



ENGLISH KINGSHIP IN THE SAGA AGE: MEMORY, TRANSMISSION
AND THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE

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Declaration

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ABSTRACT

The *Íslendingasögur* are a collection of around forty texts committed to writing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They purport to relate the lives and adventures of Iceland's leading heroes and families during the Saga Age, a period that begins with the settlement of the island in the late ninth century and ends along with the Viking Age in the late eleventh century. Included within these texts are thirty episodes, of greater or lesser detail, relating travel to England. The most prominent of these are found in the *skáldasögur*, a subset of texts that focus on the biographies of Iceland's foremost poets. Egill Skallagrímsson attends the court of King Æthelstan (d. 939), Gunnlaugr Ormstungu twice visits King Æthelred II (d. 1016), while Björn Hítðælakappi spends two years in the retinue of King Knútr *inn ríki* (the great) (d. 1035). This thesis sets out to explore the relationship between these depictions of Viking Age England, its kings, courts, and societies, and the historical record.

While the *Íslendingasögur* present themselves as histories, they are difficult historical sources. The corpus is highly intertextual and conventional, both displaying the interventions of generations of Icelandic storytellers and responding to thirteenth-century or later historiographical practices. In short, they are disconnected from their setting. This thesis proposes methodological approaches to the study of the *Íslendingasögur* as historical literature that bring historical and literary analysis together with elements of cultural studies, anthropology, archaeology, and cultural memory theory. In so doing, it is not concerned with simply correlating saga narrative against the historical and archaeological record of tenth- and eleventh-century England, but with interrogating the processes through which *Íslendingasögur* portrayals of England arrived at their textual redactions. In taking this approach, this thesis seeks answers to three key questions. Firstly, to what extent do *Íslendingasögur* narratives preserve the history or social contexts of Saga Age England? Secondly, what processes of cultural contact informed the centuries-long transmission of stories of Anglo-Scandinavian contact during this period? Lastly, to what extent do cultural, political, and social values of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland permeate the narratives as they relate to England?

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Per the Flinders University HDR thesis policy, a bibliography of my submitted, accepted and published articles during candidature has been provided; this can be found on pp. 318–19.

CONTENTS

List of Maps	v
List of Figures	vi
List of Tables	vii
Note on Translations	viii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Chronology of the Saga Age.....	xi
Maps of Viking Age England and Scandinavia.....	xiii
Introduction	1
i. Research Aims and Approaches	1
ii. Scope and Outline.....	8
PART 1	
Chapter 1: Saga Historicity and English History.....	11
1.1 <i>Íslendingasögur</i> as Sources of History: The Debate	13
1.2 England in the <i>Skáldasögur</i> : The Texts.....	21
1.3 Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr: A Historical Overview	35
Chapter 2: Narrative and Memory	51
2.1 The Fear of Forgetting and Value of Writing.....	54
2.2 Cultural Memory and Medieval <i>memoria</i>	60
2.3 Communicative Memory and Skaldic verse	67
2.4 Memory and Literature	72
Chapter 3: England in the Saga Age.....	79
3.1 Identities and Definitions: <i>viking</i> and the <i>víkingar</i>	83
3.2 Cultural Contact in the Reign of Æthelstan (924–39).....	91
3.3 Cultural Contact in the Reign of Æthelred (978–1016)	104
3.4 Cultural Contact in the Reign of Knútr (1016–1035)	118
Chapter 4: Iceland and the Writing of the Sagas	127
4.1 The <i>Íslendingasögur</i> Corpus.....	128
4.2 Iceland in the Saga Age	135
4.3 Iceland in the Age of Saga Writing	152

PART 2

Chapter 5: Memories of Time and Place: <i>Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa</i>	165
5.1 Manuscript Contexts.....	169
5.2 Björn's Travels	172
5.3 Reconstructing a Chronology.....	177
5.4 Thematic Intertextuality: Of Kings and Dragons	186
Chapter 6: Memories of Cultures: <i>Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu</i>	198
6.1 Gunnlaugr's Travels	203
6.2 The <i>skáld</i> in Literary Frameworks.....	210
6.3 The <i>skáld</i> as Poet: The Hierarchies of Verse.....	217
6.4 The <i>skáld</i> as Warrior: A Fabricated Narrative	224
Chapter 7: Memories of Events: <i>Egils saga Skallagrímssonar</i>	232
7.1 Egill's Travels.....	236
7.2 The Battle of Brunanburh.....	249
7.3 The Court of Eiríkr blóðøx in York.....	264
Conclusions.....	278
i. Interpretation and Reinterpretation	279
ii. Remembering England	281
Bibliography	284
Unpublished Sources.....	284
Primary Sources	284
Secondary Sources	290
Publications During Candidature.....	318

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1: The North Sea world	xiii
Map 2: North Atlantic Scandinavian settlement.....	xiv
Map 3: Viking Age England	xv
Map 4: Medieval Iceland.....	xvi
Map 5: Repton, Oxford and Dorset burials	81
Map 6: English minting centres	92
Map 7: Mýrar (Western Iceland).....	144
Map 8: The travels of Björn <i>Hítðelakappi</i>	174
Map 9: The travels of Gunnlaugr <i>Ormstunga</i>	206
Map 10: Egill Skallagrímsson's first journey	244
Map 11: Egill Skallagrímsson's second and third journeys	247

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Hrísbú church site plan	28
Figure 2: Coin, Æthelstan church type (Regnald, York).....	37
Figure 3: Repton St Wystan's site plan.....	81
Figure 4: Viking Age artisan artefacts found in York	99
Figure 5: Coin die, Æthelstan short cross type (York)	100
Figure 6: Coin, Æthelstan short cross type (Regnald, York).....	101
Figure 7: Coin, Æthelred helmet type (Tóki, London).....	111
Figure 8: Stone sculpture, London St Pauls 1.....	112
Figure 9: Dorset Ridgeway site plan.....	114
Figure 10: Oxford St John's site plan	116
Figure 11: Coin, Knútr pointed helmet type (Ásleikr, London)	124
Figure 12: Coin, Knútr short cross type (Godwine, Rochester).....	124
Figure 13: Coin, Eric sword type (Godwine, York)	266

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Chronology of the Saga Age	xi
Table 2: Calibrated ¹⁴ C dates (Repton)	81
Table 3: Scandinavian Æthelstan coin finds	103
Table 4: Calibrated ¹⁴ C dates (Dorset)	114
Table 5: Calibrated ¹⁴ C dates (Oxford)	116
Table 6: Overlapping periodisations	137
Table 7: Dating of the <i>Íslendingasögur</i>	156
Table 8: Internal chronology of <i>Bjarnar saga</i>	180
Table 9: Internal chronology of <i>Gunnlaugs saga</i>	207
Table 10: Chronology of the throne of York (937–45)	272

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

All prose translations into English throughout this thesis, unless otherwise noted, are my own—this includes, in all cases, translations from source texts in Old Norse–Icelandic, Old English and Latin.

The only source material not provided in original translation is skaldic verse. The depth of allusion and complexity of skaldic verse is well known and requires certain expertise in the deciphering of kennings—simply translating the words of a poem will not suffice to transmit meaning. As skaldic verse, in as far as their texts are concerned (if not function), are periphery to this study, I have relied on subject area experts. The editions used are noted throughout.

Frequently used texts have been abbreviated, as per the supplied list (pp. ix–x), and are cited by chapter and verse, year of chronicle entry, or manuscript shelf mark, depending on the nature of the source. This citation method is also used of other primary sources throughout, though they are referenced in full in the first instance of their use.

Where non-English language scholarship has been rendered into scholarly English translation, such as in the case of Sigurður Nordal and Jónas Kristjánsson's commentaries on the *Íslendingasögur* and certain of Jan Assman's works on cultural memory, this has been noted. Otherwise, translations of such texts provided herein, whether German, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic or French, are my own, including any error or interpretation that may be thus introduced.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Æthelweard</i>	<i>The Chronicle of Æthelweard</i> (London, 1963)
AM	Arnarnagnæan Manuscript Collection
ASC	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i> , cited by manuscript and year, taken from the respective volumes of the <i>Collaborative Edition</i> (Cambridge, 1983–2004)
ASE	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i> (Journal)
<i>Asser</i>	<i>Asser's Life of King Alfred</i> (Oxford, 1904)
<i>Bjarnar saga</i>	<i>Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa</i> (Reykjavík, 1938)
BL	British Library
Cleasby-Vigfússon	<i>Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1957)
CUP	Cambridge University Press
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>Egils saga</i>	<i>Egils saga</i> (London, 2003)
<i>Encomium</i>	<i>Encomium Emmae Reginae</i> (Cambridge, 1998 [1949])
<i>G. Dan.</i>	Saxo Grammaticus, <i>Gesta Danorum</i> (Oxford, 2015)
<i>G. Pont.</i>	William of Malmesbury, <i>Gesta Pontificum Anglorum</i> (Oxford, 2007)
<i>G. Reg.</i>	William of Malmesbury, <i>Gesta Regum Anglorum</i> (Oxford, 1998)
<i>Gunnlaugs saga</i>	<i>Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu</i> (Reykjavík, 1938)
<i>Heimskringla</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Heimskringla</i> (Reykjavík, 1979)
HH	Henry of Huntingdon, <i>Historia Anglorum</i> (Oxford, 1996)
HÍF	Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag
ÍF	Íslenzk fornrit
<i>Íslendinga saga</i>	<i>Íslendinga saga</i> (Reykjavík, 1946)
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
JW	<i>The Chronicle of John of Worcester</i> (Oxford, 1995)
<i>Landnámabók</i>	<i>Landnámabók</i> (Reykjavík, 1938), cited as S (<i>Sturlubók</i>) or H (<i>Hauksbók</i>) and chapter
Liebermann	F. Liebermann, <i>Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen</i> (Halle, 1903)

MEC	R. Naismith, <i>Medieval European Coinage 8: Britain and Ireland c.400–1066</i>
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
OUP	Oxford University Press
PL	<i>Patrologiæ Cursus Completus, Series Latina</i>
PKS	<i>Poetry from the Kings' Sagas</i> (Turnhout, 2009–2012)
S	P.H. Sawyer, <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography</i> (London, 1968): charter citations are by Sawyer (S) number and taken from (http://www.esawyer.org.uk/)
SD	Simeon of Durham, <i>Opera Omnia</i> (New York, 1965)
<i>Skáldskaparmál</i>	Snorri Sturluson, <i>Skáldskaparmál</i> (London, 2008)
SS	<i>The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture</i> : citations are by object descriptor and taken from (http://www.ascorpus.ac.uk/)
VSNR	Viking Society for Northern Research

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SAGA AGE

787	First recorded viking raid in England
793	Viking raid on Holy Isle (Lindisfarne)
c.850	Scandinavian settlement begins in England
c.870	Scandinavian settlement begins in Iceland
870	Martyrdom of Edmund, King of East Anglia
871	Alfred the Great becomes king of the West Saxons
c.880	Haraldr <i>hárfagri</i> [fairhair] becomes king of all Norway
899	Edward the Elder becomes king of the West Saxons
900	Constantine II becomes King of Alba
*c.910	Birth of Egill Skallagrímsson
921	Sigtryggr Cáech becomes King of Northumbria
924	Æthelstan becomes king of the English
c.930	<i>Alþingi</i> established in Iceland
c.931	Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> [bloodaxe] becomes King of Norway
933	Hákon <i>góði</i> [the Good] becomes King of Norway
937	Battle of Brunanburh
939	Edmund I becomes king of the English
947/8	Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> reigns as King of York (1 st time)
952–54	Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> reigns as King of York (2 nd time)
c.958	Haraldr Gormsson becomes King of Denmark
959	Edgar the Peaceful becomes king of the English
978	Æthelred II the Unready becomes king of the English
980	Vladimir the Great becomes Grand Prince of Kiev
*c.984	Birth of Gunnlaugr <i>ormstunga</i>
986	Sveinn <i>tjúguskegg</i> [forkbeard] becomes King of Denmark
*c.989	Birth of Björn <i>Hítðælakappi</i>

- *c.910 Death of Egill Skallagrímsson
- c.991 Sigurðr *digri* [the Stout] becomes Earl of Orkney
- c.995 Óláfr *sónski* [the Swede] becomes King of Sweden
- 995 Óláfr I Tryggvason becomes King of Norway
- Sigtrygg *silkskegg* [silk beard] becomes King of Dublin
- 1000 Iceland formally adopts Christianity at the *Alþingi*
- Battle of Svǫlðr
- Earls Eiríkr and Sveinn claim rule of Norway (under Danish overlordship)
- 1002 St Brice's Day massacre
- *c.1009 Death of Gunnlaugr *ormstunga*
- 1012 Martyrdom of Ælfheah, Archbishop of Canterbury
- 1013 Sveinn *tjúguskegg* becomes King of England
- 1014 Æthelred II restored to the English throne
- 1015 Óláfr II *inn helgi* [the holy] claims the crown of Norway
- 1016 Battle of Nesjar
- Knútr *inn ríki* [the Great] becomes King of England
- 1018 Knútr *inn ríki* becomes King of Denmark
- *c.1024 Death of Björn *Hítðælakappi*
- 1028 Knútr *inn ríki* becomes King of Norway
- 1030 Battle of Stiklarstaðir

* Dates for the births and deaths of the *skáld* Egill, Gunnlaug and Björn are approximate and are derived from the internal chronologies of their individual sagas.

MAPS OF ANGLO-SCANDINAVIAN EUROPE



Map 1: The Anglo-Scandinavian North Atlantic of the medieval Icelanders (excluding Greenland), indicating a selection of important sites (M Firth)



Map 2: Primary Viking Age Scandinavian settlements and settlement regions in the North Atlantic (M. Firth)



Map 3: Selected population centres and sites of conflict in Viking Age England (M. Firth)



Map 4: A selection of settlement sites and important clerical schools and ecclesiastical institutions associated with the production of manuscripts (M. Firth)

INTRODUCTION

Among the ninety-seven names of kings and lords listed in the Uppsala Edda *Skáldatal*, two appear out of place: Aðalsteinn *Englakonungr* and Aðalráðr *konungr*.¹ Æthelstan (924/927–39) and Æthelred II (978–1013/1014–16) are the only English kings included in the document, which otherwise lists Scandinavian rulers (legendary and historical) up to the thirteenth century, along with the Norwegians and Icelanders who served as their court poets. The inclusion of the Viking Age English kings relates to their purported employment of two of Iceland's most famous *skáld* (poet/s): Egill Skallagrímsson and Gunnlaugr *ormstunga*. As recounted in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* and in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, Egill's time at Æthelstan's court and Gunnlaugr's association with that of Æthelred was marked not only by the quality of their verse, but by the Icelanders' heroism in service to the kings.² A persistent motif of the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders), a similar episode plays out in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* at the English court of Knútr *inn ríki* (the great) (1017–35). Here the eponymous *skáld*, Björn, defends the king's retinue from a dragon attack, a clear fiction.³ As observed by Icelandic scholar Jónas Kristjánsson, in the *Íslendingasögur* 'sober fact and exaggerated fancy, the real and the imagined, come together'.⁴ It is this characteristic of the sagas that makes them problematic as historical sources, often dismissed as such, and their representations of England overlooked. Yet the *Íslendingasögur* purport to narrate reality, to recall the significant events and people of the first generations of Icelanders. These are texts that present themselves as histories, and it is with this asserted historicity that this study seeks to engage. Focusing on the case studies of Egill, Gunnlaugr and Björn in the English court, it sets out to examine the intersections of history and cultural memory in *Íslendingasögur* narratives.

I. RESEARCH AIMS AND APPROACHES

This thesis explores the relationship between historical Viking Age kings of England and the depictions of their kingships, courts and societies in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century

¹ *Skáldatal*, in *The Uppsala Edda (DG 11 4to)*, ed. by Heimir Pálsson, trans. by Anthony Faulkes (London: VSNR, 2012), pp. 100–17.

² *Egils saga* 50–55; *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, 10.

³ *Bjarnar saga* 5.

⁴ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, trans. by Peter Foote (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 2007), p. 22.

Íslendingasögur corpus. Specifically, it analyses the development and historicity of these portrayals. Historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* has long been debated and scholars remained divided.⁵ This study proposes methodological approaches to the historical analysis of saga literature, informed by theories of cultural memory, intertextuality and cultural exchange. It is at once concerned with correlating saga narrative against the historical and archaeological record of tenth- and eleventh-century England, and with interrogating the processes through which *Íslendingasögur* portrayals of England arrived at their textual redactions.

Narrative is integral to the recollection and transmission of a society's memory and experience. According to cultural memory theory, the retelling of history is a creative process: a society recalls a past beyond living memory, reshapes it in line with their social identity, reinterprets it in the very act of remembering, and records it via the medium of what Astrid Erll terms 'material memory'.⁶ In this case, that 'material memory' is the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. Indeed, the *Íslendingasögur* embody the key characteristics of cultural memory, being at once communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible. These are texts that purport to be histories, to record a shared Icelandic past, but show the editorial innovations of generations of storytellers. This does not render them devoid of historical value. However the sagas evolved in their transmission, a desire to preserve the Icelandic 'storehouse of experience' remained foundational.⁷ This study proposes that historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* resides not only in what the narratives recount, but how they are retold. That is, that historical authenticity in narrative setting is but one way in which the *Íslendingasögur* may prove of historical value. They are also historical sources for the experiences and shifting values of Icelandic society in the centuries between the Saga Age, when the narratives are set, and the Age of Saga Writing, when they were put to text.

⁵ For an overview of the debate see, Ralph O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 88–9; see also Paul Bibire, 'On Reading the Icelandic Sagas: Approaches to Old Icelandic Texts', in *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300*, ed. by Beverley Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor and Gareth Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 1–18 (especially pp. 10–13); Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse of Method* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 17–50.

⁶ Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 24–5, 144–9; Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara B. Young (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 66–8; Jürg Glauser, 'Literary Studies', in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, ed. by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann and Stephen A. Mitchell (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), pp. 231–2; Pernille Hermann, 'Cultural Memory and Old Norse Mythology in the High Middle Ages', in *Theorizing Old Norse Myth*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Lisa Collinson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), p. 152.

⁷ Pernille Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *Scandinavian Studies*, 81, no. 3 (2009), 287–90.

Critically, identifying the authenticity and evolution of *Íslendingasögur* narratives is dependent on an external historical record to identify divergence. Accounts of Anglo-Icelandic interaction are ideal for this purpose by virtue of the extensive historical and archaeological evidence relating to tenth- and eleventh-century England. This study therefore proposes three questions of the intersection of English history with saga literature: 1. To what extent do *Íslendingasögur* narratives preserve the history or social contexts of tenth to eleventh-century England? 2. What processes of cultural contact informed the transmission of accounts of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the Viking/Saga Age? 3. To what extent did Icelandic cultural values in the Age of Saga Writing permeate and alter Icelandic cultural memory of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr as kings of England?

In its approach to these questions, this thesis is fundamentally historiographical. It is structured around comparative analysis of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* with source texts for the kingships of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. Yet, it does not examine *Íslendingasögur* narratives through the lens of historiography alone. Rather, it aims to bring historical and literary analysis together with elements of cultural studies, anthropology and archaeology, alongside cultural memory theory and its underlying concepts.⁸ Critical reading of the historical contexts of setting and authorship establish narrative accuracy and intent; archaeology grounds the narratives in what is known of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact in England; while cultural memory theory illuminates function, meaning, and the processes of transmission. It is in this interdisciplinary reading of saga narrative that this study is most innovative. Pre-modern Nordic memory studies is a relatively new field and little work has been done on the historicity of *Íslendingasögur* portrayals of England.⁹ Moreover, studies of saga historicity rarely extend to the material and textual histories of non-Scandinavian cultures. This thesis takes the position that a holistic approach to the *Íslendingasögur*, to the cultural contexts of their composition and transmission, opens new avenues to explore the sagas as historical texts. Further, it is an approach that enhances our understanding of the

⁸ Ann Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory', *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (2005), 11–28 provides a concise overview of cultural memory theory, its origins, evolution, and application across media. See also Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 38–45 for the intersections of memory and history studies.

