

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF *EGILS SAGA*

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Without any doubt, *Egils saga* ranks with *Njáls saga*, *Laxdœla saga*, and one or two others as one of the great literary achievements of medieval Scandinavian literature. The almost demonic character of Egill Skalla-Grímsson continues to fascinate large numbers of readers of the saga even today, as the number of recent translations indicates¹. Despite this popularity, however, critics of the saga seem strangely ill at ease in attempting to illuminate its author's intentions. In his important study of the Icelandic family saga, Theodore M. Andersson begins his examination of *Egils saga* with these words :

"*Egils saga* inspires a set of impressions that are not easy to verify. It seems cooler, more detached, more literary, less immediately in touch with its subject than most sagas. The matter seems more diversified and less of a piece than elsewhere..."²

Then, a few lines later, he goes on to say :

"The feeling persists that so much time and place undoes the saga and when the author still somehow manages to subdue his matter, the result is skilful but artificial. The molecules of narrative are impatient of their structure. There is no genuine or inherent focus..."³

An earlier critic of the saga, Walther Heinrich Vogt, also felt that the saga, though the product of a single author, was still not completely homogeneous :

"Die Egilssaga ist das Werk eines Verfassers, das soll heissen, eines Schriftstellers, der einen umfangreichen Stoff bewusst und selbständig als Ganzes gedanklich erfasst, seiner Auffassung gemäss im einzelnen durcharbeitet und darstellt.

"Die ersten 66 Kapitel der Saga geben eine geschlossene Komposition, in den folgenden verläuft er sich in Einzelheiten. Der Verfasser hat also in den ersten zwei Dritteln seines Werkes am durchgreifendsten gearbeitet... Daher habe ich die ersten 66 Kapitel der Saga auf ihren Bau hin untersucht, und zwar im Grundsatz analytisch : ich will den Bau des Werkes aus ihm selbst verstehen".⁴

In suggesting that the last 21 chapters of *Egils saga* are irrelevant to an understanding of the work, Vogt has raised some very serious questions as to its narrative structure. If we accept for a moment his judgement that the last 21 chapters are relatively diffuse, then we can formulate a question which will enable us to come to grips with this problem. That question is : are we to interpret this ostensible loss of direction in chs. 67-87 as reflecting a weakening of the author's artistic inspiration, or does it evolve organically from a compositional principle which informs the entire saga ? To answer this question, we must now turn to the text itself.

Few readers of *Egils saga* will have overlooked the fact that the narrative begins, not with Egill himself, but with his grandfather, Kveld-Úlfr, whose life story is followed by that of his son, Skalla-Grímr, Egill's father. Upon closer scrutiny, the reader may also recognize that the 87 chapters which the saga contains may be divided into 3 equal sections of 29 chapters each, which coincide to a great extent with the life spans of the three generations of that family. These structures are presented in Table 1. That these divisions closely correspond to the three generations of Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr, and Egill, respectively, emerges from the number of the chapters in which their births and deaths are reported. Kveld-Úlfr is described in ch. 1 as being advanced in years, and his death is reported in ch. 27. Skalla-Grímr is described as a child in ch. 1, and is mentioned several times in the first part of the saga. It is only in ch. 30, however, after he has established his farm in the Mýrar region of Iceland, that he plays an independent role. His death is described in ch. 58. Egill is first mentioned in ch. 31, and the account of his death comes near the end of the saga in ch. 85. Thus, Kveld-Úlfr's life is described in the first part of the work, Skalla-Grímr's partly in the first, but primarily in the second, and Egill's increasingly in the second, and more completely in the third part of the saga.

Within each of these three sections of 29 chapters, lesser divisions may be identified on the basis of their content. Each of them begins and ends with a pair of chapters which serve as an introduction and a conclusion, respectively, to that part. The 25 chapters which lie between these pairs of transitional chapters are further subdivided into 5 groups of 5 chapters each. Moreover, the third or central chapter in each "pentad", as we may call these groups of five, contains in many cases an event of particular significance within the context of the chapters comprising the pentad, or in one or two other cases, an event which has nothing to do with the action at hand, but which will be seen later to be of great importance. For this reason, these central chapters in each pentad may be called "pivotal" chapters.

