

Personal Memory, Family Memory, Collective Memory? The Parting Gifts in *Egils saga*, chapter 61

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to discuss the uses of memory focusing on a scene in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, a long prose text written in Iceland in the first half of the thirteenth century. Both the theoretical background and current trends of memory and gift studies as applied to saga scholarship are examined and then used to analyze the role of a detailed exchange of goods between two of the central characters in the saga, Egill and Arinbjörn. The final part of the article focuses on studying the scene in its historical context of production, arguing that the saga uses gift exchange to memorialize the lineage of prominent Icelanders likely related to the writing of the saga.

RÉSUMÉ : L'objectif de cet article est de discuter les utilisations de la mémoire en se concentrant sur une scène de la saga *Egils Skalla-Grímssonar*, une longue prose écrite en Islande dans la première moitié du XIII^e siècle. Tant le contexte théorique que les tendances actuelles des études de la mémoire et des dons, tels qu'appliqués à l'étude des sagas, sont examinés, puis utilisés pour analyser le rôle d'un échange détaillé de biens entre deux des personnages centraux de la saga, Egill et Arinbjörn. La dernière partie de l'article se concentre sur l'étude de la scène dans le contexte historique de sa production et soutient que la saga utilise l'échange de cadeaux pour commémorer la lignée d'Islandais éminents probablement liés à l'écriture de la saga.

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en at skilnaði þeira Arinbjarnar ok Egils, þá gaf Egill Arinbirni gullhringa þá tvá, er Aðalsteinn konungr gaf honum, ok stóð mörk hvárr, en Arinbjörn gaf Agli sverð þat, er Dragvandill hét. Þat hafði gefit Arinbirni Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson, en áðr hafði Skalla-Grímr þegit af Þórólfi, bróðr sínum, en Þórólfi gaf sverðit Grímr loðinskinni, sonr Ketils hængs; þat sverð hafði átt Ketill hængr ok haft í hólmgöngum, ok var þat allra sverða bitrast (*Egils saga*, ch.61, 194–95)

[When Arinbjörn and Egill parted ways, Egill gave Arinbjörn those two golden rings that King Aðalsteinn had given him and each weighed a mark, and Arinbjörn gave Egill the sword called Dragvandill. It had previously been given to Arinbjörn by Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson, but Skalla-Grímr had received it before from his brother Þórólfr [Kveld-Úlfsson], and Grímr loðinskinni, the son of Ketill hængr had given the sword to Þórólfr [Kveld-Úlfsson]. That sword was owned by Ketill hængr, and he carried it into duels, and it was the sharpest of swords.]¹

In chapter sixty-one of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Egill and his friend Arinbjörn exchange gifts before parting ways in England. This scene is placed immediately after one of the climaxes of the saga, when the main character is pardoned by his enemy, King Eiríkr, due to both his own skill as a poet and the intercession of Arinbjörn on his behalf. As the latter is part of the royal retinue, both scenes can be understood as illustrating the tension in divided loyalties between lord and friend. *Egla*, as the saga is often called, was written ca. 1220-1240, and it is essentially a tale of the conflict between the kings of Norway and a family of noble exiles who become Icelandic settlers. The action moves back and forth between several locations, most notably Norway and Iceland. It is divided in two parts: a first, shorter part centred on the rise and fall of Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, which prefigures the longer second part, where the main character is Egill Skalla-Grímsson, his nephew. The saga recurrently highlights the circulation of wealth: taxes, gifts, land transfers, pillages, and feasts play a meaningful role in the narrative, which reflects the action-driven, secular, and often mundane interests of the subgenre known as “Family Sagas” or “Sagas about early Icelanders” (Íslendingasögur).

The scene of parting gifts discussed here is presented in great detail, by contrast with the formulaic and brief description usually given to parting gifts scenes in saga literature, which usually happen in the aftermath of stereotypical feast narratives. My aim is to analyze the scene in *Egils saga* ch. 61 in three different aspects. First, I examine the scene as a window to a pattern within social relationships in Medieval Iceland. I want to examine how a scene of gift exchange between two agents whose (unusual) friendship goes beyond political alliance operates against the background of some current analytical trends in gift studies.² Second, I discuss how gift-exchange (as a common framework to channel ties

between people) can work as a device that creates memories (both within particular individuals or in larger groups), considering the recent trends in memory studies which reinvigorate (and reinterpret) notions originally defined by Halbwachs. Narratives about the story of certain goods and how they changed hands are here particularly interesting, as they tie the institution of gift-giving with specific people who are meant to be highlighted. These aspects of the analysis converge in a critical reflection on the advantages and limits of two closely related theoretical models originating in two members of the Durkheimian sociological school. The third and final part of the article focuses on studying the scene in *Egils saga* ch. 61 as part of a narrative produced within a specific historical context, that is to say, as part of a politically oriented saga written during the Sturlung age.

In the example discussed here, the gifts exchanged (two rings and a sword) are given a past story by the donors at the moment of the exchange. This exchange displays materially (and narratively, of course) a memory of the bonds between the ancestors of both characters. The Icelandic historian Viðar Pálsson mentions it in his study about gift-giving in medieval Iceland and briefly comments that

re-circulating gifts with a respected history behind them was both a source of cultural and symbolic capital and a means of transmission ... Fully appreciating and maintaining the symbolic worth of objects might otherwise require presenting their extended 'genealogies,' as in *Egils saga* ... Gifts were thus no mere objects but potential biographies of relations.
(Pálsson 2010, 154)

His analysis highlights that this is but one example of a pattern illustrated in other sagas, such as the *Sturlunga* compilation.

Viðar's view is based in an anthropological trend of studies that has been prominent during the last four decades in the study of Medieval Iceland, following an initial impulse in the years around the nineteen-seventies (Turner; Gurevich; Lunden).³ Their influence is evident in the work of many major scholars of the field.⁴ It is interesting to remark that most of them are not professional anthropologists but historians, and thus their use of anthropological theory is instrumental.⁵ Amongst these, the topic of the control of distribution of goods as a tool for creating and preserving power is a recurrent one: gift-giving is crucial by reason of its prominence in the sources. Yet maybe gift-giving is also significant because it strikes a modern reader with the inversion of the equation industrial societies have on the relationship between wealth, prestige, and power. To become prominent, keeping resources like a rational (in the Weberian *zweckrational*, instrumental sense) saver to reinvest seems to help little, but giving them away is beneficial.