⁹ For an introduction to memory theory and the *Íslendingasögur*, see: Pernille Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory', pp. 287–308. Hermann is a key voice in medieval Nordic memory studies, see for example: Pernille Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory, and Storage', *Scandinavian Studies*, 85 (2013), 332–54. The most prominent study of England in saga literature to date is Magnús Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

diversity of contact between medieval England and Scandinavia as it relates to the exchange of ideas, communication of experience, and perpetuation of cultural memory.

Cultural memory is not static. It is a body of inter-generational communal knowledge that evolves alongside the values of that community, the desire to perpetuate it, and the medium of its communication.¹⁰ Written texts offer windows into cultural memory at individual points in time. Read comparatively, these may illuminate how memory evolved across generations. The burgeoning field of memory studies has seen memory widely theorised across many disciplines in recent decades, from the science of its physiological and psychological aspects in the individual, through to the analysis of mediated collective memory as manifested in historical, literary, and archaeological artefacts.¹¹ Medieval literature, the *Íslendingasögur* included, has not been exempted from this growing interest.¹² Indeed, the recently published *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* extends to over one thousand pages. Yet even that extensive volume is framed as seeking only 'to define the current state of research in the study of the pre-modern Nordic world and point to and encourage future studies'.¹³ The *Íslendingasögur* promise to remain a fruitful testing ground for ongoing research into the intersections of memory and medieval literature; Icelandic society in the Age of Saga Writing was, in itself, a memorialising society.

The cultural concern to recall, communicate and preserve the experiences of past generations of Icelanders is central to the *Íslendingasögur*: a vernacular literary corpus with an acute interest in stories of the past and their transmission. Indeed, this is characteristic of Old Norse-Icelandic literature more widely, including other 'genres' such as the *foraldarsögur* (legendary sagas) and the *konungasögur* (kings' sagas). Memory and the intent to memorialise lie at the heart of historical narrative, whether that narrative is composed within living

¹⁰ Renate Lachmann, 'Cultural memory and the role of literature', *European Review*, 12, no. 2 (2004), 172–5; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representation of Reality', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 28–9.

¹¹ For a conceptual overview of the field of memory studies, see: Henry L. Roediger III and James V. Wertsch, 'Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies', *Memory Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2008), 9–22.

¹² See for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2008); M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1037*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Lucie Doležalová (ed.), *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹³ Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann and Stephen A. Mitchell, 'Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: An Introduction', in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, p. 11.

memory of events, or centuries after the fact.¹⁴ The sagas consciously draw on and perpetuate cultural memory, the compositions of a culture transitioning between orality and literacy into the twelfth century, preserving and reinterpreting inherited stories via a new medium.¹⁵ *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* are representative of this. The adventures of the *skáld* in England are locatable on a timeline including the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn are generally accepted as historical figures, and *Egils saga* even relates its hero's participation in a battle, *Vínheiðr*, that corresponds with the Battle of Brunanburh, from which Æthelstan emerged victorious in 937.¹⁶ Yet each event, each person is, to a degree, fictionalised. Egill helps win Brunanburh for Æthelstan; Gunnlaugr champions Æthelred in a duel against a *berserkr* with magical agency; and Björn, of course, has his dragon to fight.¹⁷ The characters of people, places, and historical events alter in their transmission over time, through the processes of cultural memory, as subsequent generations and communities retell and reinterpret the stories of a shared past.

Importantly, however, depictions of known peoples and events in the *Íslendingasögur* do not exist in a literary or historical vacuum. The *Íslendingasögur* fit within a wider intercultural edifice of shared knowledge.¹⁸ Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr are widely attested outside the *Íslendingasögur*. Diplomas and law-codes from their reigns have survived the centuries; they are recalled to varying degrees of detail in the accounts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; their kingships are recounted by Anglo-Norman chroniclers such as William of Malmesbury, Geffrei Gaimar, and John of Worcester.¹⁹ Beyond the milieu of medieval English scholarship, Æthelstan appears in the annals of both Flodoard and Richer of Reims;

¹⁴ Glauser, 'Literary Studies', pp. 231–2; Renate Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 301–10.

¹⁵ Pernille Hermann, 'Key Aspects of Memory and Remembering in Old-Norse Icelandic Literature', in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, ed. by Pernille Hermann, Stephen A. Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), p. 14; Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 295–6.

¹⁶ *Egils saga* 52–54. External attestations of Egil include *Landnámabók* S105, S392, H348, S398; Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* st. 15–16, 31, 60, 140, 184, 318, 350, 392; see also Torfi Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*, trans. by Victoria Cribb (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 21–2. External attestations of Gunnlaugr include *Landnámabók* S15, H15, H34, S46, H140, S174, and *Skáldskaparmál* st. 202; see also Russell Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell Poole (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), p. 161. Björn too is named in *Landnámabók* H45, S57, H51, S63, H135, S166.

¹⁷ *Bjarnar saga* 5; *Egils saga* 54; *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁸ Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory', pp. 335–40; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 29–32; Þórir Óskarsson, 'Rhetoric and Style', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, pp. 354–71.

¹⁹ For example., ASC A–D 937, C–E 978–1018, D 1019–1035; *G. Reg.* ii.133–140, ii.164–185; JW 924–940, 978–1035; Geffrei Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, ll. 3513–3529, 4672–4755 ed. and trans. by Ian Short (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 192–3, 254–9.

Æthelred's misfortunes find their way into the pages of Thietmar of Merseberg and Adam of Bremen's histories; while Knútr's reign is also preserved in these latter, as well as myriad Scandinavian poems and histories by virtue of the extent of his hegemony.²⁰ These texts, like the *Íslendingasögur*, participate in the reception, reinterpretation, storage and transmission of experience. That these kings are represented across an array of sources distinguished by time and place, accuracy or detail notwithstanding, demonstrates that memory of their kingships was actively circulating up to the Age of Saga Writing.

The relative wealth of sources for the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr is of threefold benefit to the analysis of the historicity of their representations in the *Íslendingasögur*. Firstly, diplomas, law codes and chronicle entries contemporary with, or composed within living memory of, their reigns provide sources against which to examine the accuracy of saga narrative. Secondly, texts composed outside of direct contact with their kingships preserve divergences from the accepted historical record that can be read in critical comparison to one another. Where such variation within *Íslendingasögur* narratives correlates to those of other late source texts, it is possible to isolate saga authors' sources, seek out evidence of Anglo-Scandinavian literary contact, and identify distinctive narrative traditions and hypothesise their evolution. Thirdly, where such variation is not correlatable to external texts, it is possible to determine authorial influence. The writers who compiled the *Íslendingasögur* texts—termed throughout this thesis as 'saga authors'—asserted a great deal of creative control. These are meaningfully constructed narratives that retell the lives of prominent Icelanders, that locate them within familiar landscapes and frame them within known historical contexts. In short, these are stories intended to interpret, embody and communicate shared knowledge.

As such, the portrayals of tenth- and eleventh-century England in *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* are ideal case studies for the examination of the preservation and adaptation of historical knowledge in the Age of Saga Writing. These are descriptions of Anglo-Icelandic interaction, of English kingship, during the Viking Age; a time when both textual and material evidence indicate that Scandinavians were frequent visitors to, and

²⁰ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, 2.xxiv, 2.li–lvii, ed. by Bernhardt Schmeidler, *MGH Scriptores separatim* 2 (Hannover: Hansche, 1917), pp. 94–5, 112–18; Flodoard, *Annales* 936, 939, ed. by Philippe Lauer (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1905), pp. 36, 72–3; Richer von Saint-Rémi, *Historiae* ii.2–3, ed. by Hartmut Hoffmann, *MGH Scriptores* 38 (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani), pp. 98–9; Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Chronicon* 7.37, 7.40, ed. by Robert Holzmann, *MGH Scriptores* NS 9, reprint (Munich: MGH, 1996 [1935]), pp. 445, 447.

settlers within, England.²¹ This is not to say that they are unique as portrayals of England in the *Íslendingasögur*; indeed, a trading trip to England is briefly described in the early passages of *Egils saga* prior to Egill's appearance in the narrative.²² Nor are they unique as depictions of kingship; Gunnlaugr alone visits six northern courts, including those of three kings.²³ They are, however, uniquely detailed portrayals of English kingship, and thus provide an identifiable historical setting—a base from which to analyse textual and archaeological evidence of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction. Further, by working out from these episodes—within their own narratives, within the wider saga corpus, within yet wider inter-cultural textual traditions—episodes such as the early trading journey in *Egils saga* too become interpretable within a historical context. Other depictions of England in the *Íslendingasögur*, alternative portrayals of kingship and authority, serve to provide a richer literary context within which to situate *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*. Moreover, focusing on the Icelandic *skáld's* experiences of the English court grants thematic coherence to, and defines limitations for, the study of the legitimacy of the *Íslendingasögur* as sources of English history.

In summary, as written compositions recorded two to three hundred years after the events they narrate, the *Íslendingasögur* are artefacts that preserve cultural memory at a point in time. They are a store of thirteenth-century (or later) Icelandic societies' communal knowledge: interpretations of the past coloured by the passage of time and evolving social values. In this, the *Íslendingasögur* reflect the socially constructed nature of memory, codifying the lived experience of earlier generations of Icelanders.²⁴ As Vésteinn Ólason states in his study of reality as represented in saga literature (of *Njáls saga* in particular):

What it tells us about particular persons and events may be exaggerated, misunderstood, or invented, but the stories told are a response to something real, to words and feelings, to memories and fantasies; they are stories with roots in real life.²⁵

²¹ A brief outline of Scandinavian raiding and settlement in England can be found in Clare Downham, 'Vikings in England', in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Neil Price (New York: Routledge, 2008), 341–9.

²² *Egils saga* 17.

²³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6–9.

²⁴ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 6–8, 21–8; Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 96–101; Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory: Introduction', *European Journal of English Studies*, 10 (2006), 112; Hermann, 'Cultural Memory and Old Norse Mythology', pp. 152–3; Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity', pp. 14–15.

²⁵ Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', p. 27.

It is the identification of those ‘roots in real life’—whether found in the history and archaeology of Viking Age England, or in the cultural and historical milieu of later generations of Icelanders—that is the focus of this study. Representations of English kings and their courts in the *Íslendingasögur* may indeed be imbued with a remnant historicity, yet in their literary characterisations they also give evidence of historic Icelandic social values, of how Icelanders perceived, reacted to, and memorialised Viking Age England and its kings. A notable unifying element among such episodes is the ease with which the Icelandic *skáld* assimilate into the English court, a motif which suggests that thirteenth-century Icelanders understood a cultural coherence between England and Iceland in the ninth to eleventh centuries. Certainly, for Icelandic writers of the thirteenth century, Viking Age England was a useful setting through which to communicate meaning to their audience. It was at once familiar and foreign, a place where Icelanders could participate in society, but also a place of kings and battles, of dragons and *berserkir*. In England, the Icelandic heroes of the past could rival great men and perform great deeds. This serves to remind of the interpretive and creative function of the author as mediator, and once more raises the central question of this thesis: to what extent *do* the *Íslendingasögur* preserve something of the history or social contexts of tenth- to eleventh-century England?

II. SCOPE AND OUTLINE

This thesis is predicated on three key theoretical lenses: cultural memory theory, intertextuality, and comparative historical analysis. In this, it is both a literary and a historical study, drawing on one side from narrative constructs and the hypothesised oral traditions and communal knowledge of a long distant Icelandic culture, on the other from source texts and archaeology. This is logical: the examination of the *Íslendingasögur* as historical sources must be predicated on a correlative structure—the accepted historical record against the histories that the sagas relate. Part 1 of this thesis lays the foundations for such a structure, introducing the historical and literary sources that form the basis of the study, and examining the historical and literary contexts that underpin their content and form. It also establishes the foundational analytical frameworks of cultural memory, intertextuality and historical analysis, and their potential use in saga studies. Part 2 then takes these investigative tools and

directs them to the critical exposition of the case studies of Anglo-Icelandic interaction from *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*. Such focused analyses aim to draw out narrative constructs that underly depictions of England in the *Íslendingasögur*, thereby exposing connections not only to the historical background of their setting, but also of their authorship.

Part 1, chapter 1 introduces the three primary case study texts and provides an overview of existing scholarship. It reviews the ongoing debate around the use of the *Íslendingasögur* as historical sources, and previous scholarship on England and English kingship in Old Norse-Icelandic texts. It also provides a historical and historiographical overview of those parts of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr's reigns which coincide with the events of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*. Chapter 2 explores the use of literature as a medium for memory, and critical memory theory, and seeks to demonstrate how such theories can be applied to Old Norse-Icelandic texts. Accordingly, it considers how societies use narrative to transmit lived experience and collective knowledge to new generations for whom the events recounted are outside of living memory. Chapter 3 contextualises Saga Age or Viking Age England historically, politically and socially. It analyses Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact in England during the ninth to eleventh centuries as attested by the English historical and archaeological record, with particular reference to the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. In so doing, it examines how such contact was absorbed into Scandinavian cultural memory and, consequently, how the agents of that contact—whether king or viking, settler or trader—are characterised in saga literature. The other cultural context of central importance to the *Íslendingasögur* is the Age of Saga Writing. Starting with an overview of the saga corpus and of Saga Age Iceland, chapter 4 goes on to examine the thirteenth-century social milieu out of which the *skáldasögur* texts emerged. It addresses how the experiences of these later Icelanders fed into cultural memory of events, thereby becoming entwined and incorporated within their retellings of the past.

Putting the theoretical approaches and background established in Part 1 into action, Part 2 comprises focused studies on narrative constructs in the *Íslendingasögur*. Taking the English episodes of the three case study texts in order of their extent and complexity, it opens with an examination of *Bjarnar saga* before turning to *Gunnlaugs saga* and closing with *Egils saga*. Chapter 5 begins by examining the manuscript contexts of *Bjarnar saga*, which has had

the most fraught transmission history of the texts under examination. It then goes on to analyse the saga's internal chronology and thematic structures. By plotting Björn's foreign adventures within these frameworks and reading those comparatively with other sources for Knútr's reign, it is possible to identify the author's sources, the growth of independent narrative traditions, and deliberate intertextuality. Turning then to *Gunnlaugs saga*, Chapter 6 examines Gunnlaugr's travels through the courts of northern Europe, taking note of how his interactions with different kings are characterised. Notably, as both poet and warrior, Gunnlaugr (or the saga author) clearly perceived there to be a hierarchy of kingship near the top of which was the English king Æthelred. This chapter examines the likelihood that such a vaunted view of the English king in thirteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory derived from an authentic tenth- or eleventh-century cultural attitude. Finally, Chapter 7 undertakes the daunting task of examining the historicity of *Egils saga*, both the *Vínheiðr* passages and its later description of the Yorkish court of the exiled Norwegian king, Eiríkr *blóðøx* (947–48/952–54). Here the focus is on identifying the historical events described, on whether *Vínheiðr* should be understood as Brunanburh, and on whether King Eiríkr of York should be understood as Eiríkr *blóðøx*. By reading the English and Scandinavian historical records comparatively with *Egils saga*, it is possible to hypothesise the saga author's sources, the processes of transmission that shaped his narrative of England's past, and to explain his interpretation of historical events. Closing the thesis, chapter 8 draws some conclusions regarding how Viking Age England was memorialised by Icelanders, the degree to which saga authors had genuine knowledge of the Saga Age, and whether the *Íslendingasögur* can be read as sources for English history.

PART 1

1

SAGA HISTORICITY AND ENGLISH HISTORY

The *Íslendingasögur* are distinguished among medieval literary corpora by their regional focus, use of a vernacular, interest in the past, and often-secular concerns. The unique form that this literature took was informed by the singular nature of medieval Icelandic society. From the time of Norse settlement in the late ninth century, through to the year 1262, Iceland had no direct central administration. Instead, the island was administered by regional *goðar*, the powerful heads of noble families who theoretically operated within agreed legal frameworks. Upon the adoption of Christianity c.1000, the Icelandic church took on a similar character; its hierarchy was also dominated by these leading families.¹ As elsewhere in western Europe, literacy and book production were closely tied to the church; however, in Iceland, the church was controlled by the *goðar*. Thus, the literary outputs of Iceland's bishoprics and monasteries took a direct interest in the provenance and history of Iceland's people, in the legitimacy of the island's laws and lore and traditions.² It is here, in the recording of pre-Christian settlement narratives, of Iceland's evolving legal and social structures, of its ongoing political struggles, that the texts gain their apparent secular (and historical) tone. The narratives preserve a uniquely Icelandic worldview and narrative mode. Yet it does not follow that these belong to the Iceland of the ninth to eleventh centuries. Whatever their value as historical sources, the *Íslendingasögur* are stylised literary media. Their portrayals of Saga Age Iceland and its North Sea neighbours, both in content and in form, are informed by the cultural values and narrative expectations of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christian Icelanders.

There are several stylistic and thematic characteristics of the forty-odd texts that make up the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. Among these are the laconic authorial style associated with a constructed historical realism, the centrality of feud paradigms, and a cultural interest in the

¹ Margaret Cormack, 'Fact and Fiction in the Icelandic Sagas', *History Compass*, 5 (2007), 203–4; Lars Lönnroth, 'The Icelandic Sagas', in *The Viking World*, p. 305.

² Pernille Hermann, 'Literacy', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 39; Lars Lönnroth, 'The Icelandic Sagas', pp. 304–6.

agency of kings and the institution of kingship.³ Certainly, the degree to which each of these holds true of any individual saga is variable. Yet such tropes sit alongside the interest of the *Íslendingasögur* in the people, places, social structures, and historical happenings of ninth- to eleventh-century Iceland to give the pretence of a coherent literary 'genre'. This, however, serves to obscure those elements of each saga which may be perceived as unique, and transgressions of such saga 'norms' are readily identifiable. Björn's episode at Knútr's court, for example, both eschews any extended interaction with the king and introduces a clearly fantastic element to the narrative. It is with such variation in content and style in mind that saga critics have identified sub-categories within the corpus, the most common schema being informed by hypothesised composition dates. Broadly speaking, 'classical' sagas are those composed in the thirteenth century, while 'post-classical' sagas are those put to parchment in the fourteenth.⁴ Though all *Íslendingasögur* blend reality with the supernatural to some extent, the noted historical realism of saga narrative is most commonly associated with the 'classical' *Íslendingasögur*.⁵ *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga* all fall into this category.

More important for this study, however, is the collective categorisation of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* as *skáldasögur*. The *skáldasögur* are a formulaic sub-genre of the *Íslendingasögur* which feature Icelandic *skáld* as their protagonists. In her introduction to the edited collection, *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, Diana Whaley identifies nine elements broadly common to the *skáld's* character arc, from the hero's introduction, through his adventures, challenges and rivalries, to his inevitable death.⁶ The point at which Gunnlaugr and Björn's service in the English court (and, to a lesser degree, that of Egill) fit into this pattern is within a *Bildungsroman* trope that occurs early in the narratives, described by Whaley as follows: 'The hero voyages in Scandinavia and (often) the British Isles, engaging in trade or raiding, or spending periods in the service of rulers as warrior or court poet'.⁷

³ On saga style and affected realism, see Else Mundal, 'The Treatment of the Supernatural and the Fantastic in Different Saga Genres', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles*, ed. by John McKinnell and others (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), pp. 721–3; Daniel Sävborg, 'Style', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 119–20. On saga literature and the nuances of Icelandic attitudes to kingship, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Pretenders and Faithful Retainers: the Icelandic Vision of Kingship in Transition', *Gardar*, 30 (1999), 47–65; Theodore M. Andersson, 'The King of Iceland', *Speculum*, 74, no. 4 (1999), 923–34.

⁴ Guðrún Nordal, 'The Icelandic Sagas', in *The Viking World*, p. 316; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. by Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík Heimskringla, 1998), pp. 20–1; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, p. 116.

⁵ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p.22; O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', pp. 92–4; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 116.

⁶ Diana Whaley, 'Introduction', in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 20–1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

These *skáldasögur* travel passages are central to this thesis, because they serve as the vehicles for saga authors to describe Saga Age England. The episodes of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* that take place in the courts of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr, discussed in section 1.2, can be analysed in the light of both narrative and historical contexts. Read in conversation with depictions of other kings and courts in the *skáldasögur*, they speak to Icelandic attitudes to external authority and England's place within that worldview. Read in conversation with the English historical record, they speak to Icelandic cultural memory, processes of narrative transmission, and the historicity of saga narrative as it relates to England and its kings. Naturally, such a reading necessitates familiarity with that historical record, particularly for Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr's reigns, and so section 1.3 provides an overview of their kingships and the various points of contact between English and Scandinavian cultures throughout them. However, before engaging with either the literary frameworks of the *skáldasögur*, or the historical frameworks of the kings' reigns, it is important to first locate this thesis within its historiographical context and provide some overview of the continuing debate around historicity in the *Íslendingasögur*.

1.1 ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR AS SOURCES OF HISTORY: THE DEBATE

The notion that the *Íslendingasögur* are accurate histories or sources for the periods they describe was one that permeated early saga criticism but was being abandoned by the nineteenth century. In the first volume of his influential *Sagabibliotek*, published in 1817, the Danish polymath Peter Erasmus Müller did not hesitate to castigate his seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forebears for their credulity, suggesting their time would have been better spent investigating, rather than seeking to explain, the more clearly fictional elements of saga literature.⁸ It is an exhortation that few modern scholars would find problematic, though the relative historicity or fictionality of individual sagas, as well as whether 'history' and 'fiction' themselves are analytic terms appropriate to the *Íslendingasögur*, have themselves become topics of some dispute.⁹ This said, in a study aptly entitled 'History and Fiction', Ralph

⁸ Peter Erasmus Müller, *Sagabibliotek*, 3 vols (Copenhagen: J.F. Schultz, 1817), i, pp. xi–xii.

⁹ Bibire, 'On Reading the Icelandic Sagas', pp. 9–13; O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', pp. 92–3; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 74, no. 4 (2002), 443–54; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 27–9.

O'Connor suggests that, were saga 'genres' to be loosely categorised as either history or fiction, there would be at present something approaching scholarly consensus. On one side are those texts whose 'historical status is most secure', among them the *konungasögur* which, though at times historically suspect, 'were intended and received as history'; on the other, the more evidently fictional sagas, a group which includes the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁰ Yet it is of note that O'Connor distances himself from a firm position on this latter categorisation. His circumspection speaks to the growing view that few *Íslendingasögur* were composed as fictions, but rather performed a historical function—the mixture of historical and fabricated content combining to impart meaning to their intended audience.¹¹ That this nuanced understanding of *Íslendingasögur* narratives has only come to prominence over the past two decades does raise the matter of how saga scholarship has evolved over time. Modern saga criticism rests on the research and debates, on the questions and controversies, of earlier generations of Old Norse-Icelandic literary scholars.

Any discussion of historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* in mid-twentieth-century saga scholarship was conducted in reference to the book-prose/free-prose debate. The two positions can be characterised in brief as either the belief that the *Íslendingasögur* were authorial literary compositions (book-prose) or that they were textual records of oral narrative (free-prose).¹² Gísli Sigurðsson identifies these positions, in their late nineteenth-century origins, as being fundamentally tied to nationalism. Where Icelandic scholars sought to establish the exceptionalism of medieval Icelandic intellectual culture as embodied by the exceptional Icelandic authors who composed the sagas, Swedish and Norwegian scholars claimed them as the oral literature of their own cultures, preserved by the Icelanders.¹³ This conversation proved somewhat more varied in reference to the *Íslendingasögur*: the potential for these narratives to be passed between generations of Icelanders was almost as appealing to Icelandic nationalism as the idea of an exceptional intellectual culture. In the early twentieth century, the view that sagas derived a historical legitimacy through their origins as an oral

¹⁰ O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', pp. 88–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–3.

¹² For full discussions surveying the book-prose/free-prose debate, see for example: Chris Callow, 'Dating and Origins', in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 15–33; Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, reprint (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005 [1985]), pp. 239–315; Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, pp. 17–50; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 65–81.

¹³ See Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy', pp. 286–7.

literature was ascendant, represented in the writings of Andreas Heusler and Knut Liestøl.¹⁴ Famously, however, the theory that the *Íslendingasögur* were primarily the fictional compositions of thirteenth-century Icelandic scholars became a prevailing sentiment following the intervention of the Icelandic critic and diplomat Sigurður Nordal in his 1940 commentary on *Hrafnkels saga*. His position on the composition of the sagas, and its intrinsic relationship with twentieth-century Icelandic nationalism, are clear in the book's conclusion:

As for the honour of our nation, we must assert that on to the stage which will be left empty by the withdrawal from the pageant of history of so many fictitious killers and strong men from the Saga Age, a new kind of character will step forth from the wings where he has hitherto been hidden, the author of a saga. Is there any loss in such an exchange? Surely it is an honour for Icelanders to have produced men who wrote such books and who knew what they were about when they composed them.¹⁵

Nordal's monograph remains an important juncture for saga scholarship, setting aside the idea that the sagas may be an *accurate* record of history, and recommending the critical reading of the *Íslendingasögur* as literature. Nordal did, however, allow that oral tradition recounting regional narratives or distorted memories of past may be at times preserved in saga texts—a position reiterated in his 1957 monograph on historicity in the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁶ In the heat of debate it is an aspect of Nordal's analyses that is often overlooked but, in this, his position reflects that of many modern saga critics. As Paul Bibire notes, most saga scholars of this era were flexible enough within their views to be 'sensibly pragmatic in discussing individual texts'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is true that through the 1950s a growing school of saga studies, including in its number such important commentators as Walter Baetke and Hermann Pálsson, emphasised the sagas as thirteenth-century literary fictions, denying them any remnant historicity.¹⁸ Scholars have largely moved away from this position, with interest

¹⁴ Andreas Heusler, *Die Anfänge der Isländischen Saga* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1914); Knut Liestøl, *Upphavet til den Isländske Ættesaga* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1929).

¹⁵ Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: a study*, trans. by R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), pp. 64–5.

¹⁶ Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, pp. 30–3; Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1957), pp. 17–23.

¹⁷ Bibire, 'On Reading the Icelandic Sagas', p. 11.

¹⁸ See for example: Walter Baetke, *Über die Entstehung der Isländersagas* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1956), pp. 49–54; Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971), pp. 70–1.

shifting to narrative intent and reception and to the locating of the *Íslendingasögur* within contextual historiographical practice. Bibire in particular highlights the problem of considering the *Íslendingasögur* as 'fiction', suggesting it to be an anachronistic concept, with the evidence of the texts suggesting author and audience understood the narratives to have either literal or allegorical 'truth'.¹⁹ As such, the question of history or fiction can be seen as a redundant one, made only more so by recourse to cultural memory theory.

There is an inherent overlap between cultural memory and literature. Jan Assmann, whose theories of cultural memory remain foundational to its study, asserts that 'only with the emergence of writing does cultural memory "take off"'.²⁰ Here, he focuses on the retrospective and tangible elements of cultural memory, placing memory at the origin of narrative. His intervention in the field of memory studies broke from earlier models of 'collective memory', exemplified in the writings of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, which placed events at the origin of narrative, with authenticity understood to derive from the oral transmission of personal experience, degrading over time as narrative passes out of living memory.²¹ Thus, while Halbwachs saw the recording of an inherited narrative as the terminus of collective memory, Assmann suggests that it is rather the exemplar of a synthesised and de-individualised cultural memory.²² The idea that texts are an embodiment of cultural memory has been particularly influential in the study of the intersections of memory and literature, and is at the centre of what Ann Rigney terms a 'social-constructivist model' of memory. This is the hypothesis that memories are a construct of the culture recounting them, rather than an externalisation and manifestation of a recollected past.²³ In putting this model forward, Rigney advocates adapting cultural memory theory to the study of literature as a medium of memory, not merely adopting it. Assmann's focus on cultural memory as a function of early civilisations, and his theory that memory stored through literature can become so great an archive of knowledge as to constitute an act of forgetting, are limiting, particularly for the study of medieval literary cultures.²⁴ Thus, as literary

¹⁹ Bibire, 'On Reading the Icelandic Sagas', pp. 9–13.

²⁰ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, p. 21.

²¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. by Francis J. Ditter Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), pp. 78–80.

²² Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 8–9; Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, pp. 21, 24–9.

²³ Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity', pp. 14–15.

²⁴ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, pp. 24–9.

researchers have developed and expanded cultural memory frameworks over recent decades, this has extended to medieval literature as a medium for, and repository of, pre-modern cultural memory.

It is possible for the *Íslendingasögur* to be both repositories for, and authorial interpretations of, the shared experience of generations of Icelanders; narratives designed to meaningfully communicate the past to the then-present. This approach has been promoted by several notable saga scholars in past decades, if only recently with direct reference to cultural memory theory. As early as 1982, Carol J. Clover declared the debate around saga origins to be defunct, suggesting it was better to ask ‘what in the received saga can be ascribed to a literary author ... and what to native tradition’.²⁵ This seems a logical approach and one that underlies this study; problematically, however, Clover’s book in itself has been characterised as ‘an example of an extreme book-prose position’ by virtue of its structural approach to the *Íslendingasögur*.²⁶ This misrepresents Clover’s argument. While her work can be understood to inherit from the book-prose theorists insofar as it recommends the study of the *Íslendingasögur* as literature, her approach to the sagas builds upon the work of Theodore M. Andersson through the 1960s. Andersson published two influential monographs in 1964 and 1967 that took a literary approach to the *Íslendingasögur*, as commended by Nordal and his peers, but viewed them as a part of a literary tradition with oral progenitors.²⁷ In so doing, Andersson arrived at a structural theory of *Íslendingasögur* texts, suggesting an underlying narrative schema across the corpus.²⁸ While the saga corpus has proved too varied to submit to such a reductionist approach (Andersson identified six specific formulae he thought to apply to all the sagas), his framework provided new analytical tools to assess orality and intertextuality in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Around this same time, the *Íslendingasögur* were also beginning to be understood as belonging within wider contexts of inter-cultural medieval historiographical practice. Any lingering discussion of saga origins aside, this allowed the question of historicity in saga

²⁵ Carol J. Clover, *The Medieval Saga* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 16–17.

²⁶ Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 381 (n. 9); see also Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Íslensk sagnalist: Erlendur lærdómur’, *Tímarit Máls og menningar*, 45 (1984), p. 179.

²⁷ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); see also Else Mundal, ‘From Oral to Written in old Norse Culture’, in *Moving Words in the Nordic Middle Ages* ed. by Amy C. Mulligan and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), p. 330.

²⁸ Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, pp. 6–29.

narrative to become a topic of some debate in its own right. For any variation in opinion as to what historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* may look like, it is now generally accepted that they are of value as historical sources (albeit requiring, in the words of O'Connor, 'circumspect and sophisticated treatment').²⁹ Early in this process, M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij proposed that 'history' was a problematic term for theorising medieval audience reception, suggesting that 'truth' for the *Íslendingasögur* audience resided somewhere between historicity and invention.³⁰ In this observation, Steblin-Kamenskij's argument was rather prescient, reflecting the growing interest through the 1970s in medieval historiographical practice and in how *Íslendingasögur* audiences experienced meaning. Indeed, W. Manhire suggested that it was an awareness of audience that encouraged saga authors to ensure the veracity of their narratives by appealing to traditions and social values their societies held to be authentic, thereby preserving some elements of the past.³¹ Signalling this shifting perception of the *Íslendingasögur* as historiographical texts, the then-director of the *Stofnun Árna Magnússonar*, Jónas Kristjánsson, confidently asserted in 1988, that they 'were written as history—according to the standards of the time', exhorting historians to do the work of assessing their source value.³² Echoing this appeal in his book, *Viking Age Iceland*, Jesse Byock recommended that saga critics put aside the controversies of earlier generations and 'acknowledge the complementary possibilities of different approaches'.³³ Byock's own point that, despite the more fantastic elements of many *Íslendingasögur*, the narratives are framed (at least within Iceland) within a detailed social structure that 'reveal cultural patterns and normative codes', is now widely accepted.³⁴ It is an argument reminiscent of that which Manhire had made thirty years earlier: saga authors asserted historicity by appealing to collectively held knowledge of shared traditions drawn from a shared past. Increasingly, the *Íslendingasögur* have been recognised as historiographical media that constructed meaning for medieval Icelandic audiences and, in that capacity, served a range of functions relating to social

²⁹ O'Connor, 'History and Fiction', p. 88.

³⁰ M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. by Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), pp. 27–34.

³¹ W. Manhire, 'The Narrative Functions of Source-References in the Sagas of Icelanders', *Saga Book*, 19 (1974–1977), pp. 170–6.

³² Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 205–6.

³³ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 158.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22. See also, Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 24–6; Jesse Byock, 'History and the Sagas: The Effect of Nationalism', in *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson (London: Hisarlik Press, 1992), pp. 44–7.

identity.³⁵ This now-prevailing attitude to the *Íslendingasögur* is neatly summarised by Vésteinn Ólason:

The *Íslendingasögur* are written as histories, that is, they refer to historical personages, some events they describe are known to be historical, and their action takes place within real geography (mainly in Iceland) and is conditioned by Icelandic social and political structures.³⁶

While he does go on to note that in many cases the veracity of narrated events is not ascertainable, the point remains that *Íslendingasögur* were not wholly inventions of individual authors. The narratives have some recourse to the ‘real’—recollections of peoples and events grounded in mnemonic narrative traditions and mnemonic landscapes. This point is convincingly argued by Slavica Ranković who reiterates that narrative authenticity was achieved by their positioning in time and place and through the recollection of ‘customs, beliefs, religious or legal practices of the past as perceived’.³⁷ In this, she argues, the *Íslendingasögur* were in conversation with texts more likely to be considered historiographical (such as *Landnámabók* [*The Book of Settlements*] or the *konungasögur*), and thus actively participated in the preservation of the past.³⁸ Here the role of the saga authors as mediators of cultural memory is evident, guiding the reinterpretation and transmission of their societies’ collective knowledge. Yet a positive interpretation of this authorial intervention as historiographical practice is not universal. In an early article on cultural memory theory and the *Íslendingasögur*, Jürg Glauser saw the mediation of the author as creating histories ‘resting on a basis of fiction’.³⁹ Glauser did not deny the authorial intent to preserve cultural knowledge or communicate historical meaning to an audience, but in the resultant literary construct he found nothing that could be termed ‘history’. This view of historicity in the sagas was anticipated by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, a commentator similarly convinced of the historical function if not historical veracity of the *Íslendingasögur*:

³⁵ Diana Whaley, ‘A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland’, in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 175–91.

³⁶ Vésteinn Ólason, ‘The Icelandic Saga’, p. 34.

³⁷ Slavica Ranković, ‘Golden Ages and Fishing Grounds: The Emergent Past in *Íslendingasögur*’, *Saga Book*, 30 (2006), 52–5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 45–7.

³⁹ Jürg Glauser, ‘Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*) and *þættir* as the Literary Representation of a New Social Space’, in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, p. 204.

[S]trengt taget er der ingen genuine historiske kendsgerninger i islændingesagaene. Hvor de findes, er de underordnet en form der tjener et andet formål, og denne form er efter nutidens begreber litterær.⁴⁰

(Strictly speaking, there are no genuine historical facts in the Icelandic sagas. Where they are found, they are subordinate to a form that serves another purpose, and this form is, in today's terms, literary.)

While the term 'historical facts' is problematic and difficult to define, there is certainly an accuracy to this statement, at least as it relates to historical events. Taking Egill's service at Æthelstan's court as an example, the account of the battle at Vínheiðr places Egill and his brother Þorolfr among Æthelstan's trusted advisors; recounts that they led the Scandinavian contingent of Æthelstan's army; and finally suggests they are the architects of the victory on the first day of battle.⁴¹ What then are the 'historical facts' here? Certainly Æthelstan is a known historical figure, Brunanburh a locatable historical moment in his reign, and there is some evidence of Scandinavians fighting alongside the English.⁴² Yet, as historical facts they are, as Sørensen asserts, subordinated to narrative intent, in this case included in order to augment Egill's character by placing an Icelander at the centre of a famous battle, leading a division of men drawn from throughout Scandinavia.⁴³

Such literary artifice brings to mind Gabriel Turville-Petre's statement on Old Norse skaldic verse, that it 'can tell us little about the history of England, but the history of England may give us confidence in the authenticity of some skaldic verses'.⁴⁴ The historical facts preserved in *Egils saga* are only verifiable by virtue of their recording in sources of English history independent of Icelandic cultural memory of Vínheiðr.⁴⁵ This does not, however, negate them as 'genuine historical facts'. In truth, it is rather more accurate to state that there is little verifiable historical *detail* in the *Íslendingasögur*. Historical events and figures are

⁴⁰ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: Studier i Islændingesagaerne* (Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 1993), p. 19.

⁴¹ *Egils saga* 53.

⁴² Alistair Campbell, *Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History* (London: H.K. Lewis & Co., 1971), pp. 5–7; Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 179–83. For Æthelstan's possible use of Scandinavian mercenaries, see: *The Chronicle Attributed to John of Wallingford*, ed. by Richard Vaughn, *Camden Miscellany* XC (London, Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1958), p. 60.

⁴³ *Egils saga* 53. 'Allt lið þeira hafði norœna skjöldu ok allan norœnan herbúnað; í þeirri fylking váru allir norœnir menn, þeir er þar váru' (Their whole band had northern shields and northern armour; all the north-men of the army were there [in their division]).

⁴⁴ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. lxx.

⁴⁵ Most famously in the poem *The Battle of Brunanburh*, preserved in ASC A–D 937; some other attestations that, though non-contemporary, in their details suggest alternative traditions of the battle include: *G. Reg.* 131.4–7; *JW* 937; *SD* 937.

frequent touchstones of saga narratives but adapted to cultural expectations and authorial need. In this example, the details of the fighting and of Egill and Þorolfr's involvement at Brunanburh are unsupported by independent testimony, and rather reflect a thirteenth-century Icelandic perspective on the agency and prominence of earlier generations of Icelanders. This is not to say the *Vínheiðr* episode lacks plausible elements: Æthelstan's biographer, Sarah Foot, suggests that some historical knowledge is displayed in the unique yet logical contextualising narrative into which the saga account of the battle is inserted.⁴⁶ Yet, even if such plausible narrative detail may suggest processes of transmission that saw English history enter Iceland cultural memory, accounts that centre Icelandic heroes as participants in Anglo-Scandinavian political discourse require careful scrutiny.

1.2 ENGLAND IN THE *SKÁLDASÖGUR*: THE TEXTS

The place of Viking Age England in medieval Scandinavian literature has been much discussed;⁴⁷ its place within the *Íslendingasögur* as a subset of that literature, decidedly less so. Most scholarship on England in Old Norse-Icelandic literature focuses on the reliability of skaldic verse as medium for history. This is explained by common perceptions that, within the prosimetrum of the sagas, certain skaldic compositions may preserve older oral traditions. It is a view summarised by Alistair Campbell: 'while the verses a saga quotes may be no older than itself, they may be much older, and indeed may be of the period of the events to which they seem to refer'.⁴⁸ While Campbell is careful not to be definitive in his statement, it is true that poetry performs a mnemonic function, and skaldic verse is no exception.⁴⁹ This again recalls Turville-Petre's point that, when read comparatively with sources of English history, skaldic verse does at times appear to preserve authentic memory of events.⁵⁰ Such a position can only be asserted where a verse identifies a known person or event and, preferably, where

⁴⁶ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 180–1.

⁴⁷ See for example, Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*; Judith Jesch, 'Skaldic Verse in Scandinavian England', in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and others (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), pp. 313–25; Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009–1016', *Speculum*, 62 (1987), 265–98; Matthew Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry in Viking Age England', *The Review of English Studies*, 51 (2000), 349–70.

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ See chapter 2, pp. 66–71.

⁵⁰ Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxx.

they are attributable to the authorship of a known figure.⁵¹ Egill's verses in the *Vínheiðr* passages, for example, make explicit reference to Æthelstan and to a battle in England, and are quoted within the saga as part of a tradition that understood them to be Egill's compositions.⁵² That the saga author did not quite comprehend the kennings nor the geographical or chronological contexts well enough to frame the verse accurately within the prose narrative reinforces the view that these belong to a tradition of which he was the recipient.⁵³

However, by far the most work done on skaldic verse and English history has been attached to the reign of Knútr as King of England.⁵⁴ Broadly speaking, skaldic verse relates Scandinavian history and, around the year 1016, as Knútr engaged in his conquest of England, English and Scandinavian history coalesced. The *Knútsdrápa* of Óttarr svarti (c.1026), the anonymous *Liðsmannaflakkr* (1016 á 1017), and the *Eiríksdrápa* of Þórðr Kolbeinsson (1018 á 1023) are remarkable verse survivals narrating the events of the conquest.⁵⁵ The latter of these connects to one of the focal sagas of this thesis, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* though, despite his time at Knútr's court, not in the person of Björn. Rather, it is his rival, Þórðr Kolbeinsson, who is the best known and best attested *skáld* of *Bjarnar saga*.

The literary intersections of noble courts and Icelandic *skáld* seen in *Bjarnar saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga*, are facilitated by the typical features of the *skáldasögur*. Björn and Þórðr, like both Gunnlaugr and Egill, are of that character-type unique to the *Íslendingasögur*—Icelandic poets and adventurers seeking renown in the courts of northern Europe through the quality of their poetry and the bravery of their deeds. The *skáldasögur* are not, however, entirely set outside of Iceland, nor does the peripatetic *skáld* motif wholly define the hero's character. The *skáld* invariably returns to Iceland, whereupon he is drawn into petty conflicts, regional politics, and the convolutions of Icelandic law, with kings and dragons and heroic deeds things of the past. In effect, those behaviours that won the *skáld* renown abroad make

⁵¹ Peter Foote, 'Wrecks and Rhymes', in *Autrvandilstá: Norse Studies*, ed. by Peter Foote (Odense: Odense University Press, 1984), pp. 223–4.

⁵² See for example *Egils saga* 55 (st. 18, 21–22).

⁵³ Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 5–7.

⁵⁴ See for example: Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', pp. 265–98; Matthew Townend, 'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*: Skaldic Praise-Poetry at the Court of Cnut', *ASE*, 30 (2001), 145–79; Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry', pp. 349–70.

⁵⁵ Dates are per Townend, 'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', pp. 151–62.

him a problematic figure at home, inclined to overstep boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour.

There is then an interesting dichotomy in the literary construct of the *skáld*. The setting of the *skáldasögur* in the tenth- and eleventh-century Saga Age locates the narratives within a period critical to the cultural identity of later Icelanders, when it was understood that Iceland and its people retained a unique independence and agency. Iceland had lost its independence to Norway in 1262/64 following a fifty-year period of internal conflict characterised by increasingly powerful *goðar* corrupting the Icelandic governmental apparatus. This was the political milieu in which saga authors composed the earliest-known *Íslendingasögur* texts. Within that context, the setting of the narratives became a nostalgic construct which informed the evolution of the sagas, as well as the evolution of the character of the *skáld*: an Icelander who dealt with kings as equals, who was imbued with unrivalled heroism and agency in his interactions with the outside world. That the *skáld* was simultaneously seen to transgress Icelandic cultural norms is in part a product of a similar authorial impulse—the idealised Icelandic hero unable to defend himself from the manipulations of Icelandic politics and law.⁵⁶ Yet the *skáld* were not the inventions of the saga authors—that their stories were preserved in the collective knowledge of Icelanders and imparted to new generations is suggested, and was perhaps aided, by the survival of skaldic verse held to be of their authorship.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, how these characters are portrayed, how the worlds of the *skáldasögur* are depicted, are the reinterpretations of cultural memory of their final redactor, the saga author. With this understood, it is unsurprising that the characters and identifiable historical contexts of the *Íslendingasögur skáld* have been topics of some discussion.

Egils saga, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* have received varied treatment at the hands of saga scholars, as have the episodes within them depicting English kingship. In truth, within the context of saga scholarship, the presence of Icelandic protagonists in the courts of English kings are merely brief interludes that, while interesting, do little to contribute to the narrative arc of a saga. As a result, the amount of space that saga critics devote to assessing the English court episodes of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* primarily corresponds to the

⁵⁶ Whaley, 'Introduction', pp. 46–9; Russell Poole, 'Introduction', in *Skaldsagas*, pp. 19–21.

⁵⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definitions and Typical Features', in *Skaldsagas*, pp. 25–7, 32–5.

sagas' relative fame or place in a conceptual critical hierarchy of *Íslendingasögur*. This is exemplified by Jónas Kristjánsson's commentary on the three texts in his survey of the *Íslendingasögur*: *Egils saga* is 'an outstanding work of art'; *Gunnlaugs saga*, for its flaws, possesses a 'classic tragic theme [that] lifts it above time and space'; while *Bjarnar saga*'s 'patches of feeble narration' may be attributed to the author having 'too much old poetry at his disposal and [being] reluctant to ignore it and not fully competent to use it'.⁵⁸

Such judgements are also implied by Magnús Fjalldal in his book *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, which devotes the majority of two chapters to Egill and the historicity of the *Vínheiðr* episode, most of one chapter to Gunnlaugr's interactions with Æthelred, and three sentences to *Bjarnar saga*. Nonetheless, Fjalldal's slim monograph represents the most comprehensive analysis of saga representations of Viking Age England to date (though it is not specific to *Íslendingasögur*). It is a deft examination of the sources for, and accuracy of, saga narrative in the texts he considers—an assessment of 'information about Anglo-Saxon England—its language, history, geography and culture—that appears in medieval Icelandic texts'.⁵⁹ This takes the form of a retelling of those narratives, accompanied by an analysis focusing on reception as Fjalldal seeks to identify what information concerning England was available to medieval Icelandic readers. In this it is valuable to this study, but Fjalldal's approach to historicity also lacks nuance. He perceives the scholarly debate surrounding Icelanders' knowledge of Viking Age England as one between 'believers' and 'non-believers', placing himself in the latter camp.⁶⁰ When his scepticism is considered alongside his presumption that historical value in the *Íslendingasögur* is invested solely in their reliable transmission of 'facts', taking little consideration of the fallibility of the sources from which those are derived, the limitations of his analysis become evident.⁶¹ Thus, the parameters Fjalldal has delineated for his undertaking determine that the book has sparse engagement with literary composition, an uneven approach to external historiography, no recourse to material evidence, nor to narrative transmission or potential oral progenitors. These are all avenues of enquiry that can aid in establishing historicity of narrative, in identifying those

⁵⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 98, 257, 285.

⁵⁹ Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. vii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4.

elements of a story that may communicate remembered experience of cultures, places, people and events.

There are few sagas richer in narrative context than *Egils saga*, which has received more critical attention than almost any other *Íslendingasaga*. Indeed, the ‘selected bibliography’ of works on *Egils saga* contained in the 2015 volume *Egill the Viking Poet* extends to some fourteen pages and well over 250 items.⁶² Clearly a full accounting of this literature is not possible and a brief overview of kingship in *Egils saga* will suffice at this point. There is something of a thread of distrust for kings and kingship that runs through numerous *Íslendingasögur*, though, as Ármann Jakobsson rightly highlights, Icelandic hostility to kingship cannot be taken as axiomatic to the literature.⁶³ The nuanced attitudes contained in the saga corpus speak rather to a cultural anxiety around the institution—at times wary of the power of kings, at others seeking their patronage and protection. Nonetheless, as Ármann acknowledges, *Egils saga* is a text that does display a distinct antipathy toward the institution.⁶⁴ It is an attitude to kingship frequently found in the opening chapters of numerous *Íslendingasögur* texts, not always congruously with the rest of the saga narrative. This is because one of Iceland’s most common settlement narratives recounts that Norwegian migration to the island was driven by the centralising rule of king Haraldr *inn hárfagri* (fairhair) (c.880–c.930).⁶⁵ It is a tale retold in the early passages of *Egils saga*.⁶⁶

In all likelihood, the motif of Icelandic hostility to kingship was a cautionary tale on the dangers of kingship for thirteenth-century Icelanders struggling to retain autonomy from the Norwegian crown.⁶⁷ Thus, as John Hines notes, the suspicion of kingship in *Egils saga* seems to be a specific distrust of *Norwegian* kingship. Yet Hines also highlights that the saga is not consistent in its censure, at times portraying Haraldr as performing important social

⁶² Álfdrís Þorleifsdóttir, Katelyn Parsons, and Jane Appleton, ‘A Selected Bibliography from the Online Annotated Bibliography of *Egill’s saga*’, in *Egill the Viking Poet: New Approaches to Egill’s saga*, ed. by Laurence de Looze and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 219–32.

⁶³ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Royal Pretenders’, pp. 50–2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁵ See for example: *Eyrbyggja saga* 1, ed. by Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *ÍF* IV (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1935), pp. 3–4; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 2–3, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, *ÍF* VII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1936), pp. 4–6; *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* 1, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *ÍF* XIII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1991), p. 3; *Laxdæla saga* 2, ed. by Einar Ól Sveinsson, *ÍF* V (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1934), pp. 4–5.

⁶⁶ *Egils saga* 4, 24–25.

⁶⁷ Gareth Williams, ‘*Hákon Adalsteins fóstri*: Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Kingship in Tenth-Century Norway’, in *The North Sea World in the Middle Ages: Studies in the Cultural History of North-Western Europe*, ed. by Thomas R. Lyszka and Lorna E. M. Walker (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), pp. 108–9. See also Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill*, p. 154.

functions as king, at other times as a despotic ruler.⁶⁸ This inconsistency may be a literary device designed to emphasise the untrustworthy and fickle nature of Scandinavian rulers—similar dynamics play out in *Gunnlaugs saga* at both the Norwegian and Swedish courts.⁶⁹ Yet, as Byock asserts, simply because ‘*Egils saga* stresses aspects of [the Haraldr] story that appealed to Icelanders does not mean the text is entirely invention’.⁷⁰ Indeed, in an early recourse to cultural memory in the *Íslendingasögur* (though he does not term it as such), Byock suggests that what we see here is ‘the past in the service of the present’.⁷¹ The distrust of Scandinavian kings seen in *Egils saga* among other texts may at once stem from traditions originating the Saga Age *and* be responding to the politics of the Age of Saga Writing.

This perception of kingship is never applied to English kings; Æthelstan, Knútr, and even Æthelred, are portrayed positively in the sagas in which they appear. Irrespective of any Anglo-Scandinavian conflict that occurred in England, in the eyes of Icelanders English kings were likely politically neutral entities, having rarely participated as active players in Scandinavian politics.⁷² Thus, for saga authors, these kings could serve as foils which allowed for the Icelandic *skáld* to be the hero of kings without transgressing any negative cultural perceptions of Scandinavian kingship. This approach to English kingship is seen in the description of Egill and Þorólfr’s willingness to join King Æthelstan’s retinue:

Peir bræður, Þorólfr ok Egill heldu suðr fyrir Saxland og Flæmingjaland; þá spurðu þeir að Englandskonungr þóttisk liðs þurfa ok þar var ván féfangs mikils; gera þeir þá þat ráð at halda þangat liði sínu. Fóru þeir þá um haustit til þess er þeir kómu á fund Aðalsteins konungs; tók hann vel við þeim ok leizk svá á að liðsemð mikil mundi vera at fylgð þeira. Verðr þat brátt í ræðum Englandskonungs at hann býðr þeim til sín at taka þar mála ok gerask landvarnarmenn hans. Semja þeir þat sín í milli at þeir gerask menn Aðalsteins.⁷³

⁶⁸ John Hines, ‘Kingship in *Egils saga*’, in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. by John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: VSNR, 1992), pp. 16–21.

⁶⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6, 9; Matthew Firth, ‘Æthelred II ‘the Unready’ and the Role of Kingship in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*’, *The Court Historian*, 25, no. 1 (2020), 6–13

⁷⁰ Jesse Byock, ‘Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils saga*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 76, no. 3 (2004), 302.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Geraldine Barnes, ‘The Medieval Anglophile: England and Its Rulers in Old Norse History and Saga’, *Parergon*, 10 (1992), pp. 16–18.

⁷³ *Egils saga* 50.

(The brothers Þorólfr and Egill had sailed south past Saxony and Flanders when they heard that the King of England needed soldiers, and that there was hope of much loot. So, they then determined to go [to England] with their men. They set out in autumn until they came to King Æthelstan, who welcomed them, for he felt their force would be of great help to his own. The English King, shortly upon speaking with them, invited them to take up his cause and be defenders of his land. They agreed among themselves to become Æthelstan's men.)

The saga author achieves a sense of authenticity in this passage. Setting aside any authorial commentary on kingship, the idea that a band of viking raiders should see opportunity in warfare and turn their hands to mercenary work does not stretch imagination. From both historical and narrative perspectives, it is plausible that Scandinavian warriors sailing as far south as Flanders would hear of the English king's need for men and respond to it. Scandinavian mercenaries were employed by the kings of Wessex from the time of Alfred the Great (871–899) through to the reigns of Æthelred and Knútr.⁷⁴ As such, England was likely known among tenth-century vikings as a destination for warriors seeking employment, and that reputation was likely recalled by thirteenth-century Icelanders. It is this sort of verisimilitude that Ármann highlights as characteristic of *Egils saga*—Egill may engage with the supernatural or participate in fantastic events, yet his decisions and challenges are plausible and grounded in realism.⁷⁵ Torfi Tulinius takes this idea substantially further in suggesting that *Egils saga* 'is a description of past events that can be understood on a literal level', recalling historical people, events, and societies.⁷⁶ Significantly, though, he also recognises the role of the author in imparting a version of events that 'must have been rich with significance' for thirteenth-century Icelanders—on one level a recounting of the Icelandic past, on another a didactic tale tailored to the social values of its audience.⁷⁷ The challenge is then to identify what of the received narrative derives from its later interpretation, and what can be ascertained as historically relevant to its setting.

⁷⁴ Richard Abels, 'Household Men, Mercenaries and Vikings in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Mercenaries and Paid Men: The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by John France (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 147–8, 155–9.

⁷⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in *Egils saga*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 83, no. 1 (2011), 30–1.

⁷⁶ Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill*, p. 154.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

In seeking clear evidence of setting, *Egils saga* alone may offer an event that is directly supported by archaeological evidence. At the end of the saga, upon his death, Egill is buried in a mound at Tjaldanes in the Mosfell valley. In a coda to the main saga text, the penultimate chapter tells that Egill's son-in-law Grímr converted to Christianity after the year 1000 and, uncomfortable with Egill's pagan burial, had his body translated to the family's church in Hrísrú. Seeking to establish the authenticity of this narrative, the saga author goes on to recount that some decades later, the Hrísrú church was dismantled and moved to Mosfell. At this time Egill's bones—'váru miklu stærri en annarra manna bein' (they were much larger than that of most other men)—were discovered in a burial under the altar at Hrísrú and once more exhumed, this time taken to the cemetery at Mosfell.⁷⁸ In 1994, archaeologists attended the farm at Hrísrú. Led by the locatable landscape descriptions of the *Íslendingasögur* and by knowledge preserved in the cultural memory of the Mosfell region, they set out to excavate a mound known locally as *Kirkjuhóll* (Church Knoll).⁷⁹

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Fig. 1: Hrísrú church site plan; feature 2005-2, an empty grave shaft under the chancel, recalls Egill's second resting place
© Mosfell Archaeological Project (Zori and Byock 2014, p. xvii)

⁷⁸ *Egils saga* 88.

⁷⁹ Jon M. Erlandson, Jesse Byock, and Davide Zori, 'Egill's Grave? Archaeology and *Egils Saga* at Kirkjuhóll, Hrísrú', in *Viking Archaeology in Iceland: Mosfell Archaeological Project*, ed. by Davide Zori and Jesse Byock (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 46–7.

Through five seasons of excavation at the site between 2001 and 2005 (fig. 1), researchers discovered the foundations of an early church, the site of the altar, and a hole penetrating the largely intact gravel floor of the chancel that suggested medieval excavation. Upon excavating the fill of mixed strata, what was uncovered was a clearly delineated grave shaft that contained no human remains (though other well-preserved burials were located at the site).⁸⁰ Noting the strong correlation between the *Egils saga* account and the archaeological evidence—the presence of a conversion-era church at Hrísbú, the empty grave beneath the altar, its apparent disturbance in the twelfth century—Erlandson et al. conclude this gives credence to the account of *Egils saga*.⁸¹ Rightly, though, they also stop far short of treating the excavation site as definitive evidence for the saga's veracity.

Such sites may provide some faith in the sagas as historical sources yet, barring a definitive identification of the site of Brunanburh (or the discovery of the remains of Björn's dragon),⁸² the intent here is not to correlate specific archaeological sites with specific saga events. Rather, the archaeology of Anglo-Scandinavian England may illuminate the cultural milieu in which the sagas are set, and thereby provide a conceptual space in which the more detailed aspects of the narrative could (or could not) have taken place. For example, the myriad archaeological contexts of the famous Coppergate excavation in York demonstrate it as an identifiably Scandinavian settlement during the reign of Æthelstan, though one, according to the numismatic evidence, under English hegemony.⁸³ What then is the likelihood that an Icelandic adventurer (or mercenary) like Egill, upon journeying to England, may have found service in the armies of the English king? Coin finds from England and Scandinavia provide evidence of Scandinavian-named moneymen operating throughout England during Knútr's reign; the importance of that role and the trust implicit in it suggests a society in which Scandinavians were fully integrated (though numbers vary depending on location).⁸⁴ Does his arrival into such a society then lend credence to Björn's easy integration into the English court?

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–50; Jesse Byock and others, 'A Viking-Age Valley in Iceland: The Mosfell Archaeological Project', *Medieval Archaeology*, 49, no. 1 (2005), 208–11, also noting at 208 that *Gunnlaugs saga* too mentions the church at Hrísbú c. 1020.

⁸¹ Erlandson, 'Egill's Grave?', pp. 51–2.

⁸² For an overview of the edifice of scholarship dedicated to locating Brunanburh, see chapter 3 pp. 96–7 (nn. 69–70).

⁸³ Mark Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', in *Aspects of Scandinavian York*, ed. by R.A. Hall and others (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), pp. 335–9; Richard Hall, *The Excavations at York: The Viking Dig* (London: Bodley Head, 1984), 61–2; MEC, pp. 187, 201–3.

⁸⁴ MEC, pp. 241, 758–65; Veronica J. Smart, 'Moneymen of the Late Anglo-Saxon Coinage: The Danish Dynasty, 1017–1042', *ASE*, 16 (1987), pp. 241–303.

In contrast, Æthelred's purported antagonism toward Scandinavian mercenaries—attested in documentary evidence from his own reign and recalled in later Anglo-Norman sources—has found some archaeological support in recent years in the discovery of mass burials of executed men of Scandinavian descent in Dorset and Oxford.⁸⁵ Does this then make mockery of the idea that an Icelandic warrior-poet would have been so readily welcomed to Æthelred's court? As contextualising evidence for tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Scandinavian interaction, the archaeological record can verify the portrayals of England found in *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*, or cast doubt on their credibility.

Gunnlaugs saga has attracted some commentary on the tensions that exist between its representations of reality, and the heroic and the romantic. The accessible tragedy of *Gunnlaugs saga* noted by Jónas Kristjánsson—themes of unrequited love, of trust betrayed, of the hero's vengeance and death—brought *Gunnlaugs saga* to prominence among a wide audience from the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ Its status as the most widely read *Íslendingasaga* in English, though doubtful in the modern era with Egill, Njáll and Grettir surely vying for that crown, is nonetheless widely cited.⁸⁷ Appearing as early as 1869 in English translation, having already been translated into Danish, Swedish and German in the preceding decades, *Gunnlaugs saga* certainly enjoyed an extended period of popularity.⁸⁸ It was Sigurður Nordal once again who shifted perceptions of *Gunnlaugs saga*, arguing that the romance elements from which it derived much of its modern popularity were incongruous with the aesthetic realism that characterises the bulk of the narrative.⁸⁹ Since then, a number of other critics have noted the saga's narrative inconsistencies, the possible influences of foreign romances, the questionable morals of its protagonist, and the inferior quality of its verse, and *Gunnlaugs saga*

⁸⁵ Angela Boyle, 'Death on the Dorset Ridgeway: The Discovery and Excavation of an early Medieval Mass Burial', in *The Danes in Wessex: The Scandinavian Impact on Southern England, c. 800–c. 1100*, ed. by Ryan Lavelle and Simon Roffey (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016), pp. 109–21; A. M. Pollard, with P. Ditchfield and others, "'Sprouting Like Cockle Amongst the Wheat": The St Brice's Day Massacre and the Isotopic Analysis of Human Bones from St John's College, Oxford', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 31, no. 1 (2012), 83–102.

⁸⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 257.

⁸⁷ See for example: P.G. Foote, 'Introduction', in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu – The Saga of Gunnlaug Snake-tongue*, ed. by P.G. Foote and R. Quirk (London: Thomas Nelson and sons, 1957), p. ix; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 282; Gabriel Turville-Petre, 'Gisli Súrsson and his Poetry: Traditions and Influences', *The Modern Language Review*, 39, no. 4 (1944), 374; Vésteinn Ólason 'Introduction', to *The Saga of Gunnlaug Snake-Tongue Together with the tale of Scald-Helgi*, trans. by Alan Boucher (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1983), p. 9.

⁸⁸ 'The Saga of Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and of Rafn the Skald', ed. and trans. by Eiríkur Magnússon and William Morris, *Fortnightly Review*, 11, no. 1 (1869), 27–56.

⁸⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, pp. xxxix–lv.

has subsequently waned in popularity.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, saga scholars retain some interest in the text, notably in its structural elements and what they can tell us of contact and exchange between literatures and cultures. Of significance here is the discussion Gunnlaugr's first visit to Æthelred's court has generated around inter-cultural communication:

Nú sigla þeir Gunnlaugr í Englandshaf ok kómu um haustit suðr við Lundúnabryggjur ok réðu þar til hlunns skipi sínu.

Þá réð fyrir Englandi Aðalráðr konungr Játgeirsson ok var góðr hofðingi. Hann sat þenna vetr í Lundúnaborg. Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku. En þá skiptusk tungur í Englandi, er Vilhjálmr bastarðr vann England; gekk þaðan af í Englandi valska, er hann var þaðan ættaðr. Gunnlaugr gekk bráðliga fyrir konung ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga. Konungr spyrr hvaðan af lōndum hann væri. Gunnlaugr segir sem var, 'en því hefi ek sótt á yðvarn fund, herra, at ek hefi kvæði ort um yðr ok vilda ek at þér hlýddið kvæðinu.'⁹¹

(Now Gunnlaugr [and Þorkell] sailed into the North Sea, arriving south in autumn at the London docks, where they drew their ship onto the shore.

King Æthelred, Edgar's son, ruled England at that time and was a good lord; he was in London that winter. The tongue of England was then the same as that in Norway and Denmark, but the language of England changed when William the Bastard conquered it. From that time French was the language of England, as that is from where he came. Gunnlaugr immediately went into the king's presence and greeted him well and with respect; the king asked him from what land he came, and Gunnlaugr told him. [He then said], "And I have sought this meeting with you, my lord, for I have composed a poem about you, and I wish you to hear it.")

It is the passage's curious assertion that Old English and Old Norse were the same language that has drawn scholars' attention. It also implies a shared Anglo-Scandinavian culture, with Gunnlaugr going on to recite Old Norse skaldic verse for Æthelred, which the king

⁹⁰ See for example: Robert Cook, 'The Character of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue', *Scandinavian Studies*, 43 (1971), pp. 20–1; Janet Schrunck Ericksen, 'Genre Indecision in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 76 (2004), 21–4; Alison Finlay, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts', in *Skaldsagas*, pp. 237–8; Foote, 'Introduction', p. xx; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 283–4.

⁹¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

understands, values, and rewards. However, questions arise as to the extent of the author's knowledge of language in England in the late tenth century, and whether such knowledge would have been preserved in Icelandic cultural memory over the intervening two centuries. Fjalldal and Matthew Townend have both suggested that, in the assertion of Æthelred's comprehension of the complex *dróttkvætt* (court metre) verse, the author may provide evidence for English exposure to, and thus familiarity with, Norse poetic traditions.⁹² They do, however, settle on opposite ends of the debate. Fjalldal exhorts historians to caution and casts doubt on the historicity of the passages; Townend argues for the authenticity of the verse as Gunnlaugr's composition, and suggests Old English and Old Norse speakers were intelligible to one-another.⁹³ On that latter point, Townend represents a prevailing view. In a footnote of their 1938 *Íslensk fornrit* edition of *Gunnlaugs saga*, Nordal and Guðni Jónsson suggest that many Old English speakers could have understood Old Norse by virtue of language similarities and close cultural contact.⁹⁴ Similar conclusions have been reached by William Moulton in relation to *Gunnlaugs saga* and, interestingly, by both Þórhallur Eypórsson and Townend in relation to *Egils saga*.⁹⁵ The *Vínheiðr* passages of *Egils saga* are another exhibit pointed to as demonstrating the multilingualism of Viking Age England: Egill too recites poetry for the English king and Æthelstan, as Æthelred, understands and rewards the composition.⁹⁶ It is also of note that both *skáld* spend some significant time as members of the English courts and, as the sagas have it, fit seamlessly into the role of *hirðmaðr* (retainer).

While the *Gunnlaugs saga* author's claim that Old English and Old Norse were the same language must be rejected, the concept of mutual intelligibility is important to note, and a topic to which this discussion will return. It both reflects the closeness of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact and removes language as a barrier to the transmission of narrative and history. Conceptually, this allows that some communicative memory, some direct experience

⁹² Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 3–11; Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry', pp. 351, 356.

⁹³ Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 5–7; Magnús Fjalldal, 'How Valid Is the Anglo-Scandinavian Language Passage in *Gunnlaugs saga* as Historical Evidence?', *Neophilologus*, 77 (no. 4, 1993), 601–9; Matthew Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations Between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), pp. 150–3; Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry', pp. 351, 356; Matthew Townend, 'Viking Age England as a Bilingual Society', in *Cultures in Contact: Scandinavian Settlement in England in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries*, ed. by Dawn M. Hadley and Julian D. Richards (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), p. 90.

⁹⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 70 (n. 2)

⁹⁵ William Moulton, 'Mutual Intelligibility among Speakers of Early Germanic Dialects', in *Germania: Comparative Studies in the Old Germanic Languages and Literatures*, ed. by Daniel G. Calder and Craig Christy (Wolfeboro, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 15–18; Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 152–4; Þórhallur Eypórsson, 'Hvaða mál talaði Egill Skalla-Grímsson á Englandi?', *Málfríður*, 18, no. 1 (2002), 21–6.

⁹⁶ *Egils saga* 52 (st. 21–22)

of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction and English culture, made its way to eleventh-century Iceland. Yet at the same time, the literary nature of the *Íslendingasögur* cannot be neglected. As the adventures of the *skáld* in England entered Icelandic cultural memory, their retelling over time allowed for a flattening of narrative detail. By the time the saga authors committed them to text, the logic of the narratives—that ease of communication and assimilation—had seen Viking Age England absorbed into the Scandinavian world of the sagas.

This Scandinavian England of the sagas is also apparent in *Bjarnar saga*, though in contrast to *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* it is a sparsely studied, if surprisingly accessible, text. Its categorisation among *skáldasögur* has ensured its transmission into various modern editions, yet has also encouraged its subordination to not only Egill and Gunnlaugr, but also to *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, all generally considered more prestigious examples of the sub-genre. Even within survey scholarship of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Bjarnar saga* is not well represented. It does not, for example, feature in Byock's *Viking Age Iceland*, is afforded but three scathing pages in Jónas Kristjánsson's *Eddas and Sagas* and, as noted, is not given critical attention by Fjalldal.⁹⁷ However, the saga has not been entirely neglected, and Alison Finlay has been something of an advocate for *Bjarnar saga* in recent decades: translator of a number of English-language editions and one of only a handful of researchers to publish articles focused on the saga. Her articles, however, while providing fascinating insights into the social constructs that informed the author's composition of the narrative, focus upon the legal framing of the saga feud once Björn returns to Iceland.⁹⁸ Other contributions to the body of scholarship surrounding *Bjarnar saga* include Edith Marold's examination of the text's prosimetrum, and Frederik Heinemann's analysis of the saga within a wider narrative tradition.⁹⁹ Once again these are valuable studies that serve to shed some light on the author's modes of composition, yet none of these analyses make any detailed comment on the traveller motif that comprises the saga's early chapters.

Indeed, the most comprehensive examination of the *Bjarnar saga* author's historical framework for the travel passages remains that found in Sigurður Nordal's introduction to

⁹⁷ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 159, 166; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 108, 113; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 256–8.

⁹⁸ Alison Finlay, 'Monstrous Allegations: An Exchange of *yki* in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*', *alvissmál*, 10 (2001), pp. 21–44; Alison Finlay, 'Nið, Adultery and Feud in *Bjarnar saga hitdælakappa*', *Saga Book*, 23 (1990–93), pp. 158–78.

⁹⁹ Frederick J. Heinemann, 'Intertextuality in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*', *Saga Book*, 23 (1990–93), pp. 419–32; Edith Marold, 'Relation Between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*', in *Skaldsagas*, pp. 75–124.

the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of the text.¹⁰⁰ Where the travel portion of the narrative is given more than passing consideration, such as in John Lindow's contribution to the edited volume *Skaldsagas*, Björn's visit to the Knútr's court is mentioned as a curiosity, with little attempt to locate it within a historical timeline.¹⁰¹ This is perhaps understandable—the appearance of a dragon is an unusual fiction for the *Íslendingasögur* and distracts from the historical framework on which the author builds his narrative. It is also worth noting that the dragon attack on Knútr's retinue, the most remarkable feature of the episode, is often dismissed by critics, not for its implausibility, but due to the apparently unimpressive nature of the dragon. As Ármann Jakobsson positions it in his article on dragons in saga literature:

The dragon that Björn Hítðœlakappi slayed in his saga hardly seems worth a mention, either in this study or indeed in *Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa* itself, where it is referred to very perfunctorily—and after its slaying, never mentioned again.¹⁰²

This is not the approach taken to Björn and his dragon here. Clearly, insofar as the dragon is concerned, the episode is a fabrication. Nonetheless, Björn's adventure at Knútr's court has intertextual links to the other *skáldasögur*, and retains value to the study of narrative transmission and cultural memory. The presence of the (admittedly small) dragon aside, this example of the Icelander at the English court is recognisable as the same motif that informs Egill's interactions with Æthelstan:

Um sumarit eftir fór Björn vestr til Englands ok fekk þar góða virðing ok var þar tvá vetr með Knútri inum ríka. Þar varð sá atburður, er Björn fylgði konungi ok sigldi með liði sínu fyrir sunnan sjó, at fló yfir lið konungs flugdrekki ok lagðist at þeim og vildi hremma mann einn, en Björn var nær staddr ok brá skildi yfir hann, en hremmði hann næsta í gegnum skjöldinn. Síðan grípr Björn í sporðinn drekans annarri hendi, en annarri hjó hann fyrir aptan vængina, ok gekk þar í sundr, ok féll drekinn niðr dauðr.

The following summer, Björn went west to England and there gained great respect, staying two winters with Knútr *inn ríki*. An event occurred when Björn joined the king

¹⁰⁰ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, pp. lxxxvi–lxxxviii; though cf. Alison Finlay, ed. and trans., *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Men of Hitardale* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik, 2000), pp. xxxiii–xxxvi.

¹⁰¹ John Lindow, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 1: Related Icelandic Genres', in *Skaldsagas*, p. 223. See also Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, pp. 133, 138; Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xxxiv; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 108.

¹⁰² Ármann Jakobsson, 'Enter the Dragon: Legendary saga Courage and the Birth of the Hero', in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay (London: VSNR, 2010), p. 38.

and sailed with his retinue in southern seas; a dragon flew over the king's men and attacked them, trying to take one man. But Björn was standing near and held his shield over the man, still [the dragon] nearly clawed through the shield. Then Björn seized the dragon's tail with one hand, and with the other he struck behind its wings and there rent the dragon, which fell down dead.¹⁰³

Like Egill, Björn ingratiates himself into the English court, the king is again faced with a challenge that the *skáld* is uniquely suited to resolve, the *skáld* does so and (though not quoted thus far) the king provides material reward for his service. *Gunnlaugs saga* also follows this narrative pattern. Having won Æthelred's favour, Gunnlaugr is drawn into a *hólmganga* (duel) in defence of the king's honour, his opponent a *berserkr* whose sight blunts swords. With advice from the king and the gift of a sword, Gunnlaugr kills the *berserkr* and is rewarded for his efforts.¹⁰⁴ Once again, it is interesting to note how fundamentally Scandinavian the portrayal of England is here, the *hólmganga* and *berserkr* both direct borrowings from Scandinavian tradition. It is a conceit founded in saga authors' need to create tales interpretable by thirteenth-century Icelanders. In retelling narratives that claimed authenticity and historicity, authors sought to establish plausibility by appealing to Icelandic cultural memory. The Scandinavian England of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*, considered alongside the presence of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr, implies an awareness among thirteenth-century Icelanders of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction during the Saga Age. But more than this, that each of the kings is placed in correct or near-correct historical timelines suggests that saga authors had access to pre-existing historical records.

1.3 ÆTHELSTAN, ÆTHELRED AND KNÚTR: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Few Viking Age English rulers are better attested than Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. Their prominence in English historiography derives from the transformative milieux of their reigns. Æthelstan was the first West Saxon king to govern over all the former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms; Æthelred ruled for thirty-eight years, a long reign characterised by political intrigue and resurgent viking aggression; Knútr was a Danish conqueror whose near-two decades in

¹⁰³ *Bjarnar saga* 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

power returned some economic and political stability to England. The often-dramatic political landscape of their reigns ensured their preservation in histories and chronicles, the accompanying administrative innovations their preservation in diplomas. Yet Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr each had connections with continental Europe, and each had something akin to a foreign policy. Thus, they entered the continental historical consciousness. Moreover, each man's kingship had numerous points of contact with Scandinavia and Scandinavians, whether as settlers or mercenaries, as diplomats or merchants, viking raiders or Danish compatriots. Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr are, therefore, also a part of the history of the Scandinavian world—well attested figures whose legacies were known to saga authors, whether through Icelandic cultural memory, external historical sources, or both.

Æthelstan is often characterised as the first King of England; by the end of his reign his direct rule extended from Northumbria in the northeast to Wessex and Cornwall in the southwest. His ability to extend his hegemony rested on the successes of his grandfather, King Alfred the Great (886–99), father, King Edward the Elder (899–924), and aunt, Æthelflæd of Mercia (911–18). A mere forty years before Æthelstan acceded to the throne, the ruling echelons of English society were facing an existential crisis. The so-called *hæþen here* (Heathen Army), an invading Scandinavian force, had overrun the kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia, and stood on the verge of conquering Wessex.¹⁰⁵ While Alfred ultimately succeeded in defending his kingdom, the treaty that followed the conflict recognised and legitimated Scandinavian control of much of England's north and east.¹⁰⁶ The process of re-establishing English, or rather establishing West Saxon, control over those lands—particularly those regions of East Anglia and the midlands known as the Danelaw—began in Alfred's reign and continued into that of Edward and Æthelflæd.¹⁰⁷ By the time Æthelstan became king of Mercia (924) and Wessex (925), only Northumbria remained under Scandinavian rule. With near-unprecedented political and military stability, and a territorial hegemony unrivalled by his predecessors, Æthelstan turned his attention to these regions.¹⁰⁸ The intersections between Æthelstan's reign and Scandinavian peoples are most clearly seen in his political interventions

¹⁰⁵ A–E 865.

¹⁰⁶ ASC A–C 877–878; *Alfred-Guthrum Treaty*, in Liebermann, i, 127–9.

¹⁰⁷ ASC A–D 911–913, A 915–920.

¹⁰⁸ For an overview of Æthelstan's strategies in Scandinavian York and Northumbria, see Matthew Firth, 'Integration, Assimilation, Annexation: Æthelstan and the Anglo-Saxon Hegemony in York,' *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 45 (2017), 89–111.

in northern England. He appears to have been rarely troubled by viking activity, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* implies that the English king deployed his own fleet.¹⁰⁹ As such, Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in Æthelstan's reign is primarily limited to that which occurred between the English and Scandinavians in England.

Æthelstan initially sought to establish amicable diplomatic relations with his northern neighbours, pursuing an alliance with Sigtryggr Cáech, the Norse King of York (921–27), through the marriage of his sister to the northern king in 926.¹¹⁰ It was a short-lived treaty. Sigtryggr died the following year, and the resultant power vacuum gave Æthelstan the opportunity to bring Northumbria under the West Saxon crown.¹¹¹ There is little evidence that the new regime interfered in the administration of the region in any negative way, nor altered its Scandinavian character. Æthelstan allowed York significant autonomy and privileges. The city remained a minting centre, though coins were standardised to English measures (fig. 2);¹¹² Æthelstan patronised its churches and invested authority in the ecclesiastical hierarchy;¹¹³ he empowered the existing Scandinavian aristocracy as representatives of the crown;¹¹⁴ and Æthelstan himself is known to have taken occasional residence in the city.



Fig. 2: Æthelstan church type (1.41g), York, Regnald (ON) moneyer. Obv. [Æðelstan Rex]; rev. [Eb|or ac|ac Regnald|mon], church/reliquary with ground line. 1002.0609 © Corpus of Early Medieval Coin Finds

¹⁰⁹ ASC A–E 934; SD 934; Matthew Firth and Erin Sebo, 'Kingship and Maritime Power in 10th-Century England', *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 49, no. 2 (2020), pp. 329–40.

¹¹⁰ ASC, D 926; *G. Reg.* ii.126, ii.131, ii.134; SD 925.

¹¹¹ ASC, D 927; *G. Reg.* ii.134; Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 925, ed. H.O. Coxe (London: Sumptibus Societas, 1841), i, 386.

¹¹² Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', pp. 335–9; C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Athelstan, 924–939: A Survey', *British Numismatic Journal*, 44 (1974), pp. 88–93; MEC, pp. 187, 201–3, 355.

¹¹³ See for example S 407, an Æthelstanian grant of a large estate in Lancashire to the church of St Peter in York, in the person of its archbishop Wulfstan. Wulfstan's appointment as archbishop in 931 appears to have been sanctioned by Æthelstan, and he witnesses numerous charters of the reign (eg. S 413, S 416, and S 417). See also David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) pp. 228–30; Firth, 'Integration, Assimilation, Annexation', pp. 106–8.

¹¹⁴ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 129.

It was at York that envoys of the Norwegian King Haraldr *inn hárfagri*—the same Haraldr so ubiquitous to Icelandic origin narratives—were purported to have found the English king. William of Malmesbury provides a report of this event that has several interesting features:

Haroldus quidam, rex Noricorum, misit ei nauem rostra aurea et uelum purpureum habentem, densa testudines clipeorum inauratorum intrinsecus circumgiratam. Missorum nomina fuere Helgrim at Osfrid, qui, regaliter in urbe Eborica suscepti, sudorem peregrinationis premiis decentibus extersere.¹¹⁵

(A certain Haraldr, king of the Norwegians, sent [Æthelstan] a ship with a gilded beak and a scarlet sail, the inside of which was hung round with a close-set row of gilded shields. The names of the envoys were Helgrim and Osfrith, and after a royal reception in the city of York they wiped off the sweat of their journey with suitable rewards.)

Of first note is that Æthelstan must have been resident in the northern city for some time if foreign envoys knew to attend his court in York. Secondly, the very fact that a Norwegian envoy sought out Æthelstan in York to honour him with lavish gifts is a tacit recognition of English authority over the ostensibly Scandinavian city. Thirdly both the gift of a warship, and Æthelstan's recognition that the service of Helgrim and Osfrith warranted reward, echo those fundamentally Scandinavian elements of *Íslendingasögur* depictions of England. Yet this time it is found in an English source and, moreover, one composed some two centuries after the event. This implies that the perceived cultural compatibility between tenth-century English and Scandinavian societies was not an innovation of Icelandic cultural memory, but a more widely held belief.

This is not the only account of gift-giving between Æthelstan and Haraldr. The thirteenth-century Icelandic historian and politician Snorri Sturluson recounts a gift-exchange between the kings in which each sought to establish their pre-eminence over the other, by placing implicit obligation on the acceptance of the gifts.¹¹⁶ In Snorri's account, which is distinctly pro-Norwegian just as William's is pro-English, Haraldr gets the best of the exchange. Haraldr's man in London tricks Æthelstan into fostering Haraldr's son, which

¹¹⁵ G. Reg. ii.135.1.

¹¹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, pp. 144–5.

pleases the Norwegian king for ‘því at þat er mál manna, at sá væri ótígnari, er qðrum fóstraði barn’ (it is commonly held that one who fosters a child for another is beholden to them).¹¹⁷ In truth, both accounts are suspect of hyperbole, though the central idea—that the Norwegian and English courts maintained diplomatic contact—seems to have veracity. Snorri does not provide the only account that Haraldr’s son, the future king of Norway Hákon *góði* (the good) (934–61), was fostered by Æthelstan. There is no English tradition of Hákon *Aðalsteinsfóstri* (Æthelstan’s foster son), as Scandinavian sources name him, but his fosterage is well attested from the late twelfth century across wide range of Scandinavian histories.¹¹⁸ The fostering of one of Norway’s princes points to a diplomatic relationship between Haraldr and Æthelstan, and one that was likely amicable. That Æthelstan was chosen to perform this role also speaks to the high regard in which he was held outside of England. Though some scepticism has been raised around Hákon’s fosterage, it is plausible within its historical context.¹¹⁹ Æthelstan is known to have fostered at least two other noble children: Louis, son of the West Frankish King, Charles the Simple, and Alain, son of the Breton Duke-in-exile, Matuedoi.¹²⁰

Æthelstan’s fostering of Louis and Alain is relevant to understanding the geographical breadth of his political connections and, therefore, the extent of his reputation and attestation in non-Anglophone sources. Louis, later King Louis IV of West Francia (936–54), was Æthelstan’s nephew.¹²¹ The marriage of the English king’s unnamed sister to Sigtryggr Cáech was not an isolated case of diplomacy through marriage; around 919 Edward the Elder had arranged for Æthelstan’s half-sister Eadgifu to marry Charles the Simple. Æthelstan would go on to marry his sister Eadgyth to Otto, heir to the East Frankish throne, and another unnamed sister to a Louis, likely the brother of King Rudolf II of Burgundy.¹²² Foot describes this policy as providing the English king ‘unprecedented intimacy with the leading western European

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹¹⁸ Williams, ‘Hákon *Aðalsteins fóstri*’, pp. 111–4.

¹¹⁹ Foot’s analysis of Hákon’s fosterage, in contrast to that of the other noble boys at Æthelred’s court, is clearly sceptical, Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 52–5; this contrasts with Williams’ conclusion that both Æthelstan’s policy of fostering children, and the nature of Hákon’s Christianising rule in Norway, are consistent with an English upbringing, Williams, ‘Hákon *Aðalsteins fóstri*’, pp. 124–6.

¹²⁰ Flodoard, *Annales* 936; Richer, *Historiae* ii.2–3.

¹²¹ Of note to Æthelstan’s influence in Frankish politics, his relationship with Louis, and his frequent residence in Scandinavian York, is Richer of Reims’ account that, in 936, a Frankish embassy found that ‘Adelstanus rex in urbe que dicitur Euruich, regnorum negotia cum nepote Ludouico apud suos disponebat’ (King Æthelstan was in the city called York, with his nephew Louis and among his own people, arranging the matters of the kingdom). Richer, *Historiae* ii.2.

¹²² *Æthelweard* prologue. For an analysis of who the unnamed sister may have been, and her potential suitors, see Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 50–1.

leaders of his own day...'.¹²³ As brother-in-law, uncle, and foster-father to some of its leading men, Æthelstan became a part of the political fabric of Francia and entered its histories.

Æthelstan's hosting of the Breton court-in-exile and fostering of Alain is of more direct relevance to Anglo-Scandinavian interaction throughout his reign. One of the primary motivators for Matuedo's abandonment of Brittany was viking activity on the peninsula. Brittany had long been threatened by viking bands based on the Loire and Seine, but factional in-fighting saw Breton resistance to their incursions collapse around 910. Much of the Breton nobility fled to the court of Edward the Elder.¹²⁴ The Scandinavians subsequently used Brittany as a base to further their raids; the *Chronicle* records a significant force as sailing from the region in 914 and ravaging Wales and the Severn estuary.¹²⁵ In the words of Janet Nelson, 'for twenty years vikings lorded it over Brittany, until ... Alain II, returned to drive them out for good'.¹²⁶ Alain II (938–52) is the same Alain whom Æthelstan fostered and, according to the Frankish chronicler Flodoard of Rheims, his suppression of the Breton vikings was effected with military aid from Æthelstan.¹²⁷ The centrality of Æthelstan to this endeavour is echoed by the eleventh-century *Chronicles of Nantes* which, though a problematic historical source with a fraught transmission history, speaks to continuing Breton cultural memory of Æthelstan's involvement in Alain's succession.¹²⁸ While Alain surely had some groundswell of Breton support, it seems unlikely he would have returned to a potentially hostile political milieu without a military escort from his foster-father.

A perception of Æthelstan as an effective king and military leader must have loomed large in Scandinavian historical consciousness. He had swiftly conquered York and wider Northumbria and held them against an invading force out of Dublin led by Sigtryggr's kinsman Guðrøðr.¹²⁹ He had aided in expelling the vikings from Brittany. Moreover, he had

¹²³ Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 44.

¹²⁴ *La Chronique de Nantes* 27, ed. René Merlet (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1898), pp. 82–3.

¹²⁵ ASC A–D 914.

¹²⁶ Janet L. Nelson, 'The Frankish Empire', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 34.

¹²⁷ Flodoard, *Annales* 936.

¹²⁸ *La Chronique de Nantes* 27–29.

¹²⁹ *The Annals of Ulster (To AD 1131)* 927.3, ed. by Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), p. 379; ASC D 927; *G. Reg.* ii.134; *JW* 926; *SD* 926. It is of note that the *Egils saga* author places Harald's other son, Eiríkr blóðøx (blood-axe) on the Northumbrian throne during the latter years of Æthelstan's reign, a chronological complexity and narrative-historical conflict discussed in Chapter 7, pp. 259–71. See also Clare Downham, 'The Chronology of the Last Scandinavian Kings of York, AD 937–954', *Northern History*, 40 (2003), 27–51, and Alex Woolf, 'Erik Bloodaxe Revisited', *Northern History*, 34 (1998), 189–93.

won a significant victory at Brunanburh in 937 over a coalition of Scots, Britons, and Dublin Vikings led by Guðrøðr's son, Óláfr. Æthelstan's victory in the Battle of Brunanburh resonated throughout the societies of the northern world: noted in the *Annals of Ulster*; recounted in laudatory verse in the *Chronicle*; likely recalled in the *Íslendingasögur*.¹³⁰ It is here at Brunanburh, or Vínheiðr, that *Egils saga* first places its hero alongside the English king. Æthelstan had a reputation that extended across western Europe, to Scandinavia and to Iceland. He was a famous and powerful ruler whose realms overlapped Scandinavian territories, whose political activities intersected with those of Scandinavian kings, armies, and warlords: it is of little surprise that Æthelstan entered Icelandic memory of the past.

The sources that recount the reigns of Æthelred and Knútr, both in quantity and in detail, sit in contrast to the piecemeal narrative sources for Æthelstan's reign. This allows for something of a more coherent narrative of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction. In many ways, Æthelred's reign seems antithetical to that of both Æthelstan and Knútr, characterised by political infighting, resurgent viking raids, and political class poorly prepared to deal with those threats effectively. The extent of Æthelred's seeming ineptitude has at times been overstated, but it remains that he had limited success in countering the Scandinavian invaders of his time.¹³¹ Æthelred had come to the throne as a child of, perhaps, ten years, in the aftermath of the assassination of his half-brother, King Edward the Martyr (975–78). Though no blame attaches to Æthelred in contemporary sources, the murder occurred as part a succession dispute that had seen factions align behind each brother's claim to the throne; the English political community was divided before Æthelred ever came to the kingship.¹³² Ascending the throne in this political milieu, Æthelred's minority regime was hesitant and apprehensive, unsure of its authority, which was undermined by suspicions around who was involved in the plot to kill Edward.¹³³ It was then unfortunate timing that, after a near-seventy year lull, viking raids intensified in 980.¹³⁴ Though, to suggest the return of the raiders was

¹³⁰ *Annals of Ulster* 937.6; ASC A–D 937; *Egils saga* 52–54.

¹³¹ See for example Æthelred's failed attempt to raise a defensive fleet in 1009, ASC C–E 1009; *G. Reg* ii.164.9; *JW* 1009. For an overview of how Æthelred's reputation developed in medieval sources and modern scholarship, see Levi Roach, *Æthelred the Unready* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 1–7.

¹³² ASC D–E 978; Byrhtferth of Ramsey, *Vita S. Oswaldi* iv.18, in *The Lives of St Oswald and St Ecgbine*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009), pp. 137–41; Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready', 978–1016* (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), pp. 163–66.

¹³³ Matthew Firth, 'The Character of the Treacherous Woman in the *passiones* of Early Medieval English Royal Martyrs', *Royal Studies Journal*, 7, no. 1 (2020), pp. 6–7; Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 76–8.

¹³⁴ ASC C–E 980.

merely unlucky coincidence ignores the extent to which England was integrated within the Scandinavian world, and how attuned Scandinavia was to English political fortunes.

The threat of viking raid was more-or-less constant throughout Æthelred's reign, and there is little benefit to recounting every attack on English shores. It is enough to be aware that hostile contact continued throughout Æthelred's kingship, but also that relations with the Anglo-Scandinavian peoples under English jurisdiction had largely normalised since Æthelstan's reign. However, there are three elements of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction during Æthelred's kingship that warrant specific attention for how they may have informed the extent and nature of his reputation in Scandinavia. First, is Æthelred's use of tribute payments to counteract viking activity; second, his use of Scandinavian mercenaries; and last, the invasions of the Danish king, Sveinn *tjúguskegg* (forkbeard) (986–1014), and his son Knútr.

It is useful to bear *Gunnlaugs saga's* portrayal of Æthelred as worthy and generous in mind when considering Æthelred's payments of tribute and his employment of Scandinavian mercenaries. As noted of *Egils saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, as well as in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum Anglorum*, there was a cultural association in England and Scandinavia between kingly legitimacy, the rendering of service and the giving of wealth.¹³⁵ It is an axiomatic trope of early Germanic literatures, also prevalent in texts such as *Beowulf* and *Das Nibelungenlied*, and in the *Battle of Brunanburh* poem that celebrates Æthelstan's victory, found in the *Chronicle*.¹³⁶ Thus, though Æthelred's use of tribute and of Scandinavian mercenaries have traditionally been received with censure in English historiography,¹³⁷ it does not follow that the Danes and Norwegians who returned home enriched from their time at the English court saw Æthelred's actions as those of a weak king. It is not only *Gunnlaugs saga* that characterises Æthelred in this way: the histories of Snorri Sturluson and his Danish contemporary, Saxo Grammaticus (for all their inaccuracies) also seek to laud Æthelred's heroism and wisdom.¹³⁸

The first tribute payment recorded in Æthelred's reign is of 10,000 pounds in the year 991. While Æthelred was certainly in his majority at this time, records indicate this decision was made with reference to his councillors, and blame for the policy of tribute most often falls

¹³⁵ Above, pp. 40, 43–4.

¹³⁶ ASC A–D 937; and, for example, *Beowulf (Bilingual Edition)*, ed. and trans. by Seamus Heaney (New York: Norton, 2000), ll. 1169–72, 1484–86; *Das Nibelungenlied*, ed. by Hermann Reichert (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 162–4, 308, 684–6.

¹³⁷ See for example ASC C–E 1011; *G. Reg* ii.165.3–4; HH v.29.

¹³⁸ *G. Dan* ix.11.5; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga*, in *Heimskringla, ÍF XXVII*, pp. 13–8.

to Archbishop Sigeric.¹³⁹ This entry is found in the so-called *Æthelred Annals*, a set of detailed entries for the years of Æthelred's reign, found in the C, D and E-texts of the *Chronicle* and thought to have been composed in the years 1016 á 1022.¹⁴⁰ Retrospectively compiled, the *Æthelred Annals* were written with full knowledge of the failures and defeats of Æthelred's reign, and are overt in critiquing Æthelred's counsellors. As Pauline Stafford notes, in the view of the *Æthelred Annals* author, poor counsel was 'the reign's nemesis', an authorial point of view that Levi Roach identifies as manifesting in the naming and blaming of Sigeric.¹⁴¹ Such counsellors, or at least depictions of the king acting on their advice, are not a feature of *Gunnlaugs saga*. Here Æthelred is portrayed as having personal autonomy and as dispensing good counsel, rather than receiving and acting on poor counsel. England is, nonetheless, characterised as a dangerous place replete with viking invaders and cowardly thegns.¹⁴² The internal chronology of *Gunnlaugs saga* places the *skáld* in the English court in 1002, and this depiction of the political landscape of Æthelred's reign—as distinct from the character of the king—accords with that period as recounted in the *Chronicle*. The policy of tribute remains, with 24,000 pounds paid to a viking fleet, but we also find political uncertainty: the king's high reeve murdered, the ealdorman responsible exiled, the Archbishop of York dead.¹⁴³

Moreover, 1002 is the year the infamous St Brice's Day massacre occurred. The intersection of the chronology of *Gunnlaugs saga* with the event, in which Æthelred 'het ofslean ealle þa deniscan men þe on Angelcynne wæron' (ordered all the Danish men in England be slain),¹⁴⁴ is considered in chapter 6. Importantly, however, this is not thought to have been aimed at all men of Danish descent and there is no evidence of it being enacted in the Danelaw. Rather, the historical and archaeological records suggest it to have been restricted to the south and limited to Scandinavian mercenaries—men like Gunnlaugr's *berserkr*.¹⁴⁵ Æthelred had employed Scandinavian mercenaries from at least 994 when, having made a settlement with an invading viking force, a contingent of the Scandinavians remained in England.¹⁴⁶ Some of

¹³⁹ ASC C–E 991; G. *Reg* ii.165.2; HH v.29; JW 991.

¹⁴⁰ Pauline Stafford, *After Alfred: Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and Chroniclers, 900–1150* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), pp. 175–84.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184; Roach, *Æthelred*, p. 119.

¹⁴² *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁴³ ASC C–E 1002.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; S 909.

¹⁴⁵ Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 187–200; Simon Keynes, 'The Massacre of St Brice's Day (13 November 1002),' in *Beretning fra seksogtyvende tværfaglige vikingesymposium*, ed. Niels Lund (Aarhus: Forlaget Hikuin, 2007), pp. 43–55.

¹⁴⁶ ASC C–E 994; JW 994, 997.

these had returned to raiding by 997, while in 1001 a named Scandinavian ally, Pallig, defected to the Danes ‘ofer ealle ða getrywða ðe he [Æðelrede cynce] geseald hæfde’ (despite all the pledges he had made to King Æthelred).¹⁴⁷ Having thus tried to placate the viking raiders with both money and status, and failed, it seems that in 1002 Æthelred was attempting a more proactive, if extreme, approach to dealing with their presence.

Yet Æthelred did not cease to use Scandinavian mercenaries when such men arrived on his shores and were willing to come into his service. The best-known of all the Danish mercenaries who fought under his banner is Þorkell *inn hávi* (the tall). Þorkell arrived in England in 1009 with a large fleet and army that raided throughout Æthelred’s territories for two years—the *Chronicle* names seventeen regions that were overrun.¹⁴⁸ However, according to the *Chronicle*, in 1012 Þorkell entered Æthelred’s service with a cohort of forty-five ships. The only explicit explanation for Þorkell’s aligning himself with the English king is provided in Thietmar of Merseberg’s *Chronicon*, which recounts Þorkell’s horror at his men martyring the archbishop of Canterbury, Ælfheah.¹⁴⁹ Noting the *Chronicon*’s parallels with the *Chronicle*’s version of events, Ann Williams suggests that Thietmar’s account is plausible, that Ælfheah’s murder brought about a ‘change in heart’ in Þorkell.¹⁵⁰ It is, nonetheless, a garbled recounting of events that Thietmar acknowledges to have received second (or third) hand. Moreover, the propensity of clerical chroniclers to characterise the viking threat as a Christian-pagan conflict with eschatological significance must be taken into account.¹⁵¹ Thietmar’s story has something of this quality, echoing earlier famous martyrdoms at viking hands such as that of the East Anglian king, Edmund the Martyr, in 869.¹⁵² The *Chronicle* does not explicitly link Þorkell’s employment by Æthelred to Ælfheah’s martyrdom, and neither does a tradition of Þorkell defending the archbishop appear to have entered English cultural memory.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, Thietmar’s version of events may be credible if Þorkell’s anger at the murder is understood as

¹⁴⁷ ASC C–E 997, A 1001; *JW* 997; Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 193–5.

¹⁴⁸ ASC D–E 1009–1011.

¹⁴⁹ Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Chronicon* 7.42.

¹⁵⁰ Ann Williams, ‘Thorkell the Tall and Bubble Reputation’, in *Danes in Wessex*, pp. 147–8.

¹⁵¹ See for example the letters of Alcuin of York re. the viking sacks of Lindisfarne and Aquitaine, Alcuin of York, *Epist.* 20, 184, ed. by Ernest Dümmler, *MGH Epistolae Karolini aevi II* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), 56–8, 308–10. See also the rhetoric of Aimoin of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, *De miraculis Sancti Germani*, in *PL* 126, ed. by J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1879) cols 1027–1050; *Annales de Saint-Bertin* 881, ed. by Félix Grat, Jeanne Vielliard and Suzanne Clémencet (Paris: Klincksieck, 1964), p. 244; and Wulfstan II of York, *Sermo lupi ad Anglos*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1963).

¹⁵² Abbo of Fleury, *Passio S. Eadmundi*, in *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. by Michael Winterbottom (Toronto: Centre for Medieval Studies), pp. 67–87. See also John on Worcester’s account of Sveinn’s death, in which he recounts that a spectral St Edmund slew the Danish King of the English with a spear, *JW* 1014.

¹⁵³ See for example *G. Reg* 176, 182.3–5 (which suggests Þorkell instigated the murder); *HH* vi.8; *JW* 1012.

political: motivated by concern to preserve a proposed, and presumably lucrative, peace settlement with the English, as Roach suggests, rather than motivating a 'change in heart' in itself.¹⁵⁴ The *Chronicle* indicates that Þorkell's contingent entered Æthelred's service as part of a general dispersing of the fleet, having received tribute and sworn oaths of peace. This implies that Þorkell and his mercenary force entered the English king's service as part of a peace agreement. Moreover, it is suggestive of a king and court familiar with, and welcoming to, the support of Scandinavian adventurers like Þorkell or, indeed, like Gunnlaugr.

Þorkell seems to have remained loyal to Æthelred. At the start of 1013 he is found at the English king's side in London, defying the invading army of Sveinn *tjúguskegg*.¹⁵⁵ Sveinn's invasion nonetheless proved a crisis too far for Æthelred. By the end of the year, Sveinn had been declared king of England and Æthelred was in exile in Normandy. Here the intersections of English and Scandinavian political history are manifest. Sveinn's conquest is widely attested in Scandinavian and continental sources, and it is in this context that Æthelred's name most commonly enters the wider historical consciousness of medieval western Europe.¹⁵⁶ It is also of note that Æthelred's refuge was Normandy. There are clear implications in the historical record that the territory, whose leaders were barely two generations removed from their own Scandinavian origins, was providing refuge to the viking fleets that were raiding English shores.¹⁵⁷ Nonetheless, with Æthelred's marriage in 1002 to Emma, the sister of Duke Richard II of Normandy, Norman support for the Scandinavian raiders appears to have ceased and familial ties must have made the region a safe refuge. Yet Æthelred did not stay long in Normandy. Sveinn died a mere three months after having taken the English throne and, though his Scandinavian forces declared for his young son Knútr, the English elites recalled Æthelred, stating 'þæt him nan hlaford leofra nære þonne hiora gecynda hlaford' (that no lord was more beloved to them than their natural lord).¹⁵⁸ Æthelred returned and was able to force Knútr and his fleet from English shores, if only temporarily.

¹⁵⁴ Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 193–5.

¹⁵⁵ ASC C–E 1013.

¹⁵⁶ See for example: Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.li; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, p. 274; Thietmar Merseburgensis, *Chronicon* 7.37.

¹⁵⁷ ASC C–E 1000; *Papsturkunden* 307, ed. by Harald Zimmerman, 2 vols (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984), i, pp. 595–7.

¹⁵⁸ ASC C–E 1014.

The reigns of Æthelred and Knútr are intimately connected from 1013, when Knútr accompanied this father's invasion force, to 1016 when Æthelred died in London, besieged by Knútr's own invading army.¹⁵⁹ It is not necessary to dwell on Knútr's reign and the intersections between English and Scandinavian history within it, firstly because, in contrast to the portrayal of the English court in *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, the depiction of Knútr's court is both brief, and lacking in differentiating detail; secondly because, in the kingship of Knútr, the two coalesce. Knútr was a Danish dynast and, though the English crown was his first kingship, he would go on to gain those of Denmark and Norway. The potential for Anglo-Scandinavian interaction and cultural exchange is here explicit. While the reputation Knútr garnered as ruler of his so-called 'North Sea Empire' over his twenty-year reign surely informs the reception and interpretation of his character in the *Íslendingasögur*, the chronology of *Bjarnar saga* places Björn in Knútr's court around the time of his English conquest. This is the most widely attested moment of Knútr's reign in Scandinavian sources, finding its way onto the pages of histories and chronicles, and being preserved in skaldic verse within living memory of events.¹⁶⁰ How much of this historical or chronological context made its way into *Bjarnar saga* is the central enquiry of chapter 5 and, as such, this overview focuses on Knútr's English conquest and early years as king.

Knútr had two significant allies in the early years of his reign: Eiríkr Hákonarson, Earl of Lade and erstwhile proxy ruler of western Norway in Sveinn's name, and Porkell *inn hávi*. While Eiríkr appears to have joined Knútr's invasion in 1015, there is little to indicate that Porkell reneged on his agreement with Æthelred prior to the English king's death. Williams suggests that the defection in 1015 of one Eadric Streona with forty ships may have been the moment at which Porkell joined the Danish invaders.¹⁶¹ Porkell, however, was a prominent player in the political narrative presented by the *Chronicle* in the years before and after 1015. It seems unlikely his defection would have passed without comment, and Williams' other suggestion, that 'Æthelred's death ... brought [Porkell's] service to a natural end', seems more likely.¹⁶² Certainly Porkell must have joined Knútr's invading force at some time prior to his

¹⁵⁹ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.li–liii; ASC C–E 1014, 1016; *Encomium* 1.3–5, 2.1–7.

¹⁶⁰ For example: *Liðsmannaflokkr*, ed. by Russell Poole, in *PKS* 1.2, pp. 1014–28; Þórðr Kolbeinsson, *Eiríksdrápa* st. 11–17, ed. by Jayne Carroll, in *PKS* 1.1, pp. 504–13; *G. Dan.* x.14.2–7; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 30–9.

¹⁶¹ ASC C–E 1015; *JW* 1015; Williams, 'Thorkell the Tall', p. 148.

¹⁶² Williams, 'Thorkell the Tall', p. 148.

crowning as King of the English in 1017. Pro-Knútr sources such as the skaldic panegyric *Liðsmannaflokkr* and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae* portray Porkell as an ally who provided Knútr military aid.¹⁶³ The latter, a praise-narrative and pseudo-biography of Knútr's queen Emma (who had been previously married to Æthelred), even acknowledges Porkell's prior alliance with the English, attaching little negative judgement to it.¹⁶⁴ This is understandable from both logical and propagandist perspectives. In 1017 Knútr gave control of East Anglia to Porkell;¹⁶⁵ an honour that implies some significant service rendered, but which may also have warranted the obscuring of the onetime Scandinavian mercenary's previous partnership with Æthelred.

Eiríkr too was well-rewarded for his support of Knútr's invasion, being given the region of Northumbria to rule.¹⁶⁶ His active military involvement in the conflict is well-attested across the Scandinavian historical record, including in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, the *konungasaga* (or compendia thereof) known as *Fagrskinna*, and *Knýtlinga saga*.¹⁶⁷ However, exactly what this support entailed varies between the texts which are all, to some degree, problematic as historical sources. Nonetheless, Eiríkr's appearance across this selection of texts, all composed at least two centuries after events, show that his involvement was a ubiquitous element of Scandinavian cultural memory of the conquest. This is further demonstrated by his presence in the poetic compositions that the saga authors deployed in their texts as appeals to authenticity. *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Knýtlinga saga* all draw upon and quote verses that are thought to have been composed by eyewitnesses to the conquest, or within living memory of it: *Knútsdrápa*, *Liðsmannaflokkr*, and *Eiríksdrápa*.¹⁶⁸ In this last, Eiríkr is linked to two *skáldasögur* narratives.

Eiríkr makes two appearances in *Gunnlaugs saga*, first as an antagonist of, and latterly as an advocate for, the *skáld*. In turn, he is intimately connected to the early *Bjarnar saga* narrative and, historically, to Bjørn's rival Þórðr Kolbeinsson. As noted, Þórðr is one of the

¹⁶³ *Encomium* 2.6–7; *Liðsmannaflokkr* st. 4–5.

¹⁶⁴ *Encomium* 1.2, 2.1.

¹⁶⁵ ASC C–E 1017; JW 1017.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Fagrskinna*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, ÍF VI (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1985), pp. 166–7; *Knýtlinga saga* 15, ed. by Bjarni Guðnason, ÍF XXXV (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1982), pp. 117–19; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 30–2. Also, *Encomium* 2.7.

¹⁶⁸ *Eiríksdrápa*, pp. 487–9; *Liðsmannaflokkr*, pp. 1014–16; Óttarr svarti, *Knútsdrápa*, ed. by Matthew Townend, in *PKS* 1.2, pp. 767–83. For a full discussion of *Eiríksdrápa*, *Knútsdrápa* and *Liðsmannaflokkr* as historical sources, see Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009–1016,' *Speculum*, 62, no. 2 (1987), 265–98.

best independently attested *skáld* outside the *Íslendingasögur* thanks largely to the survival of verses he composed in praise of Eiríkr, his *Eiríksdrápa*. Though Þórðr need not have been an eyewitness to events—Judith Jesch suggests there is little in his verse to indicate that he was—he was writing contemporaneously with them.¹⁶⁹ His stanzas entered cultural memory early and were dispersed in the historical record widely, perceived to hold authenticity through the author's proximity to the time and people of the conquest. This is demonstrated in the fact that individual verses from the poem are found cited not only in *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Knýtlinga saga*, but also among the adventures of *Jómsvíkinga saga* and the litany of skaldic verses of *Skáldskaparmál*, among others.¹⁷⁰ *Eiríksdrápa* was well known and disseminated, as surely was the tale of conquest that accompanied it. In fabricating a plausible historical setting, the *Bjarnar saga* author was drawing on this cultural memory of Þórðr's connection to Eiríkr and, in turn, of Eiríkr's connection with Knútr.

Returning to Knútr's reign itself, his kingship in England brought renewed stability. A one-time viking leader himself and, moreover, a prince and later king of Denmark, Knútr oversaw the cessation of incursions into England. Further, his redivision of authority and entrusting it to known allies such as Þorkell and Eiríkr (though increasingly to English magnates) brought much-needed political constancy. However, the benefits of the new regime were not immediate. In the early years of Knútr's reign—including the two which Björn is purported to have spent at the English court—the *Chronicle* implies Knútr faced a number of challenges. In 1017 Eadric, now the Earl of Mercia was killed, Æthelred's son Eadwig exiled and killed; in 1018/19 Knútr was distracted by Danish politics and his succession to that kingdom; in 1020 he outlawed an English ealdorman; in 1021 he outlawed Þorkell for unknown reasons.¹⁷¹ Knútr's biographer, Timothy Bolton, suggests that the administrative partition of the country which saw Þorkell and Eiríkr granted their vast territories lasted mere

¹⁶⁹ Judith Jesch, 'Jómsvíkinga Sögur and Jómsvíkinga Drápur: Texts, Contexts and Intertexts', *Scripta Isclndica*, 65 (2014), 89–90; see also *Eiríksdrápa*, ed. by Jayne Carroll, pp. 486–9. The assertion by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes in their English-language edition of *Heimskringla* that *Eiríksdrápa* was composed 'after Eiríkr's death in 1014' is not supportable: Eiríkr lived to c.1023. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. and trans. by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes, 3 vols (London: VSNR, 2011), i, p.170 (n. 473).

¹⁷⁰ *Eiríksdrápa*, pp. 487–513.

¹⁷¹ ASC C–E 1017–1021.

months, and was effectively removed, along with Porkell, by 1021.¹⁷² Though the political situation settled by 1022, it seems that Knútr's early years as king were fractious.

Knútr's most pressing concern in 1017, however, was the fleet of Scandinavian mercenaries he had brought to enact his conquest. Unless paid and maintained, this could quickly have evolved into a raiding force. Thus, in 1018, Knútr dispersed the fleet, having paid them with the proceeds of an enormous tax imposed on the English—a tax which surely felt no different to the English than those tributes of previous years. Knútr kept an active fleet of forty ships.¹⁷³ Thus, no matter the situation on the ground in England, Knútr's mercenaries would have returned to Scandinavia in 1018 with tales of a successful, honest and generous king—a depiction that accords with his characterisation in *Bjarnar saga*. More than this though, it will also have been known that Knútr retained in his employ a core troop of Scandinavia's best warriors. With these twin ideas entering Scandinavian cultural memory, it is hardly surprising that *Bjarnar saga* places its hero in Knútr's court. Indeed, in the political environment of these early years of Knútr's rule, it is by no means certain that an Icelandic mercenary like Björn would not have found welcome.

The intent of this chapter has been to provide background and context to the analysis that follows. It has touched on the debate over saga historicity; introduced the tales of England told in *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*, and the work previously done on Viking Age England in saga literature; and provided some brief sketch of the historical and historiographical contexts in which Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's adventures are located. These are all concerns that are foundational to, and align with, the central thematic inquiries of this thesis: whether the *Íslendingasögur* are sources of English history; what processes of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact informed narrative transmission and composition; and how Icelandic cultural memory of English kingship evolved. This last is of particular importance because the texts of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* post-date the events they describe by two to three centuries. Thus, assessing historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* depends on the ability to understand how cultures remember their past and transmit it; to divine layers of interpretation that accompany the transmission of events from experience, to

¹⁷² Timothy Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut the Great: Conquest and the Consolidation of Power in Northern Europe in the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 44.

¹⁷³ ASC C–E 1018.

oral narrative, to text. These are the concerns of the next chapter, which explores Iceland's transition from orality to literacy, the concepts of collective knowledge and experience, and theories of cultural memory as applied to medieval literature.

2

NARRATIVE AND MEMORY

As sources for historical investigation, written narratives provide valuable evidence for the social ideals of the cultures that recorded them. Through the analysis of a culture's stories, the memories they preserve, and the knowledge and experience they privilege, it is possible to identify which characteristics and behaviours that society favoured, and which they repudiated. In fact, literary motifs frequently make cultural attitudes more explicit: as Hayden White states in his famous study of historicity and narrative, 'we may not be able to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture'.¹ That culture, in the case of *Íslendingasögur*, is thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland, and it is in the light of the political and intellectual context of that period that historical meaning is most readily located. As noted, the motif of the heroic *skáld* defending the English king may well derive from this later Icelandic social milieu, a product of identity-building. Yet it remains that, irrespective of evident fictions, *Íslendingasögur* present themselves as histories. As Vésteinn Ólason states of them: '[t]he real and imagined are ... not clearly distinguishable phenomena, but rather two aspects of experience...'.² Which is to say that saga authors construct narrative from a mix of personal and collective experience, the latter derived from the author's role as audience to other texts from which motifs, tropes, and storytelling conventions are learned and adapted.³ While this may not produce a narrative that approximates modern expectations of evidentiary truth, such topoi nonetheless convey meaning to the author's intended audience. This meaning, transmitted within culturally familiar narrative devices, is a codified expression of Icelandic communities' trans-generational collective experience and knowledge—cultural memory. Thus, it is within the literary constructs and narrative conventions of *Íslendingasögur* that traces of historicity may be found.

Identifiable historical events are common within *Íslendingasögur* narratives. Yet historicity (and authenticity) in such passages cannot be ascribed through a simple correlation

¹ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore 1991), p. 1.

² Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', p. 27.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–9.

between specific events and saga narratives. Attempting to so read the sagas speaks more to their modern reception than their compositional intent and is immediately problematised by the constructed *Íslendingasögur* aesthetic of historical realism. How the *Íslendingasögur* frame the historical touchstones of a shared past and create intersections between early Icelandic heroes and the peoples and events of their times are critical to reading such historically anchored episodes. In other words, as important as it may be to understand *what* thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders believed of earlier generations, it is just as important to understand *why* they believed this. Returning to White, this is to suggest that narrative has a certain transcultural universality that allows meaning to be conveyed not only between societies separated by place, but also by time.⁴ The *Íslendingasögur* are not solely historical sources for the Age of Saga Writing, as some critics have suggested.⁵ Rather, they respond to earlier cultural contexts. As John R. Hall notes: '[c]ulture does not float amorphously; it is tied to its bearers, their predecessors, and successors'.⁶ He argues that, while the recounting of history *is* interpretive and therefore subjective, such interpretations still rest on pre-existing sources and narratives. Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's adventures in England *are* historically (or temporally) located within the reigns of the kings with whom they interact. It is a past that can be examined against the wider historical record, not just to assess the historicity of the *skáldasögur*, but to identify the adaptations of later generations of Icelanders.

As written literature and as sources of history, *Íslendingasögur* narratives demonstrate three broad authorial interventions: the initial memorialising of experience; the trans-generational transmission of that knowledge; and the interpretation of the final redactor. Not all have equal weight. Historical theorists have well observed the ubiquity of narrative to recounting history, and that, for even the most conscientious narrator, both editorial choice and the imposition of plot ascribes meaning to events.⁷ As such, it is indeed in the voice of the saga writers, the narrators of the *Íslendingasögur* in their surviving form, that historical

⁴ White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 2–4.

⁵ See for example: Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Mediaeval Sagas and Legal Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 38; Axel Kristinsson, 'Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 28, no.1 (2003), 3–4. See also Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 32–7, for the historiography of saga criticism.

⁶ John R. Hall, 'Cultural Meanings and Cultural Structures in Historical Explanation', *History and Theory*, 39, no. 3 (2000), 333.

⁷ Hall, 'Cultural meanings', pp. 336–9; Gabrielle M. Spiegel 'History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages', *Speculum*, 65, no. 1 (1990), 73–4, 84–5; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 27–9; White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 19–24, 172–3.

meaning is most readily identified. However, it is also true that many texts within the saga corpus presuppose audience knowledge of places, people, and events to make sense of the narrative setting, implying that these represent entrenched mnemonic traditions that limit the author's licence for invention.⁸ In this, the saga author accesses the trans-generational collective knowledge of his society as a form of intertextuality, simultaneously preserving elements of one medium of cultural memory while producing another. Yet, as Gabrielle Spiegel exhorts, it is not sufficient to read medieval literary texts in their composition as 'merely intertextual'; rather, it is necessary to recognise 'history itself as an active constituent of the elements which themselves constitute the text'.⁹ The *Íslendingasögur* engage with other oral and written texts, but the saga authors do not *invent* these sources. This was clearly understood in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia, with various medieval historians from the region asserting that the Icelandic poems and sagas preserved and memorialised the experiences of their ancestors. This chapter seeks to provide the theoretical underpinnings to interrogate that presumed historicity.

Medieval Iceland was a memorialising society, and the *Íslendingasögur* corpus is a fundamentally memorialising body of literature. As such, this chapter focuses on literary memory theory. Methodologically, the communal memories of the societies out of which the *Íslendingasögur* developed are herein defined by temporal depth. First is cultural memory, trans-generational memory which extends beyond lived experience with the aid of external media. Definitionally, the *Íslendingasögur* texts are expressions of cultural memory, and 2.2 considers the place of medieval *memoria* in Scandinavian intellectual culture. Secondly, and in contrast to cultural memory, is communicative memory. Discussed in 2.3, this is trans-generational experiential memory transmitted within the lifespan of the witnessing generation. The *Íslendingasögur* cannot be repositories of communicative memory, yet it is a feature of a memorialising society that communicative and cultural memory can coexist, and thus 2.3 also considers the mnemonic aspects of skaldic verse. Turning then from the *Íslendingasögur* as a store of collective experience, 2.4 considers the literary function of memory with a specific emphasis on structural intertextuality in the *skáldasögur*. However, before

⁸ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: DS Brewer, 2005), pp. 62–3, 76, 97–8; Gisli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy', pp. 292–5; Erin Michelle Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890–1070* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 8; Hermann, 'Cultural Memory and Old Norse Mythology', pp. 156–9.