In Part I, chs. 1 and 2 describe the situation in Norway before the rise of Harald Hárfastr. In the first chapter, we meet Kveld-Úlfr and his sons Þorólfr and (Skalla-)Grímr, and his friend Berðlu-Kári and the latter's sons Eyvindr lambi and Ólfr hnúfa. Ch. 2 introduces Auðbjörn, the king of the

Table 1 : Numerical Organization of Chapters in *Egils saga*

I. Kveld-Úlfr (chs. 1-29)	II. Skalla-Grímr (chs. 30-58)	III. Egill (chs. 59-87)
1-2	30-31	59-60
3-4	32-33	61-62
5	34	63
6-7	35-36	64-65
8-9	37-38	66-67
10	39	68
11-12	40-41	69-70
13-14	42-43	71-72
15	44	73
16-17	45-46	74-75
18-19	47-48	76-77
20	49	78
21-22	50-51	79-80
23-24	52-53	81-82
25	54	83
26-27	55-56	84-85
28-29	57-58	86-87

Firðafylki, and his earls Hróaldr and Atli inn mjóvi. The first pentad, chs. 3-7 begins with the intrusion of Haraldr Hárfagri into this world, and Kveld-Úlfr's reaction to this. After Auðbjörn's defeat (ch. 4), Haraldr invites Kveld-Úlfr to become his "lendr maðr" (ch. 5). In this pivotal chapter, Kveld-Úlfr pronounces his prophecy of the ill-luck which will descend on his family through its encounter with King Haraldr. Upon his son Þórolfr's return (ch. 6), the latter goes to Haraldr's court. The pentad closes (ch. 7) with two events which will later have weighty consequences: Björgólfr seizes Hildiríðar Högnadóttir, and has two sons by her, the so-called Hildiríðarsynir, and Björgólfr's grandson Bárðr Brynjólfsson is betrothed to Sigríðr Sigurðsdóttir.

The second (chs. 8-12), third (chs. 13-17), and fourth (chs. 18-22) pentads recount the rise and fall of Þórolfr Kveld-Úlfsson at the court of King Haraldr Hárfagri. In ch. 8, Þórolfr becomes a member of Haraldr's retinue, Bárðr marries Sigríðr, and Brynjólf, Bárðr's father, dies. Haraldr is victorious at Hafsfjörðr (ch. 9), but Bárðr is killed. His friend Þórolfr marries his widow Sigríðr, but the Hildiríðarsynir now lay claim to the legacy which Sigríðr brings to the marriage. Þórolfr rejects their claim. In ch. 10, the pivotal chapter of this pentad, Þórolfr's fortunes are at their peak: Haraldr has appointed him to collect the Finn-tribute. The young courtier prepares a feast for Haraldr which turns out to be too lavish (ch. 11), and in ch. 12, the Hildiríðarsynir invite Haraldr to their estate and begin the campaign of slander which will result in Þórolfr's destruction.

The third and central pentad of Part I (chs. 13-17) records the change in Þórolfr's fortunes. In ch. 13, Þorgils gjallandi, Þórolfr's steward, delivers the Finn-tribute to Haraldr, while Þórolfr again is in the mountains collecting it, meanwhile defeating the Kirjalar (ch. 14). Ch. 15 is the pivotal chapter of this pentad, and the central chapter of Part I: here, the wheel of fortune begins its descent as the Hildiríðarsynir finally succeed in convincing Haraldr that Þórolfr has withheld part of the Finn-tribute. In ch. 16, Haraldr awards the right to collect the Finn-tribute to the Hildiríðarsynir. When they present it to King Haraldr (ch. 17), they accuse Þórolfr of having taken part of it.

In the third (chs. 18-22) of this central group of three pentads, we watch Þórolfr's destruction. In ch. 18, Haraldr instructs Sigtryggr and Hallvarðr to seize the ship which Þorgils gjallandi was sailing back to England—which they do. Þórolfr responds by seizing one of Haraldr's ships (ch. 19), and by razing Sigtryggr's and Hallvarðr's estate. The pivotal chapter of this pentad, ch. 20, records an apparently unrelated event: Skalla-Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson, Þórolfr's brother, marries, assuring the continuity of the family—and the potential for vengeance—just as Þórolfr is about to succumb to Haraldr's pressure. In the remaining two chapters, Sigtryggr and Hallvarðr receive permission to take vengeance on Þórolfr (ch. 21), but Haraldr moves more swiftly than they to Þórolfr's estate and slays him and Þorgils gjallandi himself (ch. 22). The wheel has come full

circle.

