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# FJORN THE SKALD

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**Document:** Fjorn's Notes on *Egil's Saga* as translated by Bernard Scudder (2002)

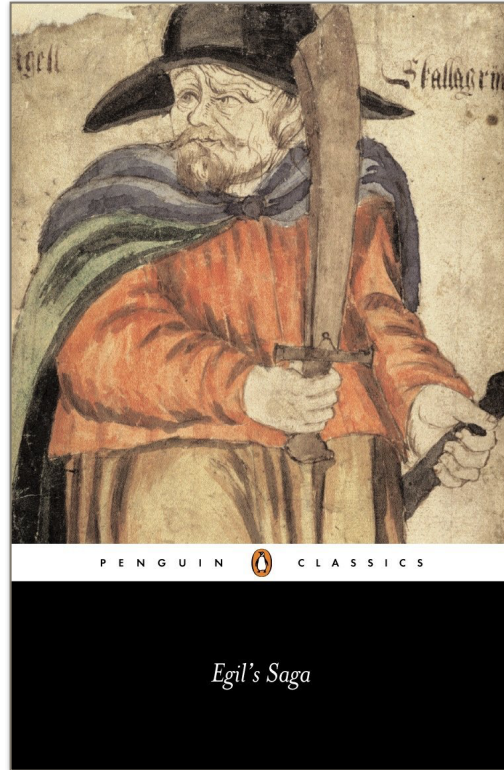
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# EGIL'S SAGA

*Bernard Scudder translation*



## **CITATION INFORMATION:**

(NOTATION)

Bernard Scudder trans., *Egil's Saga*. (London: Penguin Classics, 2002).

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## NOTES ON THE INTRODUCTION

The world of Egil's saga was formed from the Viking world. Egil Skallagrimsson is a Viking and a poet, composing his first verse at three years old and slaying his first victim at seven. Aggression against the kings of Norway in particular. This saga was written in the thirteenth century (three hundred years after Egil's life). Egil is full of contradictions. Seeks justice, but his means are questionable. From monstrous delinquent to respectable leader. Full of irony.

### *Kings and Commoners*

A main theme: Independent farmers versus overbearing kings. Takes place in a time without a king, written at a time when this had recently changed.<sup>1</sup> In this saga, Egil is a glorified farmer, one who symbolizes the past glory of independent farmers against foreign kings. These figures were becoming a thing of the past. Not a role model for thirteenth-century Icelanders, look more to a person like Skuli Thorsteinsson (featured near the end of this saga, Egil's grandson).<sup>2</sup> The saga describes Harald's rise. Egil does not get along with kingship. Wide setting. "One man's crusade against the Norwegian dynasty" (xii).

### *Crafting a Saga*

Probably composed in the first half of the thirteenth century (perhaps the earliest saga to receive a written form). Incorporated trusted sources. Argument on who composed the poetry — Egil or author. Oldest complete text: *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.), dated to ca. 1330–70, which contains ten other sagas. Perhaps author was Snorri, who is descended from Egil. Two main parts: Thorolf and Egil. Inheritance disputes (unlawful marriages). Similarities between both parts. Note the use of parallels. Motives and differences in outcomes. Sympathy is not only with Egil. Egil's harsh verdicts, even though he has been wronged so often. Why? The use of different points of view. Delayed action (medieval slow motion using descriptions). Anticipation and repetition. The power of Egil's words (Egil's head).

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<sup>1</sup> This is strikingly similar to the situation for *Njal's saga* as well. It is incredible how much more significance there is for the saga once the time period of its creation is considered alongside it. In a sense, I find it to be even more rich with information because of this effect.

<sup>2</sup> Again, I am reminded of certain themes in *Njal's saga*. The next generation is often featured and they also display a change or departure from the previous one. In a sense, they give a closure to the issues of the generation before them. The need to accept kingship is felt through the next generation. This is something I hope to come back to as I continue my reading.

## **BOOK NOTES:** *Egil's Saga*

### *Poetry and Prose*

Poetry as an emphasis or an extra dimension. Verse is very important in this saga (especially for insight into characters, notably Egil). Sixty single stanzas with fifty from Egil. Linked to the prose. Create suspense and premonitions (symbols). Contains three long poems — a look into Egil's past and life. Men of the Kveldulf family as gifted with words.

### *Characters*

No character development — stated mater-of-factly. Characteristics from one generation to the other, sometimes. Symbolic meanings in their names (Kveldulf = night wolf). Werewolf folklore. Descendants of Kveldulf get brighter (overcoming something perhaps?). People's thoughts are not described. Nor feelings. Egil breaks this at times though. Feelings from appearance — four elements (ring a bell?). Arinbjorn, the opposite to Egil, basically. Themes of friendship. Relationship between Thorolf and Egil is central. Love triangles, especially involving brothers. Asgerd and her marriage with Egil. Tensions between Egil and Gunnhild.

## CHAPTER NOTES

### *Chapter 1 (pgs. 3-4)*

1. **Ulf Bjalfason**: no man was a match for him and was only a youth when he became a Viking. His father's name means 'animal skin.'<sup>(3)</sup><sup>3</sup>
2. His companion was **Kari from Berle**: high-born, performer of great deeds, and a berserk. They shared everything with each other.<sup>(3)</sup>
  - i. After plundering days: wealthy, had 3 children (2 sons, 1 daughter).<sup>(3)</sup>
  - ii. **Salbjorg** (his daughter) was a "beautiful woman of firm character," and she married Ulf.<sup>(3)</sup>
    - a. Ulf settles down, becomes wealthy landowner "like his ancestors," and "was a powerful figure."<sup>(3)</sup>
3. Ulf was "a very clever farmer;" he woke early & kept a close eye on things.<sup>(3)</sup>
  - i. He was also "shrewd and always ready to make useful suggestions."<sup>(3)</sup>
  - ii. But he grew bad-tempered during evenings and always went to bed early.<sup>(3)</sup>
  - iii. People claimed he was a shape-shifter and they called him **Kveldulf**.<sup>(3)</sup>
4. Kveldulf and Salbjorg had 2 sons: Thorolf & Grim. They were both like their father: big & strong.<sup>(3-4)</sup>
  - i. But **Thorolf** was "an attractive and highly accomplished man," who "took after his mother's side of the family," and is described rather well.<sup>(4)</sup>
  - ii. **Grim**, however, was "swarthy and ugly, resembling his father in both appearance and character," active, and a gifted craftsman.<sup>(4)</sup>
  - iii. Thorolf went raiding when he was 20, and Kari's sons (Eyvind & Olvir) joined him—this went on for many summers (spending winters at home). <sup>(4)</sup>

### *Chapter 2 (pg. 4)*

1. King of Fjordane = Audbjorn; an earl of his = Hroald, whose son = Thorir.<sup>(4)</sup>
2. Another earl = Atli the Slender, who had the 3 sons and 1 daughter:<sup>(4)</sup>
  - i. Hallstein, Holmstein, and Herstein; **Solveig the Fair** <sup>(4)</sup>
3. Olvir courted Solveig, but Atli didn't approve.<sup>(4)</sup>
  - i. Olvir composed many love poems & gave up raiding.<sup>(4)</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This animal theme here is prominent from the very beginning, along with an association with trolls and shape-shifting. Something to keep in mind moving forward.

*Chapter 3 (pgs. 5-6)*

1. King **Harald Tangle-Hair**, the son of Halfdan the Black: his conquest of Norway is underway.<sup>(5)</sup><sup>4</sup>
2. Herlaug & Hrollaug:
  - i. Herlaug had built a mound, went in it, and it closed upon them.
  - ii. Hrollaug went from king to earl and submitted to Harald.
3. Solvi Chopper, the son of a slain king, warns King Arnvid of Harald.
  - i. 2 options: fight & die, or submit.
4. Solvi & King Arnvid send for the King Audbjorn.
  - i. King Audbjorn joins them.<sup>(6)</sup><sup>5</sup>
  - ii. Kveldulf refuses.<sup>6</sup>

*Chapter 4 (pgs. 6-8)*

- King Harald conquers More, but not without some loses.<sup>(6)</sup>
- King Arnvid & King Audbjorn are killed.
- Solvi Chopper escapes & becomes a great Viking.
- King Audbjorn's brother, Vemund, becomes king of Fjordane.<sup>(7)</sup>
- Jarl Rognvald appointed ruler of North & South More, as well as Romsdal.
- Harald returns to Trondheim.
- Jarl Atli's sons attack Olvir Hump's farm, intending to kill him.
- Olvir is forced to flee.
- He becomes one of Harald's men, close friends, and poet.
- Jarl Rognvald burned Vemund's hall down while they feasted.
- Kari of Berle joins him & later joins King Harald.
- Harald places Jarl Hroald as ruler in Fjordane.
- Harald tightens his rule over the landowners.
- Many flee Norway to escape him.
- Iceland was discovered at this time.<sup>(8)</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter is a rather detailed account of his war-path. Read the saga for specific details.

<sup>5</sup> His method is...unique. See quote 3 for details.

<sup>6</sup> Why though? King Audbjorn is his lord, but he refuses to fight with him against Harald. Kveldulf is showing stubborn independence here, it seems. This must be because Audbjorn is fighting with another king, and fighting to protect that king's lands rather than Fjordane. Kveldulf feels no obligation to help since it's not his land their fighting for (at that moment).

**BOOK NOTES:** *Egil's Saga*

*Chapter 5 (pgs. 8-9)*

- The king sends messengers to Kveldulf.(8)
- Kveldulf says that he is “too old” to be fighting on ships now.
- He stays home again.
- The king’s messengers ask for his son, saying they would make him a landowner.
- Grim also refuses this, saying his father is his superior.
- The king thought them to be arrogant but didn’t know their motives.
- Olvir told the king not to be angry & offers to see Kveldulf.
- Kveldulf has an “intuition” that no good will come to his family from Harald.
- He says it would be easy to persuade Thorolf to go.(9)
- He then says that he will stay on friendly terms with Harald in the meantime.
- Harald let the matter rest at that.

*Chapter 6 (9-10)*

- Thorolf and Eyvind return from raiding.(9)
- Kveldulf tells Thorolf that he told Harald’s men that none would be joining him.
- But Thorolf likes the idea and lectures his father about the matter.(9-10)
- Kveldulf gives Thorolf interesting advice.
- Thorolf goes to Harald.

## QUOTES

1. “Thorolf brought many precious things back to give to his parents, for in those days it was easy to win both wealth and renown.”(4)
  - i. For this, I’m much more interested in the precious objects. This quote by itself isn’t much, but I won’t hurt to tuck it away for later.
2. “...Harald will be here soon, once he has brought slavery and suffering to everyone... You will face the same choice we had: either to defend your property and freedom by staking all the men you can hope to muster...or to follow the course taken by the people of Naumdal who voluntarily entered servitude and became Harald’s slaves. My father felt it an honor to die nobly as king of his own realm than become subservient to another king in his old age. I think you will feel the same, and so will any other stalwarts who want to prove their worth.”(5)
  - i. Key point: fighting for freedom & property was the honorable choice.
3. “King Audbjorn sent around an arrow of war as a signal to call men to arms throughout his kingdom and dispatched messengers to powerful men asking them to meet him.”(6)
4. “In each province King Harald took over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited, and even the sea and lakes. All the farmers were made his tenants, and everyone who worked the forests or dried salt, or hunted on land or sea, was made to pay tribute to him.”(7)
5. “[Olvir] spoke at length, and rightly so, about how well the king repaid his men with both wealth and status.”(8)
6. “...the people who turn their backs on him and spurn his friendship...they never become great men...”(9)