This is certainly what surprised the founders of the gift-theory. Boas and Malinowski described systems that seemed irrational to a conventional economist,⁶ yet made perfect sense in the societies where they existed. But the point was not fully made into a theory until Mauss published his “*Essai sur le don*.”⁷ In saga scholarship, however, Mauss is often quoted when writing about gifts usually in the way Marx is when talking about class: just as a quick homage in passing, rather than as a serious revaluing of his views. This might have to do with the difficulties in his style and the rather subtle (some might say obscure) way he argued his points.⁸

Making a long history short (and surely oversimplifying it), it could be said that medievalists writing on gift-giving take one of two broad stances. A first, individualistic view, depicts gifts as tools that agents (either individuals or factions) use strategically and that can be employed for a series of alternative ends, generally related to power- and/or wealth-building. This view seems to have been somewhat dominant in saga studies, and it can be traced back to Miller (1986), which later formed a chapter of a very influential book (Miller 1990). It also became popular in medieval studies in general.⁹ A recent, more nuanced take of this view is by Viðar Pálsson (2015), who however displays considerable influence from Bourdieuan sociology; Miller (2008) similarly shows strong traces of this more nuanced approach espoused by the French theorist.

The second, holistic perspective is closer to the Maussian view. It is less common in Medieval Scandinavian studies, with the partial exception of those works influenced by substantivism.¹⁰ The emphasis is not on what *one can do* with gifts, but on *what gifts do* regardless of or beyond individual choice. In other words, it is about compulsion and structure, and not so much about calculation and decision-making. This approach can be dismissed as either mystic or too deterministic, and therefore has not been particularly popular in recent scholarship. It remains mostly associated with the Soviet medievalist Aaron Gurevich. In this article, I try to find some of the insight that may be gained from a holistic approach when it is used to overcome some of the limits of the strategic view. Moreover, it seems profitable to entwine it with ideas about collective memory, which rose from the same holistic theoretical milieu as the Maussian school, as it was coined by a close associate of his, Maurice Halbwachs.

Given the common intellectual root, theories of memory expectably suffer similar theoretical problems as the gift-theories derived from Mauss. For example, the Israeli scholars Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam recognize that “the inconcreteness of collective memory is the stumbling block in Halbwachs’ theory,” given that he makes it rest on an abstract, hard-to-pin-down idea of society straight from Durkheim (Gedi and Elam 38). In fact, their arguments cast a severe doubt on the usefulness of collective memory as a scientific concept, and, by extension, on holistic theoretical stances in general.

I would broadly agree with them, yet I must qualify that their criticism is particularly poignant for holistic takes on objects that exist mostly on a psychological, mental level (such as memory) and are thus inextricably linked to individual manifestations. However, holism becomes less problematic when applied to objects that can be observed beyond individual cases, as if anchored in extra-individual empirical phenomena, such as, say, the position within the structure of production (for example, in the Marxist notion of class); or the political, institutional, or symbolic positions within a system (as in the many forms of structuralism); or even the norm of reciprocity evidenced amongst other things by gift-exchange (in the Maussian tradition, which in this aspect shows a rather more resilient theory than most other Durkheimians, including Halbwachs). Therefore, a holistic view that can encompass both fields that are relevant for us needs to overcome similar difficulties, as both a study of gift-giving and as a study of memory.

Gifts and Social Ties: Two Readings

I begin by considering the passage under analysis as an anthropologically meaningful illustration of social logics, as a “window to the past” rather than as a piece of literature. The obvious question to start with is: why do Egill and Arinbjörn exchange gifts? And the (equally obvious) answer should be: because they are friends.

However, here this means “true” friends, not allies-named-friends as in most friendships described in sagas with words such as *vinir* or *vinátta*.¹¹ The text itself says it explicitly, mentioning the *kærleikr* [love] after the exchange scene when it is said that “skilðusk þeir með kærleik inum mesta” [They parted ways with the most love (for each other)] (*Egils saga*, ch. 61, 195). But this expression might be just formulaic: for example, *Laxdæla saga* uses it regularly (Sävborg 85) for all types of friendship, and there are some similar examples in *Egla* itself, and these do not denote a tie of genuine affection.¹²

Instead, what in my view confirms the degree of their friendship is how both men behave throughout the saga. They take unnecessary risks for each other, something rather opposed to the idea of a calculated political alliance. Arinbjörn risks his life and position in the chapters before this scene, defending his friend against his own lord’s bloody axe. That they have a sentimental tie is also illustrated by the fact that Egill only wrote spontaneous long poems for Arinbjörn and for his dead sons.¹³ This is an unusual deed, more remarkable given the harsh disinterest in most people displayed by the main character of the saga. Moreover, the degree of friendship becomes even materially evident when Arinbjörn pays a compensation Egill wants and will not get from a man named Berg-Ǫnundr, even if Arinbjörn had very little to gain in the conflict for the inheritance of the

landowner Björn.¹⁴ He pays, at his own expense, just to make Egill happy, rather than out of any sense of convenience or contractual duty.

Thus, assuming they are *true* friends rather than simply allies, they would not need to use the gifts to build an alliance, which, in any case, is shown to be well-established at this point in the saga. Instead it seems that they are just renewing their alliance with the gifts in the scene discussed here, which act as tokens that display both their friendship and their social standing.

But why do they exchange in private? There is no mention of anybody present in the scene apart from them; Egill is beyond doubt alone as his travel companions were left behind when he rode to the court in York (*Egils saga* ch. 59, 177).¹⁵ If the intentions were display, it would make as much sense as a *potlatch* with no guests: it communicates nothing to other members of society. Moreover, given that the scene is set in England, any possible bystanders would have little to tell of the scene to the people who might be more interested in it. In fact, a public display actually would have been dangerous, as the news could easily reach King Eiríkr's court nearby. Arinbjörn already risked the King's (and Queen's) wrath by interceding for Egill, so it would have been plain stupid to immediately go on to advertise his alliance with the ugly poet by way of an impressive gift-exchange. This reinforces the idea that the scene happens in private, as it would be irrational for both men to make a fuss about it. And Arinbjörn, at least, is portrayed as a very reasonable man; Egill's behaviour is rather less predictable.¹⁶ Keeping it private avoids this risk, but then the problem of the utility behind the exchange remains unanswered.

This can be solved by stating that the exchange is not *useful*. Utility is not a concern for them as they are not acting strategically. Egill does not want to profit in any way from Arinbjörn and vice versa. This is not a political alliance called by the name of friendship, but *real*, emotion-driven friendship. However, this would not cause any theoretical difficulties if this friendship was not performed through the same institution, gift exchange, that strategic *vinátta* uses. They are neither acting instrumentally nor following an ideological goal, but doing what they are expected to do *and* expressing emotions. This might sound obvious, but it is often ignored by scholars promoting strategic analysis, who tend to choose examples of negotiated, maximizing, utility-driven exchange of gifts that fit their chosen theoretical model and ignore the rest. Indeed, the sagas tend to reinforce this approach, as they often dwell on these interesting cases and say little on exchanges motivated by different reasons, such as feelings or tradition.¹⁷

My argument is far from new in theoretical terms. In fact, it reinstates one of the criticisms anthropological formalists received from substantivists fifty years ago in a well-known and long theoretical debate. Dalton noticed that the principles of rational choice and maximization only help if we can calculate numerically the outcome of strategies, for example as in business investment. Similar criticism (Graeber 26–30) has also been directed towards the approach

espoused by Bourdieu, who held a similar view to that of most economists and anthropological formalists in these matters. An anti-utilitarian theoretical trend has explained social action placing it along two poles,¹⁸ the one of calculation and the other on empathy (called *aimance*), by demonstrating that altruistic behaviour cannot be reduced to a hidden strategy (Caillé). In this anti-utilitarian view, Egill and Arinbjörn are closer to the *aimance* than to self-interest in their exchange.

Thus, I would want to shift the discussion away from what motivates individuals to act,¹⁹ to what is socially instituted and orients their actions. It seems that in this scene Egill and Arinbjörn exchange gifts because friends are socially expected to express their friendship through gifts. An institution, gift-giving, guides their action, regardless of any use they could aim to make of it. Therefore, it takes precedence over strategies that logically depend on how flexible certain institutional contexts are.²⁰ The reason for this precedence seems to be rooted in the fact that the socially displayed aspect is the visible shape, not the inner (even if known-by-all) *true* motivation. The generosity is, and must be, what appears visible and memorable in the gift, not any calculations behind it, which must remain hidden. A gift without calculation is still a gift, but a gift without a display of generosity is not.²¹

I will now consider the scene as a narrative aimed at a certain audience, rather than as an illustration of a social logic expressed by the text. Anthropologists have noticed that the display of the biographies of gifts can have an impressive effect. This phenomenon was already mentioned by Mauss (in 1925) and Malinowski (in 1922) and explained in further detail by later anthropologists (Weiner; Godelier). The idea empowering gifts that change hands amongst memorialized owners is that *gifts are never fully given*. They always keep part of the original owner and so each link in the chain of circulation amplifies their value, adding to it the value of subsequent possessors who gave them away.²² The display of biographies here serves such purpose, but it also shows the connections of those men and their families to each other and highlights the ties between important men. If lineage played a meaningful role in the ideology of preeminent thirteenth-century Icelandic families, it seems likely that a tale of gifts with an intergenerational biography would help those claiming a connection through descent with these great men of old.

It has long been suspected that *Egils saga* uses this kind of device, as there are important hints that point to the author and magnate Snorri Sturluson or someone in his close milieu as being involved in the creation of the saga. It is not difficult to imagine that this scene is meant to impress the public listening to (or reading) the saga, by suggesting that a descendant of Egill and the owner of his farm had already such a high lineage and a close (but not necessarily friendly) relationship to the kings of old and their trusted men. A narrative of the ties between the main character and other important men of his time would have

further enhanced the prestige of the earlier Mýramenn and, thus, presumably of their descendants.

Indeed, the narrativization of an illustrious past remains a common strategy for men who claimed superiority through lineage, and it was rather common throughout Medieval Europe, given the connection between holding power and having (and/or inventing) an illustrious ancestry (Crouch 124–35). Seen in this light, the inclusion of this scene helps us understand *Egla* as a political story and not only as a story about the inner life of a person.²³ Using the narrative to give the gifts a biography transforms an institution, competitive gift-giving, which in its basic forms lends itself better to unstable, *big-man* style forms of leadership,²⁴ into something more stable. It shapes it into a form of lordly generosity that lasts in time, and it does so because it echoes the generosity of men who are remembered and who precede the givers. In other words, the added value in these gifts is their load of memory.

In sum, Egill and Arinbjörn act as aristocrats showing off their lineages and connections. This is likely an anachronism, reflecting the social conditions of the context of production rather than those of their time of action—especially if the saga can be associated with the milieu of Snorri Sturluson, the similarities are strengthened.²⁵ However, the relationship between them (as aristocrats) and kings is shown to be ambiguous and tense: while the link with Æthelstan is mentioned to enhance the prestige of the gifts given, Arinbjörn's preference for Egill over Eiríkr is in the immediate background of the scene, and could not have passed unnoticed by the audience. For the authors of the saga, if they were somehow able to link themselves by descent with the early settlers, this stance would have been very useful. It would have allowed them to present a past they could reclaim as their own and akin to what they strove to be: aristocratic men close to monarchs, but not subdued by them. This hypothesis is treated in the final section of this text, but at present I will turn to how the scene can be read in terms of memory studies.

Whose Memory?

In the recent decades, *memory* has become one of the main focuses of interest in saga studies. The surge in memory studies approaches was inspired partly from the work of scholars in different but related fields of study, the most reputable being those of *communicative memory* and *cultural memory* explored by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann. His ideas have been brilliantly summarized and applied to the sagas by the Danish literary scholar Pernille Hermann. My focus is on the earlier concept of *collective memory*, which is at the roots of Assmann's ideas (Hermann 334). It was coined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the interwar period: his *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* was published in 1925, while the better known *La Mémoire collective* was published posthumously in 1950.²⁶

Like Mauss, Halbwachs was a member of the Strasbourg school led by his doctoral supervisor, Émile Durkheim, the man often considered the central founding figure of French sociology. Like several other members of the school, Halbwachs had a profound interest in the German scholarship of his time, hailed from a middle-class background, had close ties with the Jewish community,²⁷ and was a socialist. For students of Norse society, his name might be less known than that of his friend Mauss, or that of the somewhat antagonistic (and peripheral, but closely related) founder of liminality studies, Arnold van Gennep.

However, somewhat unlike Mauss (and decidedly unlike Van Gennep), Halbwachs arguably remained staunchly rooted in a functionalist and holistic paradigm when approaching social phenomena, diverging little in this aspect from his master, Durkheim. His studies about collective memory characteristically show an effort to diminish internal contradictions and intra-group variation and recurrently insist on showing how collective solidarity in a group was always dominant, to the point that it made individual variety irrelevant.²⁸ As with the reception of other anthropological concepts rooted in functionalist theory (such as gift-giving or feuding), I suspect that this bias towards explaining social function and glossing over conflict and contradiction can often affect how concepts are applied to specific historical contexts and artefacts.²⁹

Thus, this function-driven bias easily blurs the dynamics in societies that were heterogeneous and composed of antagonistic factions even within the same group such as the Icelandic elite of powerful chieftain families of the *Sturlungar* period in which *Egla* was surely created. Highlighting one aspect of a culture or society often implies diminishing (directly or by omission) others, and whatever the collective interests and traits of the leading family factions were, they were decidedly different from each other in many aspects and strategies of legitimation. The Halbwachsian tendency to blur individual variation might partially explain a main weakness perceived in contemporary memory studies: they often forget to identify both subjects and reception, and thus to place objects in their precise place in the past (Kansteiner). Taking this criticism into account, it is pertinent to ask whose memory is being upheld by the saga.

In broad terms, *Egils saga* can be understood as an artefact that creates cultural and collective memory by being stored in the archive of a society, and thus a memory-bearing entity. Yet, it is hard to tell if it was so (except *potentially*) back in the thirteenth century when it was written, unless one asks about its context of production, circulation, and reception. In other words, it is meaningful to ponder the extent to which a text is “collective” when it might have been meaningless, irrelevant, or even infuriating for part of the society in which it was created. Further questions derive from this. Could it have been sanctioned as a legitimate memory of the past only by certain groups? To what extent can there be something like publicly-sanctioned, official memory (that is, cultural memory)

in a society that for the most part lacked overarching public institutions?³⁰ In short, how can the memory produced by *Egla* be described?

To add a further complexity to the issue, sagas are *written* mediums of memory. Following Assmann and Connerton, Hermann argues that “writing differs from other types of externalized memory, for example, rituals ... partly in facilitating an interpretative and re-inventive engagement with the past” (Hermann 347). This contrast is very marked indeed if ritual is seen through a functionalist, Durkheimian-Halbwachsian paradigm, as a fixed institution that essentially reinforces and re-creates social order.

But ritual, when understood from a perspective inspired by a more dialectical approach as that of Victor Turner,³¹ does not differ from literature in this aspect. Precisely the opposite could be argued, again in a Turnerian fashion: ritual is precisely one of the key moments a community (or, more precisely, some of its members) has to re-interpret the past and engage creatively with it, even if at the same time it does allow for a certain reinforcing of tradition. This scene in *Egils saga* seems to be an example of this: it uses a familiar ritualized action, parting gifts, to say something different about the social order than what the previous scene shows. It seems to argue that, however effective royal power is, other social ties are also (more?) powerful, and these are based on sustained reciprocity rather than on threats and subordination. The contrast between the scene discussed here and the extremely tense scene preceding it (the scene of *Höfuðlausn*) is hard to miss.

However, it can be said that sagas, as a medium for memory, work similarly on both levels that rituals do: they at the same time reinforce and re-create a collective and cultural memory and a “storehouse for knowledge” (Hermann 347), but they also create particular individual forms of “memory” that are best read as legitimating discourses driven by ideology, particular interests, or both. This might seem self-evident, but it is important to remember that no aspect of culture is fully collective, at least in hierarchical societies.³² *Egils saga* belongs in medieval Icelandic culture, but it does so as a product of its elite culture. Several themes in the saga point to a world of wealthy and important people: the main characters are almost uniformly people of important families. While many characters are very nuanced in terms of virtues and defects, some of those who are clearly depicted as villains are men whose low ancestry turned them to wickedness (the sons of Hildiríðr). Inversely, the arguably more honourable character in the saga, Arinbjörn, belongs to the aristocracy (both as a *hersir* and high-ranking courtier). Moreover, this saga’s world is cosmopolitan, spanning from the White Sea to the British Isles, something that makes *Egla* closer to the kings’ sagas than to the often provincial and localist family sagas. Even in the newly settled Iceland, Skalla-Grímr grants land to newcomers like a lord (*Egils saga*, ch.28), and by the end of the saga, Egill settles a dispute between his son Þorsteinn and a neighbour, Steinarr, in a rather lordly fashion, backing his decision on landownership and lineage (ch. 82).

The saga might even possibly belong in an even narrower subset of cultural creations, such as a pro-Sturlungar set of texts.³³ Cultural creations are all collective, but not all equally broad and inclusive. Therefore, it does not (or does less) likely represent other shards of medieval Icelandic culture, such as, say, the culture of poor cottagers, those of smaller chieftains, or of other less literary-prone leading families.³⁴ If *Egils saga* is compared with other Íslendingasögur produced in the same region, like the (slightly earlier?) *Bjarnar saga* and the (most likely later) *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, it is not difficult to see both common cultural traits and noticeably different ideological stances.³⁵

Admittedly, this problem does not matter much if we see sagas as bearing cultural memory only in terms of literary representation and not as discussing “past reality as such” (Hermann 351), given that literary representation does not imply a necessary concern with social and political divergences unless it explicitly engages with this issue. In other words, if sagas are seen as texts independently from context, each becomes a world in itself and can be read on its own. Such an approach is indeed valid, but it might be somewhat disconcerting for social historians, who have spent a considerable amount of effort to show the ways in which sagas (typically read through anthropological frameworks) can be used to investigate how society and culture worked in every aspect, literary representation being just one of them.³⁶

At the same time, a perspective inspired by memory studies can help us avoid a problem common to anthropologically-driven approaches, which forget that the reconstructions seen through sagas bear the burden that these are constructed pasts, and, more importantly, constructed by and for a rather limited group of people who typically were on top of the social hierarchies. Therefore, it provides a way out for the criticism posed against the uniformities in the “anthropological” approach (Nedviktne), by denaturalizing historical narratives about the past present in the sources. For example, the feuds and gifts that populate the plot in many Íslendingasögur are frequently memorialized in sagas, but it then must be asked *whose* culture was a part of feuding and gifting culture in Medieval Iceland: did it include all Icelanders, as one tends to deduce by reading, for example, some well-known books (Byock, Miller 1990)? Or was it essentially an aspect of the culture of chieftains and other wealthy farmers, who then wrote so extensively about them?³⁷

The memory in *Egils saga*

Keeping these issues in mind, let us return to the question of the specific case stated above. *Egils saga* is driven by conflicts that resemble feuds structurally but do not qualify as such strictly speaking, as there is a clear asymmetry between the main parts involved, typically the Mýramenn versus Norwegian royalty. It also, as I have discussed above, involves scenes of gift-giving that do not confirm

to the typical pattern of enacting alliances through exchange of presents. It is thus central to ask *what* is being made into memory in this saga. Does the saga memorialize a general give-and-take mentality of feuds and competitive gift-giving, or does it memorialize the particular interests behind the composition of that particular saga, which portrays conflicts that were not feuds as it were and dwells on gifts of an unusual kind, or are both aspects relevant?³⁸

I would suggest that both aspects were indeed made into a meaningful memory in the case studied here, but each along different lines. The gift exchange between Egill and Arinbjörn does *generally* memorialize an aspect of medieval Icelandic culture: gifts created and reinforced social bonds, were ritualized, and could embody memories of past exchanges that added to their efficacy. The sagas, and *Egla* is no exception, highlight literarily the importance of the exchange, of those involved in it, and of the institution of gift-exchange. But at the same time, *Egils saga* memorializes a *particular* type of gift that did not involve any clear agonistic element, as a symbol of a rather unusual form of *vinátta* that resembles modern, emotionally-loaded friendship rather than utilitarian alliance, and which further hints at an idea of ties that exist before and beyond those of utilitarian alliance. Through this, it memorializes specifically two families of early settlers (the *Mýramenn* primarily, but also the *Hrafnistumenn*) and landowners of highborn immigrants whose friendship transcended standing on different sides of the pressing issue of royal service.

The first is the general, structural aspect that I suspect shows how literary representation brings in wide aspects of the “past reality as such”: elaborated gift-giving and the value associated with giving biographies to objects cannot be pure literary inventions, and the frequency of this phenomenon in the ethnographical record suggests that it is rooted in real social practice.³⁹ The second is arguably a particular and interest-driven memorialization, a shard of culture that coexisted with other discursive possibilities to deal with the same phenomenon, including possibly antagonistic ones. The most extensive discussion of the possible contexts and ideology for creating *Egils saga* is Torfi Tulinius’ *The Enigma of Egill*, which reaffirms the (inconclusive, but widespread) hypothesis that the saga was created by Snorri Sturluson to further his own agenda and reflects his personal interests and concerns. Torfi argues the case for Snorri composing *Egla* on sociological-political, literary, and psychological grounds. While I am somewhat sceptical of using psychological arguments about figures we only know through texts, it seems clear that both the literary style and milieu in *Egils saga* are coherent with the world of Snorri. The ideology promoted by the saga, with its insistence on the benefits of strong landowners and kings who must respect aristocrats, does match what we know of Snorri’s views and projects.⁴⁰ The fact that *Egla* is also the tale of some of his ancestors—those who settle a core area of his domain—does also support this theory. However, it is necessary to remember these links do not *prove* Snorri to be the author, as someone close or

similar to him in aspirations could have written this text: Snorri is just a good bet.

For example, the (equally unusual) relic-like gift in *Bjarnar saga Híttdælakappa*, where the main memory-bearing gift is a garter. This gift is not yielded between two friends of high-ranking families, but by a saintly royal patron to the leader of a relatively small family of chieftain-peasants. The ideological message is consequently different, and there are indications that both sagas represent two different types of chieftains: the often expansive Sturlungar and the smaller, waning family of the Híttdælir (Kristinsson 10–12).⁴¹

If members of these families are behind the composition of sagas remembering illustrious ancestors linked with kings, it can be argued that the memories built around them are sharply different. Björn is a protégé of a Christian, saintly king, eager to be integrated in courtly life (Finlay). Analytically, he stands in contrast both to Egill, the enemy of tyrannical pagan kings (and proto-Christian himself, if of a pretty unsaintly kind) and Skalla-Grímr, the isolationist landowner who ignores all power but his own. That example shows that artefacts stored in the collective memory of a society can be very different, yet both highly representative of the culture that created and preserved them and equally limited in their reach and appeal: the exchange between Arinbjörn and Egill and the exchange between Björn and king Óláfr represent rather different approaches to the culture of gift-giving, presumably creating meaningful memories for different collective agents. And at the same time, they belong together as representatives of broader mental and material aspects of a culture: in this case, as testimonies of the importance of gift-giving, of memorializing the early settlers in writing, often through a specific literary genre, the saga.

On a different aspect, scenes like the one discussed here suggest that a distinction between history (as a form of abstract, impersonal recollection of events) and collective memory (which dwells on the idea of a lived experience) is not particularly useful for our research case (Russell 796–801). The memorialization of the family ties between Egill and Arinbjörn through gift-exchange makes them remember events that are both personal and lived and others learned from earlier generations.⁴² Egill obviously participated personally when Arinbjörn and Aðalsteinn gave him gifts. Arinbjörn experiences the gift that Egill gives him and the one given by Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson. It is unclear if any of them were present in the earlier stages of the biography of the sword Dragvandill: Egill may or may not have seen the (implicit) transfer from Skalla-Grímr to his elder brother Þórólfr, but it is likely they knew of the earlier exchanges (the path of the sword from Ketill hængur until it reached Skalla-Grímr) through their relatives.

Yet, no distinction on those grounds is made in the saga. This makes sense, given that if there was a distinction, the exchange scene would be less powerful, as seamless family continuity is what the text wants to emphasize, rather than

individual, lived experience. In the exchange studied here, the personal, familiar, and the impersonal, the objective and the subjective, are difficult to disentangle. That, in fact, makes the exchange so powerful, and creates the feeling of a world lacking a clear distinction between collective and individual (Gurevich 177–89), but also one lacking a clear distinction between people and things (Torfing), where experiences tend to overlap and form a unified sense of a meaningful past.

The Memorialized Exchange in Context (Theoretical and Historical)

The gift-exchange scene discussed throughout this article uses the objects as tokens that represent social relationships. Kate Heslop has noticed that the presence of memory in objects is a common feature of the sagas, writing that

material objects as bearers of memory, such as the skeletons (*Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*), churches (*Hávarðar saga*, *Þórðar saga*), and bells (*Kjalnesinga saga*) mentioned in the closing chapters of some sagas of Icelanders, are a well-known feature of the cultural memory work carried out by these texts. (Heslop 92)

The goods exchanged by Egill and Arinbjörn do not seem to have survived into later time like Egill's bones or the famous spear *Grásíða*, but they do serve a similar role. This leads us back to our theoretical model: Mauss wrote that in the gift exchange,

the obligation is expressed in myth and imagery, symbolically and collectively; it takes the form of interest in the objects exchanged; the objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them; the communion and alliance they establish are well-nigh indissoluble. (Mauss 31⁴³)

At the same time, the objects exchanged are created as embodiments of a social tie, are remembered as symbols of that exchange and the people involved in it, and survive thus as signifiers of the importance of the event.

This is a core point of the Maussian take on Durkheimian holism: objects do express society in some way, even if some forms of thought (that is, ideological constructs) pretend that they precede or exceed it. This mirrors the (Halbwachian) idea that collective memory does the same, and individuals bear memories also as an effect of society, rather than as their own.⁴⁴ While this can lead the analysis to portray a conflict-less, uniform society, I do not think that such an issue is enough to completely dismiss a holistic approach, given that conflict can be incorporated within the analysis. For the purposes outlined here,

it suffices to try to identify the agents and factions promoted by the scene, in other words, to show its ideological stance as an aspect of its creation of memory worth remembering.

From the analysis above, the memory described in this scene of *Egla* can be described as the collective memory of a lineage,⁴⁵ and as both historical and lived experiences expressed (or created) through a literary artefact. Unlike most sagas, *Egils saga* is firmly dated to a specific context of production: be it late (ca. 1240) or early (ca. 1220) amongst the proposed datings, there is little doubt that it was produced in Iceland, in or near Borgarfjörður. The broadest possible context is the age of the Sturlungar, within one of the most culturally active areas of the insular nation,⁴⁶ where the fortunes of the Sturlungar were always one of the crucial elements of the political context. The saga makes clear that the area was settled by Skalla-Grímr, and that this grumpy bald farmer excelled at both improving, distributing, and managing the lands under his claim, and established a dominant family in the area, the Mýramenn: it is primarily their memory that is upheld, and it was possibly created to give a meaningful, legitimating past to some of their descendants, for example, some Sturlungar. An advantage of the bilateral kinship system of Medieval Iceland was that it was possible to choose a preferred ancestry through both male and female figures. For example, the line from the Mýramenn to the Sturlungar runs mostly through a male line, but it shifts to a female line one generation above Snorri and his brothers, as it is their mother, Guðný Þoðvarsdóttir, who descends from Egill and Grímr. By contrast, a text such as the genealogy known as *Skrá um ættartölu Sturlunga* skips them, as it traces the ancestors of their father, Hvamm-Sturla.⁴⁷

Moreover, it is also a long illustration of the relationship between Icelanders and kings. *Egils saga* is one of the Íslendingasögur where kings play a more prominent role (Á. Jakobsson 2002), at a time where the issue of the relationship between Icelanders and kings was of both literary and political interest, at least for a considerable part of the Icelandic elite. The scene discussed here adds an interesting element, if read sociologically: the figure of a loyal, highborn royal servant, who, unlike Egill's brother and uncle (both named Þórólfr), does not succumb to the risks of royal service, be they courtly intrigue or military service. Arinbjörn is both the perfect courtier and a force of his own. The scene is a corollary to the highest display of independent strength by the Norwegian aristocrat, which subtly but evidently makes sure that his lord, King Eiríkr pardons his friend in the scene crowned by the delivery of the poem *Höfuðlausn*. The exchange of gifts between Arinbjörn and him is a political statement, one that says that aristocrats and wealthy farmers can interact beyond the reach of kings.

The exchange discussed in this text is better read primarily as a literary creation (regardless of its relation to events that happened in the extra-textual reality), but it does tell an audience a story of people and things that endured time and needs to be remembered. It makes them matter. Literary memory is

thus a powerful tool, simply because it tells of a past that is deemed to be worth telling (*söguligr*, to be more precise), not a small issue in a society where aiming for legitimate domination was a prime concern for those involved in the power struggles in the era that created *Egils saga*.

NOTES

1. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. For a sophisticated overview of the friendship between both characters, see Sayers.
3. The much earlier, seminal work by the Danish scholar Vilhelm Grønbech is also important, but his trend seems to have led to a dead end during his era (in particular, Grønbech, II, 46–67). Moreover, the application of economic anthropology to medieval studies after Philip Grierson’s rethinking of medieval commerce via its adoption by the *Annales* school (Duby, Gurevich) might also have contributed to its acceptance into Medieval Scandinavian studies.
4. Some key figures are the historians Sverre Bagge, Helgi Þórláksson, Jesse Byock, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, William Ian Miller, and the literary scholar Margaret Clunies-Ross. Of the mentioned forerunners, only Turner was an anthropologist; Gurevich and Lunden were also historians.
5. Two exceptions are the anthropologists Gísli Pálsson and Edward Durrenberger. However, the work of Durrenberger has been received negatively by some of the core scholars in Norse studies (see, for example, Jochens).
6. A few economists however were already discovering different economic rationalities in a trend that resembles the early findings of anthropologists such as Malinowski. In the 1920s, Gustav Cassel (III, 371) highlighted the difference of “frame of mind” between *Hávamál* and modern attitudes towards exchange.
7. The theoretical counterpoint between Mauss and Malinowski, however, is evident. Mauss argued against gift-giving as essentially instrumental, but instead as a “total social fact,” while Malinowski saw the Kula ring exchange as essentially instrumental, but different from modern exchange in form. The roots of this disagreement are partially explainable through different epistemological and political stances, given that Mauss was generally holistic and a staunch socialist, while Malinowski held more individualistic, liberal views.
8. Moreover, the particular way in which the Durkheimians understood societies probably makes it rather different from main traditions in liberal thought, emphasizing global *constraints* rather than individual *possibilities*. Moreover, Mauss’s ideas also suffered appropriation by structuralists, who were looking for a founding father and decided (in the famous *Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss* by Claude Lévi-Strauss) to “find” it somehow in the positivist-functionalist author of “Essai.”
9. A good example of this use is Gadi Algazi’s introduction to the aptly named book *Negotiating the Gift*, which is a defence of the unstable nature of gifts and their immense potential (and risks) as tools for social manoeuvring. By emphasizing their instability and variety, it appears as if they cease to be instituted by forms and rules of morality and law, two attributes that the Maussian theory was seeking (and found) in gifts.

10. Substantivists adopted Maussian theory through its “demystification” by Sahlins (1972), but nevertheless they maintained a holistic and institutionalist approach. Maussian influence is particularly strong in Gurevich, but here through structuralism.
11. The bibliography on friendship in the sagas is extensive. See in particular Jón Viðar Sigurðsson.
12. *Egils saga*, ch. 9, 24 (“Síðan fór Þórólfr þaðan ferð sína, ok skilðusk þeir konungr með inum mesta kærleik” [Later Þórólfr went on with his trip, and parted ways with the king in the highest love]); *Egils saga*, ch. 11, 29 (“[Þórólfr and king Haraldr] skilðusk þá með kærleik miklum” [... parted ways with great love]); *Egils saga*, ch. 48, 122 (“[Egill and Áki] Skilðusk þeir með kærleik ok mæltu til vináttu mikillar milli sín” [... they parted ways with love and made great friendship between them]); *Egils saga*, ch. 64, 206 (“Skilðusk þeir Egill ok Friðgeirr með miklum kærleik” [Egill and Friðgeirr parted ways with great love]).
13. Obviously, *Höfuðlausn* has to be considered in different terms, as it is the by-product of need and duress rather than of freewill and affection.
14. The quite complex narrative develops in *Egils saga* ch. 56, 148–63.
15. That is, he is alone unless we include the reader (or listener) of the saga. This point is argued in the next section.
16. It has been argued that Arinbjörn is the closest to a wise, honourable *jafnaðarmaðr* figure in the saga (Barreiro).
17. Theorists following such an individualist approach tend to reduce everything to negotiation towards maximization in a certain context. Business men maximize profit and opportunities, chieftains maximize prestige and power, peasants maximize autonomy and survival, and so on. Even behaviour that seems to go against maximization is translated into the utilitarian language of choice and benefit. A man maximizes love over material gain if he leaves his job to make his wife happy (and of course maximizes material gain if he leaves the wife and keeps the job). Suddenly, maximization explains everything, but at the same time it loses explanatory power as it becomes tautological and all-encompassing by making any social action rational given a certain goal. The contrast between accumulate-to-win and distribute-to-win that shocked early anthropologists disappears under the “everybody aims to win” rule. This digression is very brief and inevitably oversimplified. Gregory, Graeber, and Caillé give detailed accounts.
18. Strictly speaking, Caillé uses two pairs of opposed poles: interest-empathy and obligation-liberty, but the second one matters little for our purposes here.
19. My desire to avoid discussing individual motivation comes from the fact that the matter then slides into a psychological theory, and psychological explanations are impossible to confirm (or deny) through historical sources. To avoid psychologism generally means to explain the individual by the social, and therefore to go back to classical holism.
20. The examples studied in Miller’s 1986 article are therefore biased as representatives of a general trend, as he chose conflicts between equals or near-equals in a very decentralized context such as the “saga-age” imagined by the Íslendingasögur. Moreover, some cases reflect exceptional, uncommon situations (such as the advantage

of a hay hoarding miser in *Hænsa-Þóris saga*). I find it problematic to deduce any general trend from such a selective use of sources. It can also be added that some scholars have raised doubts about the risks of thinking too much in “general” terms about a society that was non-egalitarian as some members of the “anthropological school” do (Vésteinsson, Nedkvitne).

21. Some examples of gifts that are not reciprocated in a balanced way are those at the extreme sociable end of the continuum of generalized reciprocity (Sahlins), or the rather elusive idea of “total prestation” (Mauss). Balanced, competitive gifts are not the only types of gift. Aggressive, dominant potlatch-like agonistic gift-giving (in the Boasian classical explanation reused extensively by Mauss) are an extreme and historically uncommon subtype, which does not even apply to the Potlatch when not under unusual conditions (as long since shown by Piddocke).
22. The notion of an ever-present donor even after a gift is given happens because the original owners keep something that is never put into circulation and is the original source of value, being sacred. What this is for medieval Scandinavia is very debatable, but a possibility is royal honour. Norwegian kings claimed divine descent, and they were a source of unlimited transferrable honour, but their special nature was not transferrable and only existed inside royal family members. However, amongst themselves, Icelanders operated under a different system of honour in which there was a fixed amount that can only be acquired by taking it from someone else (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen). However, families on the rise sought to increase their honour by associating themselves with the king during the Sturlung age, because this did not need open competition with other families.
23. *Egla* as a political story may either be the life of the main character itself or a reflection of Snorri’s own life (Tulinius).
24. Anthropological studies on big men are abundant. Two very influential works have been Sahlins 1963 and Strathern.
25. For the discussion of Snorri’s attitude towards aristocracy, see Helgi Þorláksson 2018. For the anachronisms in *Egla*, see Capelle and Kramarz-Bein.
26. Both books took decades to be translated into English: the first appeared only in 1992, while the second was translated in 1980 but was not widely distributed, and its rendering of the French text is somewhat imperfect.
27. Although he was not Jewish himself (like Mauss and Durkheim), his wife Yvonne was. Halbwachs was deported to Buchenwald concentration camp when protesting the death of his parents-in-law, Victor and Hélène Basch.
28. For example, we read that merchants

peut sembler d’abord qu’ils sont plus séparés que fondus ensemble et rattachés l’un à l’autre par une sorte de conscience commune. Tournés vers les clients, c’est avec eux qu’ils se mettent en rapport et non avec les marchands voisins, qui sont des concurrents ... Cependant, alors même qu’il n’y a point de communication directe entre l’un et l’autre, *ils n’en sont pas moins les agents d’une même fonction collective*. En eux circule un même esprit, ils témoignent d’aptitudes du même ordre, obéissent à une même morale professionnelle.

Bien qu'ils se fassent concurrence, ils se sentent solidaires, lors qu'il s'agit de maintenir les prix et de les imputer aux acheteurs.
(Halbwachs 1950, 99, emphasis added)

[might seem more separated than joined together and associated by some sort of common consciousness. Centered on customers, they relate with them and not with neighbouring merchants, who are their competitors ... Even if there is no direct communication between each of them, *they are no less the agents of the same collective function*. Among them a similar spirit circulates, they hold aptitudes of a similar kind, obey the same professional morality. Even if they compete, they feel solidarity when they try to set prices and apply them to the customers.]

29. Similar criticism was already directed by Van Gennep to the head of the group in his review of Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*: "Mr. Durkheim's well-established personal proclivity for identifying and foregrounding the collective or social element leads him to neglect the generative role of particular individuals in creating certain institutions and beliefs. ... From there to outright denial of the reality of the individual and the dynamic part played by individuals in the evolution of civilizations is a short leap that Mr. Durkheim eagerly makes" (Van Gennep quoted in Thomassen 578).
30. However, it could be argued that some institutions (the Church, the *þing* system, and later the monarchy) can be seen as public institutions. The discussion of such matters is beyond the scope of this article.
31. Turner took the idea of *liminality* from Arnold Van Gennep, an early anthropologist and folklorist whose views differed considerably from those of the mainstream, primarily by giving uncertainty and conflict a noticeable role in his social theory, as opposed to the rather static functionalism of the Durkheimian holism and the older evolutionist views, which typically envisioned change as orderly progress.
32. A long development of this argument for capitalist societies was famously put forward by György Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*. Many of his conclusions do not hold for societies not grounded on a mode of production so clearly based on economic exploitation (this is, any mode except the capitalist) yet the core point, that subaltern groups are often unable to set up their own collective past because elites tend to disrupt such a creation as it will weaken their domination, can arguably be applied to cases like the one discussed here. Of course, this might just mean that the control of the production of the collective past was in the hands of these elites and thus typically reflects their ideas and interests.
33. This stance may even be considered pro-Snorri if, for example, the arguments for his authorship (recently reinvigorated by Tulinus) are accepted. See further discussion below.
34. Furthermore, I dare not delve in its complex ties with ecclesiastical culture, but I tend to agree with Grønlie (80–93) that it represents an anti-hagiographic text, a kind of reversed mirror image that is both indebted and opposed to it.
35. *Egils saga* could also be compared in ideological terms with sagas from other subgenres, such as the *konungasögur* as does Sverrir Jakobsson, who contrasts it with *Fagrskinna*,

Heimskringla, and mentions its well-known influence in some versions of *Landnámabók* (S. Jakobsson 2016, in particular 186–88). Sverrir Jakobsson notices an “anti-royal perspective” in *Egla*, which is indeed present, but that can be nuanced by noting at least two elements. First, it applies mostly to Norwegian kings, while figures such as the English king Æthelstan are not portrayed negatively. Moreover, it could be argued that the aggressive portrayal of Norwegian kings is partly justified by the actions of their enemies in the saga. For example, Egill can hardly be described as a role-model of good behaviour.

36. In other words, if sagas are read as evidence for social structures, we do need to concern ourselves with their link with the past reality as such. Helgi Þorláksson argued along a similar line in his paper for the 2012 *XVth International Saga Conference*, which to my knowledge has never been published in full. An abstract is available (Þorláksson 2012).
37. Concerning gift-giving, Viðar Pálsson 2015 argues that the second scenario is the most probable. My own view would fall somewhere in the middle between his stance and the one held by earlier authors. While indeed feasting, feuding, and gift-giving were mostly important to the existing elites (and those aiming to become elites), it was also an element in their domination of subaltern groups, even if their participation in these institutions was subaltern, rather than highlighted by excluding them from the system in a conventionally elitist fashion. In this aspect, comparison with similar institutions (such as the Potlatch-holding peoples of the Northwestern Americas) could provide interesting points of comparison, but that is beyond the scope of this article.
38. Gísli Sigurðsson has provided an excellent case study of how memory is used in saga literature through an interest-driven, particularist lens, which supplements the well-known book on how Sturla’s own ideas shaped his reconstruction of the past in *Íslendinga saga* (Nordal). Gísli’s study of how Sturla Þórðarson shaped the past about Haraldr hárfagri is also directly pertinent here, as the topic is of central importance in *Egils saga*, and given that the Sturlungar learned milieu appears to be closely related to it. Sturla likely used the saga as a source for his version of *Landnámabók*, famously changing the size of the settlement of Skalla-Grímr, one of his illustrious ancestors. In this way, he chose to reproduce the past constructed by the author of *Egla* (maybe his uncle Snorri or some close relative). And he might as well have been informed by oral traditions in his milieu, which could have remembered Skalla-Grímr’s *Landnám* as Sturla and *Egla* did, and not like Styrmir Kárason wrote. Unfortunately, Gísli’s approach is harder to apply for texts that are anonymous, of uncertain date, and that exist in single redactions.
39. This solution is indebted to that proposed by Helgi Þorláksson 2012.
40. Even if these are not old aristocrats, intergenerational social mobility is taken for granted.
41. *Egils saga* (ch. 56, 151) mentions Bjørn Hítœlakappi as one of the descendants of Skalla-Grímr; it is impossible to know if *Bjarnar saga* did the same, as the early part of the saga (which very likely presented the main character and his ancestry) is lost. This line of argument does not imply that these families constituted unified parties in the political struggles, as expected in a society where kinship was centred on individuals and where ties of friendship and alliance played such a large role. Large and powerful factions would thus often be divided in autonomous groups, as exemplified by the

divisions between the Sturlungar. I suggest the contrast more in terms of cultural and social aspirations than in actual political choices. Even there, one could notice differences between individuals: for example, between leaders such as Sighvatr and Snorri Sturluson, whose paths to leadership were noticeably different, even if both can be described as possessing aristocratic traits. For the weaknesses on conceiving families as coherent political groups, see the arguments advanced by Sverrir Jakobsson (2013, 8).

42. I do not think this is particularly meaningful in theoretical terms, because the distinction between history and collective memory had rather contradictory grounds already in Halbwachs. The distinction, aptly summarized by Russell, would make history a form of semantic memory and collective memory a form of episodic memory. But one of the examples given (the contrast between remembering the deeds of Alexander the great and remembering a trip to London) shows how relative this distance is. When Russell says that “Episodic memory is highly personal and subjective. I cannot remember your trip to London; I can only remember mine. Episodic memory cannot be passed from one person to another. By contrast semantic memory is objective: anyone who ... reads about the glorious acts of Alexander the Great can remember that abstract information” (Russell 798), one can perceive how artificial that distinction is: first, because not all those reading the same deeds of Alexander would remember them equally, but their recollection would be modelled by their subjectivity; second, because you can remember a trip to London you did not experience if you were told about it. Of course, that memory would be a construction, but memories derived from a personal experience are also constructions at least in the sense certain elements are prioritized, others rationalized, and others simply invented.
43. This quote is taken from the cited English translation.
44. This rejection of individualism and the insistence on society as a self-explaining entity was aimed to criticize both utilitarian liberal individualism and romantic essentialism (the two main targets of the Durkheimians). It also paved the way for the main weakness of the “French sociological school,” turning society into a rather uniform general cause, while ignoring conflict and divisions within it, and thus, logically, within its avatars, be they gifts, memories, or both. Therefore, I think it is clear that holism does not need to be discarded because it fails to incorporate conflict, diversity, and fragmentation within society, as a long tradition of anthropological schools, from the Manchester Anthropological School to French Structural Marxism, has proved that it is not difficult to add conflict to a broadly Durkheimian view. (For the history of anthropological theory, see Hylland Eriksen and Sivert Nielsen.)
45. The account can be raised to two, if we include the people of Hrafnista (the family of Ketill hængr and Arinbjörn), but they are secondary to those of Mýrar.
46. Several articles (in particular, those by Else Mundal, Karl Johansson and Torfi Tulinius) in the volume compiled by Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir and Helgi Þorláksson explain the cultural milieu around the major centre at Reykholt.
47. The text from the *Uppsalaþók* manuscript appears in *Diplomatarium Islandicum* I, 501–7.

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