In the fifth and final pentad in this part (chs. 23-27), the situation deteriorates even further. To be sure, Ketill Hængr, Bárðr Brynjólfsson's grandfather, slays the Hildiríðarsynir and then flees to Iceland (ch. 23). Ólvir hnúfa attempts to reconcile Haraldr with Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr (ch. 24). In the pivotal chapter of this pentad (ch. 25), we follow the course of the audience between Skalla-Grímr and Haraldr, so carefully arranged by Ólvir, from which Skalla-Grímr forced to flee. In ch. 26, Haraldr sends Sigtryggr and Hallvarðr to bring the sons of Haraldr's recently deceased cousin Guttormr to Þrandheim. Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr slay them all, and leave for Iceland (ch. 27). Kveld-Úlfr dies, and is buried at sea. The final chapters in this part, chs. 28-29, describes Skalla-Grímr's landtake in Borgarfjörðr and the settlement of the region.

Part II (chs. 30-58) opens with Haraldr confiscating Kveld-Úlfr's and Skalla-Grímr's property in Norway (ch. 30). In ch. 31, we see the foundation of Skalla-Grímr's family and the birth of his children, including Egill. The four pentads which follow record the growth of Egill and his brother Þórólfr into manhood, and their attempts to establish themselves under the rule of Haraldr and his sons Eiríkr and Hákon. The first of these, chs. 32-36, begins with another abduction: Björn Brynjólfsson flees with Þóra Hlaðhönd. They are shipwrecked in the Shetlands. Björn then goes to Iceland (ch. 33), where he meets Skalla-Grímr, who gives him shelter. In the pivotal chapter, ch. 34, when Skalla-Grímr learns that Björn has been declared an outlaw by the king, he is enraged. In the remaining two chapters of this pentad, a more peaceful prospect emerges. Þóra gives birth to Ásgerðr, who will one day become first Þórólfr's, and then Egill's wife. A reconciliation is effected between Björn and Þóra's brother Þórir (ch. 35). Þórólfr gives a beautifully painted ship to Eiríkr Blóðöx (who is Þórir's foster-brother), and is introduced to Haraldr at court.

The next pentad, chs. 37-41, treats of Þórólfr's success at the court of King Eiríkr, and of Egill's coming of age. Þórólfr accompanies Eiríkr on an expedition to Bjarmaland, and, almost parenthetically, we meet the brothers Berg-Önundr, Haddr, and Atli inn skammi, with their father Þorgeirr Þyrnifótr. When Þórólfr returns to Iceland (ch. 38), he brings his father an axe as a gift from king Eiríkr, which Skalla-Grímr damages, and then discards. The pivotal chapter of this pentad, ch. 39, looks ahead to the end of the saga: Geirr, the son of Ketill blundr, marries Skalla-Grímr's daughter Þorunn. Their son Þorgeirr blundr will play a role in the conflict between Þorsteinn Egilsson and Steinarr Bjarnason at the end of the saga. In ch. 40, we meet Egill for the first time, and learn of his first slayings. Finally, in ch. 41, Þórólfr allows Egill to accompany him when he returns to Norway.

The next pentad, chs. 42-46, is not only the central pentad of Part II, but the central pentad of the saga. In it, we see Egill coming of age. In ch. 42, Þórólfr marries Ásgerðr Bjarnadóttir. Because Egill is sick, he cannot

attend the wedding, which sets the stage for ch. 43, in which he and Ólvir, one of Þórir Hróaldsson's stewards, are forced to land on the island of Atley. Here, in ch. 44, the midpoint of the saga, Egill comes before King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr—his first public appearance, as it were. This encounter ends with Egill's slaying of Bárðr, the king's steward, and his fleeing for his life. The events of this pivotal chapter recall Kveld-Úlfr's prophecy of ill-luck between his family and that of Haraldr, and insure that relations between Eiríkr and Egill will always be hostile. Þórir Hróaldsson manages to smooth things over somewhat (ch. 45), and Egill and his brother Þórólfr depart for Kurland (ch. 46).

The next two pentads, chs. 47-51 and 52-56, trace Egill's assumption of the mantle of manhood, and, concomitantly, Þórólfr's moving into the background. In ch. 47, Egill and Þórólfr sail back to Denmark, sacking Lund on the way. Egill shows himself the ladies' man with Arfiðr's daughter (ch. 48), and, in the pivotal chapter of this pentad, ch. 49, they escape the trap set for them by Queen Gunnhildr. The two decide to offer their services to King Aðalsteinn of England (ch. 50), since England is in turmoil (ch. 51).

The final pentad, chs. 52-56, opens with an account of Þórólfr's and Egill's adventures in England (ch. 52-53). The pivotal chapter, ch. 54, describes the Battle of Vínheiðr, in which Aðalsteinn is victorious, but in which Þórólfr is killed. Egill buries Þórólfr, receives a handsome present from Aðalsteinn, and returns to Norway. In ch. 56, Egill marries Ásgerðr, Þórólfr's widow, and they return to Iceland. Years pass, Ásgerðr's father Björn höldr dies, and Berg-Önundr, the son of Þorgeirr Þyrnifótr, takes over her inheritance because of his marriage to Gunnhildr, Ásgerðr's half-sister. When Egill claims part of the estate in behalf of Ásgerðr, Berg-Önundr rejects the claim, and King Eiríkr supports his position in this action. In the final two chapters, chs. 57-58, Egill kills Berg-Önundr and Rögnvaldr, the king's son, and, before returning to Iceland, directs a "níðstöng" against Eiríkr and Gunnhildr. Meanwhile, in Iceland, Skalla-Grímr dies, and is buried by Egill (ch. 58).

The final section of the saga, Part III (chs. 59-87), describes Egill's adventures in the latter part of his life. The two introductory chapters deal with Egill's return to England (ch. 59), where he comes before King Eiríkr at York. To save his life, he composes the poem "Höfuðlausn" (ch. 60). The first pentad, chs. 61-65, opens with Egill's journey to King Aðalsteinn at London (ch. 61), and continues with Egill's return to Norway (ch. 62). Having received a letter of introduction, so to speak, from Aðalsteinn, Egill returns to Norway, and presents himself to King Hákon (ch. 63), from whom he receives permission to stay in Norway. In pursuit of Ásgerðr's inheritance, Egill kills Ljótr inn bleiki (ch. 64), and Atli inn skammi (ch. 65).

The second pentad, chs. 66-70, opens with Egill's return to Iceland, where he stays a number of years, and concludes with a description of his family. He returns to Norway (ch. 67), and visits his old friend Arinbjörn. In

the pivotal chapter, ch. 68, Egill claims Ljótr's property, but Arinbjörn settles the claim out of his own pocket. Together they raid Frisia (ch. 69). They return (ch. 70), and Egill stays with Arinbjörn's nephew, Þorsteinn Þóruson, who has been ordered to collect the king's tribute from hostile subjects in Vermaland at great risk.

The third and central pentad of this part, chs. 71-75, is devoted to Egill's adventures on the Vermaland journey. He encounters Ármóðr (ch. 71) and Þorfinnr (ch. 72). In the pivotal chapter, ch. 73, he defeats Ármóðr's waylayers and arrives at the farm of Álfr inn auðgi. He finally receives the tribute from Jarl Arnviðr (ch. 74), and returns to Álfr (ch. 75). On the way back, he repels an attack by Arnviðr's men.

The fourth pentad, chs. 76-80, opens with Egill's final visit to Hákon, and then recounts his return to Iceland. Ch. 77 describes the final settlement of the region, and the marriage of Þórdís, Egill's stepdaughter. The pivotal chapter, ch. 78, encompasses the tragic death of Egill's son Böðvarr, as well as the two great poems, the "Sonatorrek" and the "Arinbjarnarkviða". In ch. 79, we follow Egill's move to Þórdís's farm at Mosfell, and Egill's son Þorsteinn receives Borg. The final chapter in this pentad (ch. 80) tells of Steinarr Ónundarson's trespassing on Þorsteinn's land, and of Þorsteinn's killing of one of Steinarr's slaves.

The final pentad, chs. 81-85, recounts the events which result from this slaying. Þorsteinn kills one of Steinarr's slaves (ch. 81), and Steinarr cites Þorsteinn to the "várþing". Egill dispenses justice in the case (ch. 82). In the pivotal chapter, ch. 83, Steinarr leaves his farm, Ánabrekka, and tries to kill Þorsteinn in a trap. Þorsteinn and Steinarr fight (ch. 84), and the matter is finally settled. In the last chapter, ch. 85, Egill having become old and feeble, finally dies. The final two chapters of the saga tell of the discovery of Egill's skull (ch. 86), and of Þorsteinn Egilsson's descendants (ch. 87).

From this review of the content of the saga, it can be seen that it has been carefully structured along the lines indicated in Table 1. In addition to what we have called the pentadic structure of the saga, however, we may detect another, one which reflects the changing relations between the three generations of Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr, and Egill, on the one hand, and Haraldr Hárfagri and his sons, Eiríkr Blóðöx and Hákon, and Eiríkr's son Haraldr Gráfeldr, on the other. These relationships are underscored by another arithmetical pattern: every 11th chapter records a change in the fortunes of Kveld-Úlfr and his descendants vis-a-vis the various members of the Norwegian royal house. These chapters together constitute what we may call the "endecadic" structure of the saga. In ch. 11, Þorólfur Kveld-Úlfsson, with the best of intentions, overshoots the mark in preparing a feast for King Haraldr. In ch. 22, Haraldr, moved to hostility because of the slanders of the Hildiríðarsynir, slays Þorólfur. In ch. 33, Skalla-Grímr, having just been run out of Norway by Haraldr, and having found haven in Iceland, suddenly discovers that he is harboring Björn Brynjólfsson, a man

whom Haraldr has sworn to kill as an outlaw because of his having abducted Þóra Hlaðhönd. Egill's disastrous appearance before Eiríkr and Gunnhildr in ch. 44 has already been discussed. Because Egill has earned King Aðalsteinn's gratitude, it is possible for him in ch. 55 to return to Norway, and eventually to marry Ásgerðr, his brother's widow. Chs. 66 and 77 express the theme of increasing security: in ch. 66, we see Egill as father of a family, and in ch. 77, he arranges for the marriage of his brother's daughter, and his stepdaughter, Þórdís, and for her move to Mosfell, where he will spend his last years. Whereas the first three chapters of this series, chs. 11, 22, and 33, document the dependence of Egill's family on the Norwegian kings, the last three mark their diminishing influence on Egill's life as well as his increasing security. In connection with the change of mood registered by these later chapters, we recall that Walther Heinrich Vogt regarded the saga as consisting of two parts: that containing chs. 1 to 66, which in his opinion was tightly composed, and that containing chs. 67 through 87, in which he felt the author had lost his way in details. Vogt recognized the importance of ch. 66 as marking a reduction in the tension associated with Egill's life, but interpreted it - erroneously, as we believe - as a boundary between the main part of the saga and a kind of appendix containing unimportant biographical information.

At this point, it is possible to attempt an answer to the question as to what the author of this saga is trying to say. We noted that two different structural systems could be discerned within the saga. The first consisted of three successive parts, each containing 29 chapters, with internal subdivisions into pentads. This structure was based on the successive generations of Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr, and Egill, respectively. This structure furnishes the underlying chronology of the saga, and also reflects the author's concern with portraying a kind of development through the course of these generations. The second structure, the sequence of ch. 11 followed by every 11th chapter thereafter, functions as a kind of barometer which shows the state of the relations between Kveld-Úlfr and his descendants and the Norwegian kings. Given the function of this endecadic structure, we may find a clue here as to the author's overarching conception. It is true that Haraldr Hárfagri's centralizing policies were oppressive and a source of tension. On the other hand, there are a number of indications in the saga which suggest that it was possible to enter into a tolerable, if not ideal, arrangement with him. In Naumudal, for example, if King Herlaugr chose to withdraw into a grave-mound and seal it up after him, his brother King Hrollaugr found it possible to abdicate his kingship and to remain in Naumudal as one of Haraldr's earls. Similarly, Berðlu-Kari, Kveld-Úlfr's old comrade-in-arms and later his father-in-law, made his peace with Haraldr and became his subject. And Kveld-Úlfr himself, who had not offered any overt resistance to Haraldr, was allowed to remain on his farm, provided he would send at least one of his sons to serve with the king, and indeed, his son Þórólfr was more than willing to do so. At least

initially, then, Harald's political policies and Kveld-Úlfr's psychological predispositions were joined in a kind of dynamic equilibrium which might well have continued indefinitely. If this is so, then what was it that disturbed this equilibrium?

The answer to this question emerges from a scrutiny of the genealogical relationships of the four major families in the saga with whom Kveld-Úlfr and his sons and grandsons became involved. The progenitor of the first of these is Björgólfr, whose grandson Bárðr Brynjólfsson befriends Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, who later marries Sigríðr, Bárðr's widow. But Björgólfr, in his old age, also takes a fancy to the young Hildiríðr, and has two sons by her. Second, there is Björn höldr, who in like fashion becomes involved with the third family, that of Hrðaldr, through the latter's daughter, Þóra Hlaðhönd; Hrðaldr was one of King Auðbjörn's, later Harald's earls, and the grandfather of Egill's close friend, Arinbjörn. Björn and Þóra have a daughter, Asgerðr, who marries Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson, and, after the latter's death, Egill himself. But Björn, after Þóra's death, remarries, and has a daughter, Gunnhildr, by his second wife. Gunnhildr eventually marries a member of the fourth family, Berg-Önundr, the son of Þorgeirr Þyrnifotr. In the course of the saga, Egill slays not only Berg-Önundr, but the latter's two brothers, Haddr and Atli inn skammi, as well.

We recall that both Hildiríðr and Þóra were abducted by Björgólfr and Björn höldr, respectively. From the juridical standpoint, the relationships between these women and their husbands did not meet all of the requirements for a full and lawful marriage, and consequently the claims of the children for a share of their husbands' property are challenged. These disputed claims to the property of Björgólfr and Björn are what upset the equilibrium between Harald and Kveld-Úlfr and their descendants, and what make it impossible for these families to establish and maintain a *modus vivendi* in Norway. In the first case, the relationship between King Harald and Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, so promising in the beginning, is poisoned by the slanders of the Hildiríðarsynir, who feel that they have been cheated of their father Björgólfr's property: first by his son Brynjólf, and then by the latter's son Bárðr, and finally by Þórólfr, who had married Bárðr's widow and taken control of her property. In the second case, it is a question of the conflicting rights of Asgerðr and Gunnhildr, the two daughters of Björn höldr by Þóra Hlaðhönd and Álöf, respectively. After Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson's death, his brother Egill marries his widow Asgerðr, and upon Björn's death lays claim to half of Björn's estate on Asgerðr's behalf. After the disruption of the court proceedings, Egill eventually kills Berg-Önundr, erects a "níðstöng" directed at King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr, and leaves Norway for Iceland.

This interpretation is supported by evidence from the pentadic structure of the saga. The abduction of each of these women takes place in the first pentad of the first two parts, respectively: Hildiríðr is seized in ch. 7, and Þóra flees with Björn in ch. 32. Moreover, there is a turning

point in the affairs of both parties at the end of these two parts. At the end of Part I, Ketill Hængr slays the Hildiríðarsynir (ch. 23), though to be sure the damage has already been done. Similarly, Björn höldr dies in ch. 56, at the end of Part II, and in ch. 57 Egill slays Berg-Önundr. The fact that these events coincide with the beginning and end of their respective parts underscores their significance as motivating factors within the saga.

These observations also throw light on another episode, the function of which in the economy of the saga is not immediately apparent: that involving Ljótr inn bleiki. It is true that Egill agrees to fight the berserk Ljótr in place of young Friðgeirr because the latter's mother Gyða is the sister of Egill's close friend Arinbjörn. However, Ljótr has challenged Friðgeirr to duel because of his desire to marry Friðgeirr's sister, and to acquire her property. This, then, is clearly another instance of an attempt to take a woman by force, much as Björgólfr did Hildiríðr. What is more, it occurs in ch. 64, i.e., like the other two cases, in the first pentad of the part in which it is recounted, and is thus parallel to those, not only in content, but also in its position in the structure of the saga. By killing Ljótr, Egill not only defends his friend Arinbjörn's kinsmen, he also prevents a recurrence of the disputed property claims which might well have resulted from it. This is consonant, too, with the general tenor of Part III of the saga, in which we note a gradual lessening of tension and reduction of conflict.

Thus, the relationship between Kveld-Úlfr and Haraldr and their respective descendants was, while tense, nevertheless not without opportunities for compromise and accommodation. What disturbed this delicate balance of forces was the repeated intrusion of property claims which, in both instances, had their origin in two cases of abduction of women which had occurred long before, in each of two successive generations. The second of these involved Þóra Hlaðhönd, whose daughter, Ásgerðr, ultimately becomes Egill's wife. The defeat of Atli inn skammi, the last of orgeirr yrnifotr's sons, and the last possessor of Ásgerðr's inheritance, takes place in ch. 65. In the next chapter, ch. 66, we note the appearance of a mood of relative tranquillity. The initial tension between Kveld-Úlfr and Haraldr has given way to the relative security of life on Iceland. When tragedy does strike, as it does in the case of Böðvarr Egilsson, it is the force of nature which is at fault. And Egill is still man enough to settle minor conflicts like that between his son Þorsteinn and Steinarr Önundarson with a "Machtspruch". Now that the root cause of the conflict has been removed, equilibrium has been restored, and life can once again take its accustomed direction.

In conclusion, then, we can draw together some of our observations, and show how they contribute to an understanding of the structure of this saga. To begin with, we can say with some confidence that *Egils saga* is a single and complete work—the arithmetical symmetries which obtain among the various groups of chapters allow no other conclusion. Moreover,

the fundamental compositional principle is the succession of generations—this is the basic unit of measure of life. We can trace this through two families : Kveld-Úlfr and his descendants, and Haraldr Hárfagri and his. Conflicts arise, usually from a combination of factors. The initial tension in the saga resulted from the peculiar psychological characteristics of Kveld-Úlfr and his family, who are confronted by Haraldr, a king who is trying to bring all of Norway under his control. But this initial tension is not in itself enough to generate open conflict. This grows out of claims involving the inheritance of property, which in turn spring from unjust actions by third parties long ago. Then, too, there is an element of chance in human affairs—what, for example, if Hildiríðr had borne two daughters instead of two sons ? And finally, conflicts can be resolved, and when this happens, we note the restoration of equilibrium among the parties involved.

In this connection, we observed at the beginning of this article that Vogt interpreted the change of mood in ch. 66 as a sign of the end of the saga proper. His underlying assumption was that the main concern of the author of the saga was to record the deeds of Kveld-Úlfr, Skalla-Grímr, and Egill—"die Geschichte der Väter", as he put it, would illuminate the deeds of the hero (p. 4). For my part, I have come to the conclusion that this saga is less an heroic epic in prose than a case study in social dislocation. Even though acts of violence are common in this saga, as in many others, the author's purpose is not so much to glorify these deeds for their own sake, or even for the ideals which they may represent, but to explain how such things can happen in the first place.

This point has important consequences for the structure of the narrative. The author is trying to present his interpretation of the events he is dealing with ; he wants to explain the causes of things. This purpose requires both chronological organization and a way of forming chains of events which can be related as cause and effect. The pentadic structure provides both. Chronology is implicit in genealogy, and the individual pentads, as we have seen, provide convenient building blocks for situations larger than an individual scene. Also implicit in chronology is change through time, and the direction of this change is marked by the endecadic structure, the series of every 11th chapter. The scenes of Egill's infirmity and old age at the end of the saga are surely as much a part of his story as the battles of his youth. This is evidence, not only of the unity of the saga, but also of the harmony which obtains between its content and the narrative structure in which it is expressed.

APPENDIX

(At the conclusion of the presentation of this paper, a number of those present raised questions, chiefly about numerical composition, or arithmetical proportion, in the structure of the saga. I am indebted to Benjamin Blaney, Peter Jorgensen, James Knirk, Margaret Clunies Ross, Roderick McTurk, and to several other whose names I do not know, for their interest. The following comments are offered in general response to their questions, and furnish additional documentation on several points raised in the discussion).

One question which always arises in connection with the claim that a given work of literature is organized symmetrically is the basis for determining its presence. Clearly the segmentation of a text must be justified by reference either to divisions in its content, or to features of its form. As to the purpose of numerical composition, there is a theoretical justification in the sense that the various parts of a work could be seen as harmoniously constituting a unity (see below). On the practical side, it was probably an aid to the author in organizing his material. I know of only one account which describes the process of literary composition by this method: that given in one of the medieval lives of Vergil which supposedly goes back to a lost work of Suetonius. This brief passage reads as follows:

"Aeneida prosa prius oratione formatam digestamque in XII libros particulatim componere instituit, prout liberet quidque, et nihil in ordinem arripiens. ac ne quid impetum moraretur, quaedam imperfecta transmisit, alia levissimis versibus veluti fulsit, quae per iocum pro tibicinibus interponi aiebat ad sustinendum opus, donec solidae columnae advenirent".

I take this to mean:

"He set about composing the Aeneid, having previously written it out in prose and having divided it into twelve books, arranging it in whatever manner he pleased, not taking anything in any particular order. And so that the creative process might not be hindered, he let anything pass, however imperfect, and supported the other members, so to speak, with random verses, which, he said jokingly, were inserted as props to sustain the work until the solid columns would arrive".⁵

The statement about writing a prose version has no relevance to the sagas, which are already in prose, but it is interesting that the numerical

structure of the *Aeneid* was chosen prior to the composition of the verse version.

As to the effect on the reader, in all probability one perceives the proportions which obtain among the parts of a work, not in numerical terms, but rather as a pleasing sense of just proportion. This seems to be the thrust of Socrate's observation that, if measure and proportion (*metriótès kai symmetría*) are absent from any composition in any degree, the work is likely to confuse and fail (Plato, *Philebus* 64E).

The development of the tradition of numerical composition is not entirely clear, and so the following sketch must be regarded as tentative. It evidently has its origin in the number speculations of the Pythagoreans. This must have influenced Jewish thought, since we find in the Book of Wisdom a verse which runs through the entire Western tradition as the Biblical authority and basis for such a procedure: "Et omnia in mensura et numero et pondere disposuisti" (*Sapientia* 11:21) "Thou hast ordered all things according to measure and number and weight". This formula appears again and again, well into the eighteenth century.

The mathematical disciplines of antiquity enter the Roman tradition, where they are ultimately included by Varro in the *artes liberales*, and then receive a Christian interpretation at the hands of Augustine, Boethius, Cassiodorus, and Isidore of Seville. Somewhat later, the *De nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* of Martianus Capella becomes the standard textbook in the Carolingian curriculum and for several centuries thereafter, particularly in France. From here, the ideas in it must have reached Iceland soon after the acceptance of Christianity. Recently, Régis Boyer has drawn attention to the rapidity with which monasteries were established on Iceland, and of the importance of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium* in the course of study which was instituted.⁶

To these learned sources must be added the practical arts of architecture and weaving, both of which involve the application of arithmetical combinations. As to the former, it is of particular interest in connection with *Egils saga* that the order of free-masons was supposedly either founded or reorganized at York by King Æþalstan, i.e., the Aðalsteinn of the saga, and Egil's benefactor. According to a fourteenth-century manuscript now in the British Museum, it was also King Æþalstan who introduced the study of Euclid's *Elements* into England, geometry being virtually synonymous with architecture at that time.⁷ The connections between York and Scandinavia were very close during this period.⁸

As to weaving, this was an important activity on Iceland during the Middle Ages, and was practiced in virtually every Icelandic hall by the women. It is also an activity which requires a careful counting of threads, particularly if a design is to be woven into the cloth. There is evidence that the weaving of tapestries in Scandinavia may have begun as early as the seventh century⁹. The principle of numerical composition in literature

might have resulted from a transfer of techniques from weaving to literary composition is implied by the formula *wordcræftum wæf* near the end of Cynewulf's *Elene* :

þus ic frod ond fus þurh þæt fæcne hus
wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs,... (1236-39).

"Thus, I, skilful and eager, through that guileful house,
wove with the power of words and collected wonders..."¹⁰

Whatever the significance the presence of numerical composition in *Egils saga* might have for the interpretation of that work, it certainly suggests that the civilization of medieval Iceland evolved in much closer contact with that of the continent than many have believed.

NOTES

- 1 E.g., *Egils saga*, tr. Christine Fell with John Lucas (London : Dent, Toronto-Buffalo : University of Toronto Press, 1975), *Egil's saga*, trs. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Harmondsworth : Penguin Books, 1976), as well as the German translation, *Die Saga von Egil*, tr. Kurt Schier (Düsseldorf-Köln : Diederichs, 1978).
- 2 Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga : An Analytical Reading*, *Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature*, 28 (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 106.
- 3 Andersson, *Icelandic Family Saga*, p. 106.
- 4 W. H. Vogt, *Zur Komposition der Egils saga*, kpp. I-LXVII, Programm des Gymnasium Augustum der Stadt Görlitz, Nr. 264 (Görlitz : Hoffmann und Reiber, 1909), p.1.
- 5 "Vita Donati" in : *Vitae Vergilianae Antiquae*, ed. Colin Hardie, 2nd ed., *Oxford Classical Texts* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 7, ll. 85-91.
- 6 Régis Bover, *Les sagas islandaises*, *Bibliothèque historique* (Paris : Payot, 1978), p. 37.
- 7 "Constitutiones Artis Gemetriae Secundum Euclydum" : *A Facsimile of the Early Poem on Freemasonry from the Original MS presented by King George II to the English Nation in 1757, now in the British Museum* (London : Spencer, Boston : Clarke and Carruth, 1889).
- 8 Alfred P. Smith, *Scandinavian York and Dublin : The History and Archeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms*, I (Dublin : Templekieran Press, 1975).
- 9 Karl Hauck. "Brieflicher Hinweis auf eine kleine ostnordische Bilder-Edda", in : *Zur germanisch-deutschen Heldensage*, ed. Karl Hauck, *Wege der Forschung*, 14 (Darmstadt : Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965), pp. 427ff., 431.
- 10 "Elene", in : *The Vercelli Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 2 (New York : Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 100.

