of 'Snorri the Man' (c.AD 1179-23rd September 1241, aet 62) demonstrated a number of aspects of his character: Snorri's private life; the chieftain; the Sturlungs and Snorri's killing. Importantly, Guðrún describes Snorri's timeline,

1179	born, son of <i>Guðný Böðvarsdóttir</i> and <i>Sturla Þórðarson at Dalasýsla, Iceland</i> .
1181	fostered at Oddi by <i>Jón Loftsson</i> .
1199	married to <i>Herdís Bersadóttir</i> ; they lived at Oddi.
1202	they move to Borg á Mýrum.
1206	Snorri moves to Reykjaholt; <i>Herdís</i> stays on at Borg.
1215-18	Snorri a lawspeaker.
1218-20	Snorri in Norway; stays with <i>earl Skúli (lendr maðr)</i> .
1222	partnership with <i>Hallveig Ormsdóttir</i> .
1222-31	Snorri a lawspeaker.
1237-39	Snorri in Norway with <i>earl Skúli</i> . Goes to Iceland in spite of King <i>Hákon's</i> ban.
1241	<i>Hallveig Ormsdóttir</i> dies.
23/09/1241	Snorri killed in Reykjaholt by <i>Gizzurr Þórvaldsson's</i> men: <i>Markús Marðarson, Simon Knútr, Àrni Beiskr, Þórsteinn Guðinason, and Þórarinn Àsgrimsson</i> were with <i>Gizzurr Þórvaldsson</i> but <i>Àrni Beiskr (the Bitter)</i> gave Snorri his death blow.

This article suggests that Egil's Saga may have been collated in note form c. AD 1220 – 1231 by Snorri but according to the literary time-structure of specific words and phrases the saga was probably constructed and added too much later – an historic/literary palimpsest. Further, there are certain literary aspects described in the first person that could not have happened to Egil at that time. These structural literary aspects can be assessed and dated, thus giving validity to the argument that Snorri may not have written the Saga in its first redaction. Further, some historical aspects are incorrect.

⁶ Guðrún Nordal is the daughter of Sigurður Nordal. This timeline extract was taken from her PostGraduate lecture in the Scandinavian Studies Dept at UCL. Her CV states: "Guðrún started her research career in London, after graduating from Oxford in 1988. She was appointed a lecturer at University College London in 1990. She moved to Iceland then was awarded a postdoc position from the Icelandic Research Council in 1993, and was appointed a senior research fellow at the Arni Magnusson Manuscript Insititute in 1997. In 2001 she was appointed an associate professor at the University of Iceland, and has been a professor since 2005. In 2009 she became the director of the Arni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies".