

## An Ill-Tempered Axe for an Ill-Tempered Smith

### The Gift of King Eiríkr *blóðøx* to Skallagrímr Kveldúlfsson in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*

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ABSTRACT: Current studies on, and translations of, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* approach weapons, in particular their metallurgical composition and forged details, with little reflection of recent advances in archaeology, both classic and experimental. This results in an impoverished appreciation of both the detail of the episode in which Skallagrímr Kveldúlfsson tests a richly decorated battle axe given to him by the king of Norway and the treatment and symbolism of axes throughout the saga. This episode, complemented by subsequent axe references, reflects and reinforces the founding narrative of the settlement of Iceland and the strained relationship between Iceland and hegemonistic Norway in the thirteenth century, the likely date of the saga's composition.

RÉSUMÉ : Les études et les traductions de *la Saga d'Egil* témoignent d'un manque de connaissance technique au sujet des armes à main, surtout en ce qui concerne leur composition métallurgique et les processus de la forge. Le résultat en est une mésestimation de la richesse de l'épisode dans lequel Skallagrímr Kveldúlfsson met à l'épreuve une hache de bataille ornée dont le roi de Norvège lui a fait cadeau. Largement inaperçu est le symbolisme des haches qui surviennent dans chaque génération de la saga. L'épisode qui met en scène Skallagrímr, comme toute la suite d'allusions aux haches, rejoignent et renforcent le récit fondateur de la colonisation de l'Islande et fournissent la preuve des relations tendues entre l'Islande and la Norvège hégémonique au treizième siècle, date probable de la composition de la saga.

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On the grand scale, a major theme of *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* is relations between the Norwegian kingship and the Icelandic commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> This finds principal expression in the warrior-poet Egill's dealings with King Eiríkr blóðøx Haraldsson and his successor as a consequence of disputed land claims in Norway and an escalating sequence of aggressive acts and counter-acts. But the theme, in true saga style, is established well before Egill takes centre stage as a youngster, in the politics surrounding his father Skallagrímr and grandfather Kveldúlfr, and their withdrawal from royal Norwegian hegemony in favor of settlement in Iceland. For the experienced listener or reader of the thirteenth century this proleptic narrative style would seem to exert a nearly deterministic influence on the later course of events and human fates, as what may appear an innocuous motif or potential symbol is rewrit larger and larger, until a theme is solidly constructed of much interlocking detail. Such an original motif, for instance, an object, may be treated from a variety of perspectives, e.g., impersonal description by the saga author or presence at the centre of a series of actions. It may be explicitly mentioned by a figure in the saga, in, variously, indirect discourse, direct speech, such heightened forms of communication as extemporaneous verse, or even referenced through its silent omission at a time when comment might be judged relevant.<sup>2</sup>

Another of the most readily recognized of these literary devices, or partial world-views, if we wish to implicate the public in a saga vision of life, is the transfer in selective fashion of telling physical and psychological characteristics over several generations of a family. A father's behaviour may have significant consequences for a son's fate, when such affinities exist. Running in parallel to this generational determinism are various functional roles in the saga that seem to perpetuate themselves independently of kinship or alliance: mediators regularly appear when parties are in conflict; poets figure in love triangles; berserks seek to maximize land holdings through judicial dueling; rapacious kings coerce or cajole men into allegiance.<sup>3</sup> Another mental disposition that the saga public must bring to the stories is a readiness to try to penetrate the psychology of the principals. Public statements are only that—and issue from a social persona navigating a sea of often competing relationships. Dialogue is always highly significant in the sagas but may well only alert the listener to the possibilities of what is not being said but only thought, indirectly referred to, and acted on. We even have scenes of principals operating in complete solitude and must piece together intention and will from the saga's bald statement of actions that the listener/reader knows are purposeful and meant to be consequential (Blaney).

This article examines one such episode from early in the saga, one that combines politico-economic relations with a rare concern for Viking Age technology, since the sagas are otherwise seldom interested in description for its own sake or for the creation of a general sense of place and mood. When

present, the realistic detail, which may be as slight as a place name on an itinerary or an everyday object, is often a pivot on which the plot turns. The combination of technical detail and rich symbolism makes for a considerable challenge in literary analysis and translation. A case in point is metallurgy and weapons-smithing. The object in the present case is a battle axe, one of several such weapons in the saga that tend to generate, or accompany, comparable, not always successful, outcomes.



*A modern replica of the axe head found at Langeid, Norway, forged of bog iron and according to historical methods. The blade length is 24.4 cm and the cherry wood haft is 117 cm long. In the saga, this basic type of battle axe has been enhanced with decorative effects on the head and haft and may have had a longer lower point.*

*Photograph courtesy Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo, Norway / Vegard Vike.*

The scene to be examined in detail is preceded by an earlier episode in the saga in which Kveldúlfr and his son Skallagrímr attack a king's ship at night on the Norwegian coast (*Egils saga*, Ch. 27). Kveldúlfr carries what is called *bryntröll*, a weapon as dangerous to men in mail as trolls to humans. The weapon is not otherwise described. Editor Sigurður Nordal identifies it as a halberd (*Egils saga*, 68, n. 2), a long shaft with an iron spike at its end, below which were an axe blade and facing hook or two axe blades. Kveldúlfr strikes an opponent in a way that can only be a downward blow with an axe blade rather than an upward thrust as with a spear. The weapon penetrates a royal retainer's helmet and head, allowing Kveldúlfr to hoist him into the air and cast his body overboard.

After this understated introduction, where the axe-like blade is not explicitly named, axes figure throughout *Egils saga*, albeit in very qualified terms. By and large, the axe as a distinct weapon is associated here with anomalous situations or inconclusive actions, with some exception. The motif and its lexical expression are introduced by King Eiríkr himself who bears the grim epithet *blóðøx*, not

otherwise explained in the saga, although the name seems to have originated in a fratricidal struggle for the rulership.<sup>4</sup>

Another backdrop against which to appreciate axes is an early declarative passage setting out Skallagrímr's competence in blacksmithing (*Egils saga*, Ch. 30). It is highlighted by an anecdote in which the smith swims out to sea and retrieves a stone slab that will serve as his anvil in the absence on his property of suitably sized stones. The stone is described as huge and heavy, flat but with a wavy surface reminiscent of the sea itself. Both Kveldúlfr and Skallagrímr are shape-shifters, the fundamental thermomorphic transformation that could be thought the base image of other such transformations (Jakobsson). Skallagrímr also composes a stanza, ostensibly in reaction to his farm-hands' reluctance to rise early and man the bellows in his forge. Artisanal imagery such as from wood-working figures in Egill's verse (Sayers 2002, Clunies Ross 2015). Here we have a poem about smithing itself. Smelting and forging bog iron, with the semi-aquatic origin and reliance on forced air, can be imagined as a homologue of the creation of poetry from the natural resource of language through the inspiration from the mead of poetry. In particular, the emphasis here on the bellows may recall the role of the mouth in poetry, the two-way conduit for the inspiring poetic mead and for its artistic production.<sup>5</sup>

After Eiríkr blóðøx has succeeded his father Haraldr hárfagri as king, he maintains amicable relations with Þórólfr Skallagrímsson, whose father and grandfather had left Norway after killing close members of the king's family in revenge for the death of his uncle and namesake, Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson. Apparently with a view to placate Skallagrímr, Eiríkr sends him, via Þórólfr, a rich gift, a decorated axe. The saga describes it as follows: "øxin var snaghyrnd ok mikil ok gullbúin, upp skellt skaptit með silfri, ok var þat inn virðiligsti gripr" (*Egils saga*, Ch. 38, 95). There is no statement on other qualities; this is an external view only. All battle axes of the period had crescent-shaped blades with extended toe and heel. In *snaghyrnd*, *snag* is cognate with English *snag*, and *-hyrnd* "horned" refers to these pronounced recurving points at the extremities of the blade.<sup>6</sup> The adjective *mikil* is more probably in reference to the size of the bit or axe-head, in particular the blade length, rather than the overall dimensions of the weapon. Axes, even those decorated with gold, have a haft or handle in wood (ON-I *skapt*). While some kind of plating effect cannot be ruled out on the haft, it would add to the overall weight, albeit in the wrong place. An inlaid filigree effect or winding with silver wire or strips (note the adverb *upp*, implying some impression of movement) is more likely, on the basis of preserved examples of axes and of the descriptor *skellt*, which is the past participle of the verb *skella*, meaning, inter alia, "to beat," thus "beaten." This detail in metal would prevent the haft from being severed in combat. This opening external description may be rendered as follow: "The axe was bearded (extended at the toe and heel of the blade), large, and decorated with gold, wound along the shaft with beaten silver, and it was a most



magnificent artifact.”<sup>7</sup> Yet it is the internal qualities of the blade edge that will be central to a trial and evaluation that the recipient of the axe makes some time after his receipt of the gift.

On his return to Iceland, Þórólfr presents the axe to his father but no direct speech is recorded at this point in the saga. In fact, it is explicitly stated that Skallagrímr examined the axe but said nothing and placed it over the bed in his sleeping chamber. This would seem to indicate a personalized taking of possession, although the saga does not expressly make this point. In the autumn of the same year, the normal season for the slaughter of domestic animals, Skallagrímr has two oxen brought into the farmyard and tethered with their heads together over a slab of rock, a detail reminiscent of the flat stone he had brought from the sea for his forge. “Síðan gekk hann til með օxina konungsnaut ok hjó yxnina báða senn, svá at hօfuđit tók af hvárumtveggja” [Then he proceeded with the axe that was the king’s gift and struck the two oxen at the same time so that he took off both their heads] (*Egils saga*, 95-96). Skallagrímr’s actions effect a striking drop in the register of the saga. The finest product of the smith’s art, decorated in gold and silver, and bestowed on an Icelandic farmer by the King of Norway, is being used to slaughter farm stock, not warriors of comparable rank. It is no longer being kept as a valued display weapon, whether hung in the hall or carried in public. For the decapitation to be successful, the necks of the oxen would have to cross each other. Still, the planned operation would require a generous blade length, horn to horn or heel to toe, for the instrument to slice cleanly through the vertebrae and surrounding flesh, hide, and hair of the medieval cattle. Battle axes from the period portrayed in the saga, of the ninth and tenth centuries, display considerable variation, but most axes preserved in the archaeological record have a cutting surface between eight and twelve inches long. Blades measuring eighteen inches have also been preserved and these general dimensions continue through the thirteenth century, the likely date of the composition of the saga. The king’s gift would have been in the upper range of conventional bladed weapons. It may be assumed that the author of *Egils saga* had in mind a weapon that would have been very thin in the area just behind the edge and the ratio of length of cutting edge to total weight quite high. The haft, of oak or ash, would also have had to be at the high end of the three-to-four-foot range for Skallagrímr’s exercise to have been practicable.

The saga continues:

օxin hljóp niđr í steininn, svá at muđrinn brast ór allr ok rifnaði upp í gegnum herđuna. Skalla-Grímr sá í eggina ok röeđi ekki um, gekk síđan inn í eldahús ok steig síđan á stökk upp ok skaut օxinni upp á hurđása. Lá hon þar um vetrinn.  
(96)

This statement has been subject to serious misconception in English and other translations of *Egils saga*.<sup>8</sup> ON-I *muðr* is a homonym for *munnr* and generally means “mouth,” although, in the Nordic application of body imagery to weapons, it also designates a blade, more exactly its edge. It is then the bit or blade of the axe, not the poll or butt with the socket, that has failed Skallagrímur’s test and has broken “completely out.” In the subsequent phrasing “rifnaði upp í gegnum herðuna,” *rifna*, “to be rent, to split,” means that cracks or fissures developed in, and spread back and out from, the point of impact on the sharpened edge. The prepositional phrase “í gegnum” means “through.” *Herða* generally means “hardness” but is here used as a technical term for the highly tempered part of the axe-head. But the decapitated oxen prove that, whatever its weaknesses, the axe was extremely sharp.

What many commentaries fail to reflect is that axe heads of the Viking age were of composite manufacture. A blade section of steel with a higher carbon content, involving repeated reworking with fire and sledge, was welded to the blank head in order to give it a stronger, sharper edge (Pedersen 36-47, Tylecote, 81-82). The horns of the flared edge would also have to be of quality steel since, less massive in construction than the axe blade and body, these “beards” were still exposed to blows from an opponent’s weapon and needed to be strong enough to permit efforts to snag another’s arms or clothes and pull him off balance or off a horse. What has happened with the king’s gift is that the front of the blade has been broken loose and the impact has also caused cracks at either end where the highly tempered section was welded to the remainder of the head.

The passage may be translated as follows:

[The axe sprang down onto the stone, with the result that the edge of the blade broke completely loose and cracks ran up into the tempered part. Skallagrímur looked at the edge and said nothing about it; he then went into the fire room and then climbed up on a bench and shoved the axe up on the rafters (over the doorway). It lay there over the winter.]

The fancy axe is disfigured and useless but not broken into pieces. That the most consequential damage is, as might be expected, to the narrow edge of the blade is confirmed by Skallagrímur’s subsequent actions. According to the saga, he looked at the edge (ON-I *egg*), as a smith well might, but said nothing about it. In the understated narrative economy of the saga, this is the first mention of the term *egg* but this is really what the episode is all about, although the principal will not admit to this in words, nor will the author. The Icelander’s taciturnity is maintained throughout the episode and the result of the practical trial must speak for itself. The axe, after performing the single demeaning service of slaughtering cattle (unless this is a ritual act) but being rendered useless in the process, is relegated to the rafters of the fire room off the hall, a typical storage area by an

outer door—moved from the fire of the forge to the smoke of the under-roof of the kitchen. The term for these upper beams is *hurðás* or “door beam,” and this completes the curious run of words on the pattern H + vowel + R + dental: *hyrnt*, *herða*, *hurð*. The defective tempering (*herða*) of the bearded (*hyrnt*) axe results in the weapon being relegated to the rafters over the doorway (*herð*). Is this wit intentional or simply in the mind of the modern, overly close reader? If the humour, nonetheless somewhat grim, is intentional, it is at the expense of the king’s pretensions or his wiliness in awarding an impressive but defective weapon, one that would let its bearer down at a critical moment.

Word-play or paronomasia in skaldic verse is most evident in the riddling concealment of the personal names of intimates, a friend or woman being courted. In *Egils saga*, the names *Arinbjörn* and *Ásgerðr* are so treated and, in *Kormáks saga*, *Steingerðr*. Punning capabilities were clearly present in the culture. Its taste for word-play, not least with satirical intent, may have been enhanced by contact with Celtic culture and language in Ireland and Scotland.<sup>9</sup> One may then speculate whether the whole episode of the gift axe is not a concretized pun: in the king’s epithet *blóðøx* can be heard overtones of the adjectives *blautr* “soft, effeminate” or *blauðr* “weak, cowardly,” also used of the female of animals (cf. *blotna* [to become soft or weak]).<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that these instances of consonant retention and vowel alternation are the basis for the half-rhyme that is regularly found in the odd lines of skaldic verse in the *dróttkvætt* form. *Uxi* “ox” can similarly be evoked by *øx*, so that the royal epithet, *blóðøx*, is open to parody in the hypothetical \**blaut-uxi* [weak ox] and in the decapitation scene. Another possible disparaging pun on the thematic level is with *naut* “cattle, oxen” and *nautr* “donor, giver,” also used of the gift itself, as in *konungsnautr* in the saga, the “king’s gift.”

One might even venture that Norway and Iceland, in the fictionalized world of the sagas, stand in the same relationship to each other as the elements of a pun. We can imagine the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor (the subject to which attributes are ascribed and the object whose attributes are borrowed) in a more fanciful, antagonistic relationship. The cultures, like the phonetic element in word-play, are close but the values, ambitions, competencies, as semantics, differ markedly. The more populous, stronger, and richer kingdom sets the topic and context and is in the mainstream, while the island commonwealth, with its feuders, farmers, and traders, repeatedly injects incongruity into the situation, destabilizes assumptions and judgments. So does the punning word; before the king, Icelandic visitors outshine resident Norwegian courtiers; farmers’ sons are appointed military leaders; rural commoners provide the most skilled eulogy of rulers; and mocking adversaries in asymmetrical conflicts extemporize witty verse. In any event, three elaborate puns are *disponibles* for the so-minded public in the episode of the test of the king’s axe. More may follow.

The chapter immediately following Skallagrímur’s trial of the king’s gift shows a true axe at work. Egill, still a lad, has been engaged in a rough ballgame and has

been thrown to the ground by a bigger and older opponent, after Egill had swatted him with the bat. Egill runs after him, takes a small axe carried by a bystander both as a status symbol and for personal security, and buries it in the skull of his opponent. After the episode of the king's gift, this example of an axe is purposely downplayed: "Hann seldi honum í hendr skeggøxi eina, er Þórðr hafði haft í hendi. Þau vápn váru þá tíð" (*Egils saga*, Ch. 40, 100) [He [Þórðr] handed him [Egill] a bearded axe that Þórðr had in his hand; these weapons were common at that time"]. Here the axe is a simple practical expedient for Egill, carrying no symbolic value, not even subject to ownership by the principal actor. It is distanced from its user in a different way than was the king's gift. But there is the slightest tie to the earlier episode in the beard or extended lower horn on the axe head.

Eiríkr's axe gathers dust and soot under the roof of the fire-room over the winter. In the spring Þórólfr Skallagrímsson prepares for a trading trip and court visit to Norway. The saga reads:

En áðr Þórólfr fór frá Borg, þá gekk Skalla-Grímr til ok tók øxina ofan af hurðásum, konungsgjöfina, ok gekk út með. Var þá skaftit svart af reykh, en øxin ryðgengin. Skalla-Grímr sá í egg øxinni. Síðan seldi hann Þórólfi øxina.  
(96)

[And before Þórólfr left Borg, Skallagrímr went and took down the axe, the king's gift, from the doorway rafters and went out with it. The haft was blackened by smoke and the axe head had become rusty. Skallagrímr looked at the axe's edge. Then he gave the axe to Þórólfr.]

Skallagrímr then extemporizes, as saga conventions would have it, a stanza of poetry in lieu of any specific extra-poetic instructions about returning the axe to its donor. In addition to the noun *egg* "edge," ON-I knew the verb *eggja*, which meant "to whet, put an edge on" and, by metaphorical extension, "to incite, to whet, to egg on." In conventional type scenes, a subaltern figure such as a woman or old man, whom a manly man could not easily or violently silence, incites the reluctant object of scorn to an act of vengeance in defence of family honour.<sup>11</sup> Whetting is then a kind of provocation, and Skallagrímr may well have seen the gift of a defective, poorly edged axe as a provocation. He finally breaks his silence but in the superior register of skaldic verse, which passes judgment on the axe, while itself, as a poem, being its homologue or correspondence in terms of the elaboration of form. The poem is an intricately and well worked artifact, a gift fit for a king (content to one side), but has all its edge, since it is an incisive condemnation. The poet concentrates his scorn on the poorly wrought blade and its flashy tips. Since the verse, in the traditional *dróttkvætt* verse form, is traditionally thought older than the thirteenth-century saga, it may have supplied

the technical vocabulary met earlier in the prose, although the reverse seems true.<sup>12</sup>

Skalla-Grímr kvað vísu:  
 Liggja ýgs í eggju,  
 ák sveigar kǫr deiga,  
 fox es illt í øxi,  
 undvargs flǫsur margar;  
 arghyrnu lát árna  
 aptr með roknu skapti;  
 þǫrfgi væri þeirar,  
 þat vas inga gjǫf, hingat.  
 (*Egils saga*, Ch. 38, 97, st. 6.<sup>13</sup>)

[Skallagrímr recited a verse:

Many flaws lie in the edge of the fierce “wound-wolf” (= axe); I have a doughy “limbs’ grief” (= axe); there is evil cunning in the axe. Let its craven corners and smoky haft be shipped back; there is no need for it to have been brought—that king’s gift—here.]

Key vocabulary includes *egg* and the descriptor *deigr* “soft” (equivalences of which were above juxtaposed with the king’s nickname). *Sveigar kǫr* has been identified as an axe kenning (Sigurður Nordal, *Egils saga*, 97, n. 6), and, indeed, it meets the formal criteria of this device, and, in the combination of the designation for the recipient/target and the emotion he/it experiences, recalls other axe names met in the saga. Yet it represents a fall in register since the instrument is not to be seen, at this moment, as a battle axe but rather as a domestic axe. In context, this is a parodic kenning. The limbs (*sveigir*) it cuts are trees’ branches not men’s arms and legs. *Kǫr* prompts thoughts of *kýr* “cow” (cf. also *kurfla* “to chop wood”). In addition, *deigr* means “soft” but has a nominal equivalent *deig* “dough.” This, too, places the axe in the domestic, now female, sphere. As a doughy “bane of boughs,” the axe is still unbaked, untempered.

The word *øx* now finally appears in Skallagrímr’s mouth but only to be locked in the equation with *fox* “fraud, deception.” There is reference to the horns, now characterized, ostensibly, as *argr* meaning “weak, unmanly” or “evil,” and in Skallagrímr’s estimation, perhaps superfluous. No silver now shows on the sooty haft but rather (according to the prose) rust on the blade (a return to the boggy origins). Until the recital of the poem, the axe has been viewed only externally, although all the action has tended toward revealing internal properties. In this, it parallels the stance of the farmer-smith, whose silence has been maintained until the crucial test of the axe has been completed, and nearly forgotten.<sup>14</sup> There is a pronounced dual deixis in the last four lines. With the rise and descent of the gift axe in the poet’s memory, along with the passage from honoured position

indoors to farmyard work site and then to dishonoured position within, the poet orders the return of the axe to Norway and denies the propriety of its original movement from Norway to Iceland—all this given extra point by the terminal position of the rejected *hingat* “hither,” which is linked by rhyme to the poetic word for “king, ruler,” *ingi*.<sup>15</sup>

The poem and the return to silence following it affect the closure of the episode and the realignment of the saga narrative. On this occasion and at this point in the narrative it is only with the shift from impersonal prose to poetry that anything essential about the gift axe is stated, and then in the subjective voice of the extemporizing poet (Clunies Ross 2010). This makes the Icelandic specialty of skaldic verse the only reliable medium for the communication of accurate information on this instance of material reality. It is not that the author is ingenuous. Rather, he states only what anyone would see on first viewing the axe. With regard to the possibility of word play explored above, there is something of the formal aspects of the *double entendre* hanging over the entire episode: puns on the king’s name and the properties of the *konungsnautr*, the concrete pun in slaughtering *cattle* with the *gift* axe, the interplay of taciturnity and eloquence, the king’s putative deceptiveness in conferring an axe that may let its bearer down and does not have a steeled core commensurate with its flashy exterior (like a failed pun).

Skallagrímr clearly intends the axe to be returned to King Eiríkr, although he does not say so other than via the poem. Þórólfr is, however, more prudent. Once at sea, he throws the axe overboard. Since the sea is implicated in the story of the mead of poetry (the dwarves’ theft and sequestration on an islet), the axe is now twice disposed of, once in the medium of poetry, then in the sea itself. This loops back to the origin of Skallagrímr’s anvil stone and to the subaquatic/subterranean source of the smith’s raw material, bog iron. Before the king, Þórólfr expresses his father’s thanks for the fine gift and makes the return gift of a ship and sail, less aggressive artifacts but no less costly, and the latter the product of many hours of women’s work. Marine imagery, although in the background, is present to the end.

Since there is a strongly advanced scholarly opinion that Snorri Sturluson is the likely author of *Egils saga*,<sup>16</sup> it is relevant to see how he treats axes in other works. Snorri makes a programmatic statement in the section in *Skáldskaparmál* devoted to the lexis of skaldic verse, weapons in particular:

Höggvápn, øxar eða sverð, er kallað blóðá eða benja.... En øxar kalla menn tröllkvinna  
heitum ok kenna við blóð eða benjar eða skóg eða við.  
(*Skáldskaparmál* 1998, 1.67)

[Cutting weapons, axes or swords, are called fires of blood or wounds. ... People call axes by names of troll-wives, and refer to them in terms of blood or wounds or forest or tree.]

(*Skáldskaparmál* 1987, 118)

No myth preserved in narrative form or alluded to in kennings makes an axe its central object. Even in the detailed catalogues of the possessions of the Æsir, no one counts an axe among distinctive personal weapons. Nor is there even the briefest mention of a celebrated axe forged by dwarf smiths. But surely, the fabricators of Þórr's hammer, Mjöllnir, even if they skimmed on the handle, would have known the secrets of steel. This may be thought to have some bearing on the treatment of axes in *Egils saga*.

In the section in which Snorri lists *heiti*, i.e., names (historical or concocted on the basis of typical traits), rare homonyms of basic terms, metonyms, and other descriptors of people, natural phenomena, and things that often figure in skaldic verse, he provides examples of terms that may be used of axes. Relevance to present concerns is sharpened by the fact that one of Snorri's terms, and not the least prestigious, also figures in Skallagrím's little poem on the king's axe. Snorri's list of axe *heiti*, often reproduced in stanzaic form, is as follows:

Øx ok jarðsparða  
hyrna  
skjáfa ok skeggja  
skráma ok genja  
reginspönn Gneþja  
gýgr ok Fála  
snaga ok búlda  
bartha ok víggloð  
þveita ok þenja.  
Þá er arghyrna,  
hon er æzt talið  
øxar heita.

(*Skáldskaparmál*, 1998, I.121, st. 463)

In Anthony Faulkes's translation the list reads:

[Axe and iron-sparth, horny, scraper and bearded, cutter and gaper, power-span, Gneþja [towering], giantess and Fala [frightener], spiked and bulging, whiskered and Viggloð [battle-bright], hewer and stretched. Then there is soft-horned: this is considered the highest of names for axe.]

(*Skáldskaparmál*, 1987, 159)

Here we meet several terms and concepts seen earlier in Skallagrímr's verse: *hyrna*, *snaga* (the spikey horns), beard—and *arghyrna*. But how can the “unmanly horns” of Skallagrímr's stanza qualify as the most flattering term for an axe? It may be that *argr* and its variant *ragr*, in the sense of “unmanly, effeminate,” are reserved for human males, while in the case of inanimate objects the meaning is “evil, pernicious.” Here it is the weapon's capacity to do harm that is designated, not its deficient moral nature. For Skallagrímr's verse the best interpretation seems to be that the gift axe is judged to be intentionally deficient, intended to betray its bearer at a critical moment. We recall that Ragnarøk is preceded by, *inter alia*, a *skeggjöld* “age of bearded axes” (or “halberds” *skeggjur*; *Völuspá*, *Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, st. 45; Snorri, *Edda*, 49).

To return to *Egils saga*, chapter sequence is important in tracking the axe motif. Skallagrímr's intended return of the axe via Þórólfr follows Egill's killing of a ballplayer with a borrowed axe. In the subsequent chapters of the saga—once The Axe is out of the picture, so to speak—the adult Egill is never shown fighting with a hand or pole axe. It is as if the weapon/tool were excised from the saga. Since the most extensive physical portrait of Egill is reserved for the near mid-point of the saga and shows the hero sulking or grieving at the court of King Athelstan of England, while he awaits compensation for the death of Þórólfr at the battle of Vin Moor, we might look to these chapters for an equivalent account of how a professional fighting man typically equipped himself for massed combat—and would not be disappointed. Yet the inventory of equipment is attached not to Egill but to Þórólfr, perhaps with a view to concentrating listener interest on Egill's brother, since it is he who falls in the battle after a tactical deployment of troops and leaders that does not meet with Egill's approval but is rather the king's decision. In addition to helmet, shield, and sword, Þórólfr bears a halberd, the description of which can be profitably compared for its clinical precision to that of the axe given Skallagrímr by King Eiríkr but also recalls Kveldúlfr's weapon in the naval encounter early in the saga.

Kesju hafði hann í hendi. Fjōðrin var tveggja álna lōng ok sleginn fram broddr ferstrendr, en upp var fjōðrin breið, falrinn bæði langr ok digr, skaftit var eigi hæra en taka mátti hendi til fals ok furðuliga digrt. Járnteinn var í falnum ok skaftit allt járnvafit. Þau spjót váru kōlluð brynþvarar. Egill hafði inn sama búnað sem Þórólfr. (*Egils saga*, Ch. 53, 136)

[He had a halberd in his hand. The blade was two ells long (at least 36 inches) and was forged toward the end spike with a rectangular cross-section; and the blade was broad at its upper end and the socket was both long and stout; the shaft was no thicker around than a hand span up to the socket but was extremely strong. There was also an iron prong on the socket and the shaft was wound around with iron strips. This kind of spear was called a “mail-scraper.” Egill had the same equipment as Þórólfr.]



Whether this mid-tenth-century pole-arm carried an axe blade opposite the iron point is not stated or otherwise known.

Only in the following generation, after Egill has all but retired from public life, does an axe recur.<sup>17</sup> Egill's son Þorsteinn is involved in an acrimonious dispute over grazing rights. The law is clearly on his side, and his claim to the riverside land is sound. But his neighbour Steinarr continues to graze his cattle there. Þorsteinn has already killed one cowherd for the infraction, and Steinarr buys a slave (although "enslaved man" might be a more accurate term), Þrándr, who is big, strong, and trained in weapons. The new herdsman promises to deal with Þorsteinn, and Steinarr equips him for the job: "Steinarr seldi í hendr Þrándi øxi mikla, nær álнар fyrir munn, ok var hon hárhvøss" (*Egils saga*, Ch. 80, 279) [Steinarr handed Þrándr a large axe, with a blade almost an ell long, and it was sharp enough to sever a hair]. At about 18 inches along the blade, this recalls the oversized weapon given by Eiríkr *blóðøx* although the counterpart is now at the far end of the social scale and is in the hands of a slave.

One morning Þorsteinn goes to inspect the grazing situation. "Þorsteinn... hafði øxi í hendi ekki mikla ok engi fleiri vápн" (*Egils saga*, Ch. 81, 280) [Þorsteinn... has an axe, not very large, and no other weapons]. Þrándr sees Þorsteinn's approach and leaps up, seizing his larger axe in both hands. After an exchange in which Þrándr is boastful and threatening and Þorsteinn calm but determined, the slave says that the gentleman-farmer will find a night's sleep beneath his axe, that he is twice as strong as his opponent, is not lacking in courage, and is better armed. In a curious development, Þrándr apparently elects to display his scorn for Þorsteinn by bending down to retie his shoe. Þorsteinn raises his axe on high and deftly decapitates the slave. But the matter will not be resolved so neatly, and only when Egill intervenes at the local þing is the grazing dispute finally settled, to Steinarr's great disadvantage as a consequence of Egill's sly legalistic maneuvering. Coolness, self-reliance, and a small axe win the day over bluster, coercion (through enslavement), and an axe outsized for its purpose.

The killing of Þrándr has curious resonances with a scene in *Njáls saga*. Skarphéðinn Njálsson participates in an attack, a failed ambush actually, on members of a rival faction in the feud underlying the saga.<sup>18</sup> The two groups of men are separated by the Markarfljótt. While his brothers and others go down toward the icy shore, Skarphéðinn pauses to retie his shoe lace. This may well have a practical motivation but also seems a detail so trivial as, inversely, be a signal for something greater about to happen. Shoe tied, Skarphéðinn takes a run at the river, jumps across the open water, and comes firmly down on a sheet of ice on the far shore, where his opponents have gathered. He slides at speed on the ice toward the other party, then, abreast of Þráinn Sigfússon, swings his axe to split Þráinn's head, and glides off untouched. The putative physics of upper-body motion while on a slippery surface are rather implausible here, but it makes for a striking scene and is well in character for the raffish but bold Skarphéðinn. The

episode is set up by the mention of Njáll hearing an axe clunk against an inner wall at home earlier that morning.

In contrast to *Egils saga*, axes in *Njáls saga* are both the ubiquitous mark of social standing, despite the presence of domestic homologues in the form of wood-working and timber-felling axes, and a common accouterment for personal security. The aged and frail Njáll is even seen carrying a small axe when he is borne to the high seat at the Alþing (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, Ch.118, 296). Gunnarr, for his part, carries a small axe when he goes out to his field with a grain sieve to sow (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, Ch. 53, 134). Axe violence is endemic to *Njáls saga*, perhaps being the weapon of choice in feuding with its haphazard violence, neither raiding, war, nor judicial duel, and in this it is sharply distinguished from *Egils saga*.<sup>19</sup>

Axes receive a final mention in *Egils saga*, at its very end, after Egill has died and been buried, first in a grave-mound and then by his step-daughter in a Christian cemetery. His bones are now being transferred to new ground in connection with the relocation of the church. Egill's skull is discovered, massive and ridged over like a scallop-shell.<sup>20</sup> A priest in attendance, wittily named Skapti, is curious to test its thickness.

Tók hann þá handðoxi vel mikla ok reiddi annarri hendi sem harðast ok laust hamrinum á hausinn ok vildi brjóta, en þar sem á kom, hvítnaði hann, en ekki dalaði né sprakk, ok má af slíku marka, at hauss sá mundi ekki auðskaddr fyrir höggum smámennis, meðan svörðr ok hold fylgði.  
(*Egils saga*, Ch. 86)

[He took a rather large hand axe in one hand and struck as hard as he could with the hammer turned toward the skull to see whether he could crack it and the result was that the skull turned white but was not dented nor split, and from that you could tell that a skull like that would not have been easily damaged by the blows of lesser men, when it was covered with skin and hair.]

The deployment of the axe motif in *Egils saga* concludes with a test, as it began. The Icelandic slab of rock withstood the royal Norwegian gift, which was irreparably damaged. Egill's pagan skull, with its scalloping like the forge stone retrieved from the sea by his father, withstands the curiosity of the proponent of the new faith. The test also concludes the series of head references by and about Egill that recur at regular intervals in the saga and in Egill's verse (Clunies Ross 2015). While Egill's head is dark, huge, craggy, and ugly, it is also the medium for the utterance of early Iceland's highest art form, skaldic poetry.<sup>21</sup>

Axes (or a pole arm with an axe blade) are wielded for one purpose or another over four generations of one family, from Kveldúlfr to Þorsteinn, and in a majority of cases under exceptional circumstances or in anomalous ways.<sup>22</sup> Axes are one medium in *Egils saga* for comment on pretensions to politico-economic power

and prestige, on overconfidence, and often on social phenomena that transpire through royal Norwegian efforts to dictate the course of Iceland and Icelanders. In the Icelanders' world as portrayed in *Egils saga*, axes have their place but must be capable of both taking and keeping an edge, like the Icelanders themselves, and not be valued for simple size or extraneous decoration, as might be the product of a court environment.

Archaeological investigations at Hrísbú, a farm in western Iceland about 40 miles from Egill's home at Borg that has been operated for more than a millennium, suggest that it was among the richest farms in Iceland in the tenth century, well supplied with trade goods, yet in important ways less well provisioned than comparable farms in Scandinavia (Wärmländer, Zori, Byock, and Scott). While the great hall measured almost 100 feet in length, it was built in driftwood from Siberia. Black-smithing operations were limited to repair work, in which various metal scraps were resmelted and reforged. This leads the investigators to the conclusion that "there was little room to use metals for non-utilitarian purposes" (Wärmländer, Zori, Byock, and Scott 2289). This accords well with the attitude we ascribe to Skallagrímr when he approaches Eiríkr's axe: utility is the primary concern; decorative effect is superfluous. On the subject of natural resources, the Icelander would nonetheless have experienced his superiority in the non-depletable resource of language, the ore of art, and doubtless also in character.

Like many other points of detail in the sagas and *Egils saga* in particular, the symbolic values attached to smithing and weapons ownership flatter the charter narrative of the settlement of Iceland but are also relevant to the thirteenth century, in which the Norwegian throne posed a renewed threat to the island. In the end, actions speak louder than objects, and, at times, silence louder than words. The Icelander's sledge hammer trumps the dress axe, and blacksmithing and wordsmithing produce more of worth than ostentation and ambiguous gifts.

Saga scenes involving medieval Norse technology (traditional pursuits such as hunting, fishing, agriculture, the crafts, warfare, etc.) will continue to require the critic's and translator's closest attention, because of the idiosyncratic understatement of realistic detail in the sagas. Experimental archaeology is providing new sources of insight and facilitating the recovery of lost techniques. The detection of intentional word-play, both in skaldic verse and in saga prose, poses a comparable problem, since even the accumulated weight of evidence cannot determine definitively that a key word also makes a subtle and subversive allusion to another.

As historians and critics we should work from the premise that the sagas are as intricately and rigorously constructed as skaldic verse and share many of the same stylistic devices and aesthetic objectives.<sup>23</sup> This mapping of saga axes and axe epithets over five episodes shows, and other studies of motifs and recurrent situations and relationships confirm, that *Egils saga* is a very carefully constructed narrative with its interlocking architectonics, operating over a range of scales.

The essentials of the relationship between thirteenth-century Iceland and the Norwegian throne are all present in microform in the episode of King Eiríkr blóðøx's tenth-century gift axe to Skallagrímr Kveldúlfsson.

In light of the cultural affinities of Norway and Iceland, despite early differences in socio-political organization and the authorial interest in word-play that the episode of the royal gift evidences, a last image that we may take from *Egils saga* is of a double-bitted axe.<sup>24</sup> One blade is plain, functional, strong and authentic in its own terms, the other decorated, ostentatious, but weak at its heart, whether from artisanal deficiency or from donor duplicity.<sup>25</sup> Janus-faced, the axe looks from the tenth century both backward to the founding years of the settlement of Iceland and establishment of the commonwealth and forward to the events of the thirteenth century. The Age of the Sturlungs fulfills the prophecy of an axe-age that pits kinsman against kinsman. Shattered, Icelandic society will be reforged and incorporated in the Norwegian kingdom and its expanding role in European politics and trade.

#### NOTES

1. On kingship from the perspective of the sagas, see Hines; on Egill as agent, see Sayers 1995. A select bibliography of studies on *Egils saga* has been published in *Egil, the Viking Poet* (edited by Þorleifsdóttir, Parsons, and Appleton 2015).
2. On examples of weapons as quasi-agents in the sagas, see Perkins; Kristjánsson.
3. On this aspect of saga compositional practices see Sayers 2015; Fichtner; Tulinius 2015.
4. Latin and Norse references to Eiríkr's fraternal disputes are listed in "Eric Bloodaxe," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric\\_Bloodaxe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Bloodaxe).
5. This may be viewed in the context of Egill's repeated reference to, and description of, his craggy head; see, most recently, Clunies Ross 2015.
6. This has led to the modern characterization of such weapons as "long-bearded axes," based on Old Norse-Icelandic *skeggøx* "bearded axe," a weapon with a long, trailing lower point on the blade. Lexical reference works consulted for the present essay include *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, *Norrøn ordbok*, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*, and *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog: A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*.
7. Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own.
8. Although *Egils saga* has been the object of several competent translations into English and other languages, Bernard Scudder's English rendering from 1997 (reprinted in 2000) has achieved dominant status and is, for example, the version repeatedly quoted in the recent collection of essays, *Egil, The Viking Poet: New Approaches to Egil's Saga*. As concerns the episode here under discussion, Scudder's rendering is inaccurate on several points. He writes: "[the axe] went right through and struck the stone, and the mount broke completely and the blade shattered. Skallagrim inspected the edge without saying a word, then went into the fire-room, climbed up on a bench and put the axe on the rafters above the door, where it was left that winter" (*Egil's Saga* 1997, 60). The

key sentence fares little better in other translations: *Egil's Saga*, 1976 (Pálsson and Edwards): "The axe struck the stone slab, breaking the steel edge and shattering the tempered part of the blade" (91); *Egil's Saga*, 1975 (Fell): "The axe crashed down on to the stone so that the edge was shattered and the blade cracked" (54); *La Saga d'Egil* (Boyer): "la hâche arriva dans la pierre si bien que tout le tranchant d'acier éclata et que le fer fut fendu sur toute la partie trempée" (68); *Egils Saga: Die Saga von Egil* (Schier): "die Axt aber traf auf den Stein, so daß die ganze Schneide herausbrach und das Blatt dabei Risse bekam" (89). I have not been able to consult Meti's Italian translation, *La Saga di Egil*. The reader of an early draft of this essay poses the question whether "translators of a key text such as *Egils saga* have systematically been operating in ignorance of findings in the archaeological and material culture specialisms." This has certainly been the case, but opportunities have never been better for rectifying the situation.

9. See Sayers 2006 for the Celtic-Norse parallels. On the formal rhetorical devices of skaldic verse, see most recently Guðrún Nordal 2015.
10. See below for further punning echo effects in a stanza on the occasion of Skallagrímur returning the axe to Þórólfr.
11. For the ground-breaking investigation of this limited but effective female empowerment in the sagas, see Clover.
12. The anatomy of skaldic verse forms, in particular *dróttkvætt*, has been well analyzed in Frank; Kuhn; Gade; and Guðrún Nordal 2001, and the kennings are now fully catalogued. The richness of reference and allusion in the verse, however, continues to challenge and delight.
13. The Skaldic Editing Project has not yet dealt with this alleged poet. Most commentary follows the parsing of the stanzas by editor Sigurður Nordal and the prior edition of skaldic verse by Finnur Jónsson.
14. For a recent theoretical discussion of the performance context of skaldic verse and in particular *lausavisur*, with their potential for absent listeners and addressees, see Osborne.
15. Here, the editor adopts the reading proposed by Gunnarr Pálsson in his early edition (*Egils-Saga, sive Egilli Skalagrímii vita*). In manuscripts W and M, as edited by Bjarni Einarsson and Michael Chesnutt, respectively (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* 2001), the word is *hringa* and the collocation would then represent "a paltry gift."
16. See, for a recent contribution to the debate, Tulinius 2004 and 2014.
17. A question worth pursuing in future scholarship is the multiple ways in which the narrative of Egill's doings changes when he is in neither in Iceland nor Norway, e.g., England, Värmland. Saga conventions appear to be less closely followed when the force of the central *agon* is weaker.
18. Skarphéðinn's name probably means something like "hard-coated," that is, wearing a cured and dried (*skarpr*) animal skin for protection, and is not a reference to sharpness, as might be consonant with an axe-bearer.
19. This ubiquity seems to have caught the eye of Miller, as evidenced by his book title, "Why is your axe bloody?": *A Reading of Njáls saga*. In comment on an early draft of this article,

Torfi Tulinius has pointed out “the symbolism of Skarphéðinn planting his axe Rimmugýgur into the wall of the farm before his death by burning. Like Skalla-Grímr’s treatment of the axe given to him by Eiríkr, Skarphéðinn intends the sharpness of his axe to be protected from the fire so that it may later serve in avenging him and his family.”

20. On the possibility of Egill’s extremely thick skull being a result of Paget’s disease, see Byock.
21. It should not be inferred from the conventional title of the poem composed for King Eiríkr at York, *Höfuðlausn* [Head-Ransom], that the death that threatens Egill at Eiríkr’s men’s hands would be decapitation with an axe. There is no evidence for a headsman function in these early states.
22. Three axe-related events, implicating the first three family members, occur about mid-way through the first half of the saga. Doings in Athelstan’s England and Þórólfr’s halberd-wielding in battle, which is described in terms similar to those used of Kveldúlfr, right down to hoisting a slain opponent into the air, come at the mid-point of the saga. Þorsteinn’s controversy with Steinarr and the killing of Þrándr are near the end of the saga, which closes with the reburial of Egill’s bones and skull and a list of the descendants of his son Þorsteinn.
23. See Jesch for a contemporary posing of the problem.
24. This is admittedly anachronistic, although there is a greater likelihood of double-bladed halberds.
25. But for another, less concrete artifact, the skaldic poem, most of these conditions and attributions are reversed, with the taste for decorative effect now on the side of the Icelanders.

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