⁹ Spiegel 'History, Historicism', p. 84.

delving into historical narrative, memory theory, and intertextuality in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is important first to gain some insight into how Scandinavian intellectual culture in the Age of Saga Writing perceived the past, understood memory, and sought to preserve both.

2.1 THE FEAR OF FORGETTING & VALUE OF WRITING

The fallibility of memory and the desire to ensure knowledge is passed on to new generations were of distinct concern for medieval Scandinavian writers. Several late-twelfth and early-thirteenth century historians express the importance of preserving the memories and experiences of their cultures and, in so doing, demonstrate certain beliefs of Scandinavian intellectual culture at this time. Firstly, that memories are lost over time—both those of an individual and of a collective nature. This is exemplified in the following quote from the anonymous early thirteenth-century *Hungrvaka*, a *biskupasaga* relating the early years of the *Skálholtsbiskupa*. Here the author professes concern to preserve knowledge passed on by Gizur Hallson, a twelfth-century political figure, himself a participant in the transmission and adaptation of cultural memory of early Christian Iceland. In interpreting this collectively constructed memory via a written medium, the *Hungrvaka* author is also a participant in this process. Yet he is also aware of the fallibility of memory—both his own and his society’s—and it is his concern to safeguard it from potential loss that prompts him to create a written record:

En ek hefi þó nálíga öllu við slegit, at rita þat sem ek hefi í **minni** fest. Hefi ek af því þenna bækling saman settan, at eigi falli mér með öllu ór **minni** þat er ek heyrða af þessu máli segja inn fróða mann Gizur Hallsson, ok enn nokkura menn aðra merkiliga hafa í frásögn foert.¹⁰

(But that which I keep in my memory, I have closely related in writing; I have put together this booklet that I do not forget the matters of which I heard about from the wise Gizur Hallsson, and on which other remarkable men have also reported.)

There is, in this passage, also evidence of a second belief common to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavian historians: that writing preserved knowledge. It is evident that the

¹⁰ BL MS Add 4864 ff. 2r–2v; *Hungrvaka* 1, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *ÍF XVI* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 2002), p. 3.

Hungroaka author thought only written composition could arrest the degradation of memory, an idea pervasive within Old Norse-Icelandic literary cultures.¹¹ This concern for the inherent potential for loss in memory is discussed by Snorri Sturluson in a well-known passage from the introduction to his *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*. Importantly, Snorri identifies a pre-literate saga tradition, suggesting that the narratives collected in the *Íslendingasögur* were transmitted by word of mouth for over two-centuries, their authenticity vested in mnemonic poetry. Perhaps of most interest in this passage, however, is Snorri's concern for that authenticity, and his mindfulness that corruption may be introduced in the process of transmission:

En sögur þær, er sagðar eru, þá er þat hætt, at eigi skilisk öllum á einn veg. En sumir hafa eigi **minni**, þá er frá líðr, hvernig þeim var sagt, ok gengsk þeim mjök í **minni** optliga, ok verða frásagnir ómerkiligar. Þat var meirr en tvau hundruð vetra tólfrœð, er Ísland var byggt, áðr menn tœki hér sögur at rita, ok var þat löng ævi ok vant, at sögur hefði eigi gengizk í munni, ef eigi væri kvæði, bæði ný ok forn, þau er menn tœki þar af sannendi frœðinnar.¹²

(But when it comes to stories that are told, there is a danger in them that they not be understood by everybody the same way. Some have no memory of *how* they were told and, as time passes, they are often greatly changed in their memory, and the stories become meaningless. Iceland had been settled for more than 240 winters before people here began to write sagas, and that was a long time; and it is possible that sagas would not have persisted in oral tradition if there had not been poems, both new and old, from which people could verify their knowledge.)

Snorri is not alone in suggesting that skaldic verse, as a medium of cultural memory, is less inclined to be subject to forgetting than prose. This is a third belief common to medieval Scandinavian intellectual culture, though the assertion that verse is inherently mnemonic within oral cultures has a certain universality, being just as applicable to Homer's Greek epic and Caedmon's Old English verse as to the skaldic poetry of medieval Scandinavia.¹³ Poetic

¹¹ Jürg Glauser, 'The Speaking Bodies of Saga Texts', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn with Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 19–21; Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory', pp. 289–93.

¹² Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*, in *Heimskringla, ÍF XXVII*, p. 422.

¹³ Bergsveinn Birgisson, 'The Old Norse Kenning as a mnemonic figure', in *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Lucie Doležalová (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 204–11; David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads,*

structures are memorialising in intent and memorable by nature; poems enter the storytelling traditions of oral cultures and, as they are assimilated into societies' collective knowledge and disseminated between groups and generations, become resistant to alteration.¹⁴ This is displayed by Bede in his account of Caedmon's divinely inspired poetry, where he voices a reluctance to alter the received Old English verse by translating it.¹⁵ Here Bede is not simply stating his belief in verse as a reliable vehicle of memory, but demonstrates the cultural reluctance to modify poetic traditions that grants them their perceived legitimacy. It is, no doubt, a social more similar to that accessed by Snorri in appealing to the authenticity of skaldic verse, and likewise drawn on by the twelfth-century Norwegian monk Theodoric Monachus in the opening to *Historia Regum Norwagiensium*:

[O]perae pretium duxi, vir illustrissime, pauca haec de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium breviter annotare, et prout sagaciter perquirere potuimus ab eis, penes quos horum **memoria** praecipue vigere creditur, quos nos Islendinga vocamus, qui haec in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt. et quia paene nulla natio est tam rudis et inculta, quae non aliqua monumenta suorum antecessorum ad posterios transmiserit, dignum putavi haec, pauca licet, majorum nostrorum **memoriae** posteritatis tradere.¹⁶

(I have thought it of worth, most eminent lord, to briefly record these few things regarding the ancient history of the Kings of Norway, just as I have been able to diligently ascertain from a people who possess memory of these things that is believed to be especially strong, those we call Icelanders, who recount them as famous events within their ancient poems. Moreover, as almost no people is so uncultivated and uncivilised so as not to pass on some memorials of its predecessors to future generations, I deemed it fitting to impart these memories of our forefathers for posterity, though they are few.)

and Counting-out Rhymes (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 142–3; Peter Toohey, *Epic Lessons: An Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 7–8.

¹⁴ Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, pp. 5–6; Kate Heslop, 'Minni and the Rhetoric of Memory in Eddic, Skaldic, and Runic Texts', in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, pp. 78–9; Judy Quinn, 'From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, pp. 39–45.

¹⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 4.xxiv, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 416–17.

¹⁶ Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* Pr., in *Monumenta historica Norvegae*, ed. by Gustav Storm (Kristiana: A.W. Brøgger, 1880), p. 3.

Theodoric, writing some decades before both Snorri and the *Hungrvaka* author, thus not only privileges skaldic verse as a repository of memory, but demonstrates the same concern for the fallibility of memory, and more fully expounds the importance of preserving it through writing. Moreover, Theodoric's concern to memorialise the past and safeguard knowledge for future generations anticipates cultural memory theory and its perception of a social group's collective knowledge as existing outside of lived experience, most often aided by literary media.¹⁷ While this memorialising intent is implicit in the extracts from Snorri and *Hungrvaka*, Theodoric is explicit in his aims and intent: the trans-generational preservation and communication of Norway's political history. It is also of note that, for his history, Theodoric draws knowledge from a store of memory which, though culturally familiar, sits outside of his direct social milieu. In his identification of Icelanders as the guardians of skaldic verse, the repository of trans-generational knowledge and experience, Theodoric highlights a fourth belief permeating perceptions of the past and its preservation in medieval Scandinavian intellectual culture. Snorri, in his extract, likewise identifies Icelanders as serving a critical role in safeguarding Scandinavian cultural memory, as does Saxo Grammaticus in his introduction to *Gesta Danorum*:

[N]ec Tylensium industria silentia oblitteranda ... cunctarum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse **memorie**que mandare uoluptatis loco reputant, non minoris glorie iudicantes alienas uirtutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. quorum thesauros historiarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosus consulens haut paruam presentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui. nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta uetustatis peritia callere cognoui.¹⁸

(Nor should the diligence of the Icelanders be obscured by silence ... since they think it a pleasure to learn the deeds of every people, and to entrust them to memory – judging it to be of no less renown to discuss the worth of others as to display their own. I have then composed this present work in no small part, having diligently consulted their packed treasure-store of historical events, by copying the accounts [of

¹⁷ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *G. Dan Pr.i.4.*

Icelanders]. Nor have I looked down on these witnesses, where I recognised such expertise of ancient knowledge.)

All four authors assert confidence in Icelandic oral literature as vested with a legitimate historicity, and all but the *Hungrvaka* author ascribe that legitimacy to the transmission of skaldic verse. Each of them uses the Old Norse *minni* or Latin *memoria*—terms that translate as ‘memory’—and shows concern for its preservation and anxiety around its fallibility, even that perpetuated by the Icelanders, and place trust in written text as a tool for its safeguard. That the four authors explicitly express these concerns in texts composed within a relatively short period between c.1177 and c.1230, suggests that a sense of loss or disconnection with the past permeated Scandinavian intellectual culture at this time.¹⁹

That this period coincides with the textual composition of many of the earliest *Íslendingasögur* suggests that these same concerns and beliefs also permeate those narratives. Diana Whaley argues that this interest in history and historical knowledge on the part of Icelanders is a result of their ‘temporally finite history’ beginning with the late ninth-century settlement of the near-uninhabited island.²⁰ The desire to record narratives of the settlement, albeit often infused with mythologised or nostalgic elements, is evident in Iceland’s earliest extant vernacular historical text: Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* (1122 á 1133). Margaret Clunies Ross highlights the unusual nature of Icelandic culture as both a young society and one that eschewed a formal nobility as a key motivation for this interest in Icelandic, and wider Scandinavian history.²¹ By this reasoning, the Icelandic sagas and histories, with their attendant genealogies, represent a desire to legitimate Icelandic society within wider Europe, establishing familial right to territorial claims and linking those families back to the important people, families, and events of mainland Scandinavia.²² This is particularly evident when *Íslendingasögur* portrayals of Icelanders’ interactions with other Scandinavians are taken into account. It is axiomatic of the *skáldasögur* and, more specifically, the travel episodes of *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Bjarnar saga* and *Egils saga*, that Icelanders are conscious of reputation and

¹⁹ *Hungrvaka*, ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, p. xxvii; Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 14; Sverre Bagge, ‘Theodoricus Monachus: The Kingdom of Norway and the History of Salvation’, in *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery*, ed. by Ildar H. Garipzanov (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 71–2; *Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, p. xxiv.

²⁰ Whaley, ‘A Useful Past’, pp. 161–3.

²¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organisation in Early Iceland’, *JEGP*, 92, no. 3 (1993), 374–6.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 375–7.

cultural perception when interacting with foreigners.²³ The defensive nature of such interactions, however, suggest that Icelanders' claims to wider political recognition remained tenuous and Saxo, for example, claimed their preoccupation with preserving history resulted from the tedium of living in Iceland.²⁴ It is nonetheless apparent that, against a cultural backdrop of concern for loss of memory and disconnection from the past, the memorialising traditions of Icelandic society granted it both legitimacy and respect within Scandinavian intellectual culture.

However, it is worth noting that, in contrast to Bede, there is little in the above quoted excerpts to suggest these Scandinavian historians had an awareness of (or were willing to acknowledge) the interpretative nature of the act of writing. Each of them is discussing events outside of living memory, drawing on the oral literature of a culture temporally and, for Theodoric and Saxo, geographically distant from their own. Briefly returning to White, Spiegel, and theses of historical narrative discourse; in their exposition of the historical record, each of Snorri, Theodoric, Saxo, and *Hungrvaka* adapt it to accord with both personal experience, and the collective experiences and values of their societies.²⁵ In the context of the four historians—though the *Hungrvaka* author to a lesser extent as an apparent Skálholt native composing a didactic local history—this means that the store of memory preserved by Icelandic culture was moving outside of its compositional origin. It is a contextual and medial shift of memory through which meaning was implicitly encoded. Yet these historians also ascribed meaning through the process of textual composition. *Hungrvaka* is intended as a didactic history of Skálholt's prosperous ecclesiastical heroes; Snorri wrote *Óláfs saga* as a panegyric of Óláfr II *inn helgi* (the holy) (1015/16–1028) as king and saint; Theodoric in turn was a Norwegian loyalist whose history seeks to legitimise Norway's place in western Christendom; while Saxo's Danish patriotism and desire to assert the independence of the Danes throughout history is clearly announced in his prologue.²⁶

²³ Gunnlaug's prideful remarks at the Norwegian court of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson, and his comments disparaging Eirík's heritage which see him outlawed, are a case in point. *Gunnlaugs saga* 6.

²⁴ *G. Dan.* Pr.i.4.

²⁵ Spiegel 'History, historicism', p. 85; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 28–9; White, *The Content of the Form*, pp. 172–3. On what types of information may have been deemed worth preserving (albeit in England), see Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, pp. 148–51.

²⁶ On *Hungrvaka* see: *Hungrvaka* 1; Björn Bandlien, 'Situated Knowledge: Shaping Intellectual Identities in Iceland, c. 1180–1220', in *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Scandinavia, c. 1100–1350*, ed. by Stefka Georgievka Eriksen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016) pp. 142–

That Scandinavian intellectual culture understood Icelandic cultural memory to store the collective experience and memory of Scandinavian societies is clear, as is each individual author's ability to shape the narrative told from that storehouse of experience. Icelandic cultural memory was perceived as fallible, subject to forgetting, and in need of textual preservation and 'correction' in line with the norms of specific cultural and intellectual milieux. As Erin Michelle Goeres has noted, specifically of Snorri, the stated trust in the memorialising narratives and poetics of Icelanders, when contrasted with its subsequent interpretations, speaks to a 'complex and contradictory understanding of memory and history'.²⁷ The Age of Saga Writing had inherent within it a fear of forgetting, and the *Íslendingasögur*, like *Hungrvaka*, like the sagas and histories of Snorri, Theodoric and Saxo, are historical narratives layered with the adaptations of transmission and textualisation.

2.2 CULTURAL MEMORY AND MEDIEVAL MEMORIA

Narrative is just as critical to the study of memory as it is to the study of literature. A society's narratives are expressions of its collective knowledge, of its cultural memory. As Glauser notes, there is a distinctive nuance to the relationship between memory and literary-historical narrative: memory informs the narrative of historical events, but it does not follow that historical events inform memory. In essence, memory can become the event, at first inspiring and originating historical narrative, but subsequently feeding on itself to shape and legitimate that account.²⁸ It is a process that results in an interesting twofold effect within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, granted both the limited number of extant texts, and their temporal distance from the narrative setting. Firstly, memories and narratives of individuals often become obfuscated, coalescing into predominant cultural memories of not only events and people, but social mores and behavioural norms. Secondly, it is possible to identify regional cultural memory and narrative traditions where accounts of events or social codes vary, and

4. On Snorri see: Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 14–9; Carl Phelpstead, 'In Honour of St Óláfr: The Miracle Stories in Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga Helga*', *Saga Book*, 25 (1998–2001), 293–5; Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction* (London: VSNR, 1991), pp. 119–21. On Theodoricus: see Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia Pr.*; Bagge, 'Theodoricus Monachus', pp. 73–6. For Saxo Grammaticus see: *G. Dan. Pr.i.1, Pr.i.6; Gesta Danorum*, ed. by Friis-Jensen, pp. xli–xliv.

²⁷ Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, p. 7.

²⁸ Glauser, 'Literary Studies', pp. 231–2.

the motives and origins of those variations can be interrogated. Likewise, where corresponding narratives can be discerned, a locatable historicity can be hypothesised.

Critical to understanding the processes that inform and construct medieval literary media as repositories of cultural memory is the concept of *memoria*. Glauser loosely defines medieval *memoria* as 'a kind of cultural transfer ... closely related to mnemonic practices and writing strategies'.²⁹ Within literary contexts, *memoria* can be understood as the inherent *intent* within a narrative to ensure the preservation and transmission of memory. Though this may appear oppositional to Rigney's framework of social-constructivist memory, the intent to memorialise does not negate either the fallibility of memory transmission and recall, or the interpretative nature of memorialisation.³⁰ Rather, *memoria* is a reminder that cultural memory is fluid: informed, constructed, and reconstructed by each generation in response to their own social milieu. As Rigney and Erll explain:

In considering literature as a medium of cultural remembrance ... one is quickly brought to the realisation that 'remembering the past' is not just a matter of recollecting events and persons, but often also a matter of recollecting earlier texts and rewriting earlier stories.³¹

Medieval *memoria* has been linked in numerous studies to classical concepts of *ars memoriae* and mnemotechnics, the techniques of visual and verbal association to aid recollection as described in classical rhetorical manuals.³² Mary Carruthers convincingly demonstrates that connection in her influential *Book of Memory*, noting that *ars memoriae* was a fundamental element of education from antiquity, and even went through something of a revival in thirteenth-century pedagogy, coinciding with the era when the *Íslendingasögur* were first committed to text.³³ As Pernille Hermann notes, though the *Íslendingasögur* may be primarily indebted to regional narrative culture and perhaps local mnemonic techniques, it is logical to assume some authorial familiarity with *memoria* as a component of rhetorical training.³⁴ The

²⁹ Glauser, 'Literary Studies', p. 234.

³⁰ Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity', pp. 14–15.

³¹ Erll and Rigney, 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory', p. 112.

³² See for example, *ad Herennium* III.xvi–xxiv, ed. and trans. by Harry Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 205–25. For discussion, see Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 68–70; Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 153–5; Hermann, 'Key Aspects of Memory', pp. 14–5, 21–4; Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual', pp. 301–3; Gesine Mierke, 'The Old Saxon *Heliand*: Memoria as Cultural Transfer', *Florilegium*, 27 (2010), 92.

³³ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 153–5.

³⁴ Hermann, 'Key Aspects of Memory', pp. 14–5.

textual recording of the sagas is by its very nature an erudite act, the literacy of their recorders evidence of their education.

However, in its nature as an element of rhetorical training, classical *ars memoriae* relates to the mnemotechnics of an individual more so than the mnemonics of socially constructed cultural memory. While authorial *memoria* is no doubt in some part reflected in the interpretive act of recording the sagas, as used of medieval literature and medieval cultures more broadly, *memoria* is closely related to cultural memory—collectively conceived and performed. The mnemonic, memorial, and communal nature of the Roman Mass is a conspicuous example of shared performative *memoria* within medieval western Europe, as are the storytelling traditions that perpetuated the transmission of local ‘history’ through oral, literary, and material narratives.³⁵ As Catherine Cubitt highlights, there is little that exemplifies medieval *memoria* so much as saints’ cults. Most saints were regional figures, the memory of whom was perpetuated by landscape and material mnemonics, both prompting and prompted by communally recollected narratives, ultimately institutionalised through the liturgy; through churches, relics and shrines; and through hagiographies.³⁶ Here the intent to memorialise, to foster cultural memory as a trans-generational transfer of a community’s knowledge and social identity, can be seen. There are clear parallels with the *Íslendingasögur*: regional narratives featuring local figures, set within a mnemonic landscape, and codified through the text of the sagas. The *Íslendingasögur* typify medieval *memoria*. More than this though, the *Íslendingasögur* epitomise the intersections of cultural memory and literature, described here by Renate Lachmann:

Literature is culture’s memory, not as a simple recording device but as a body of commemorative actions that include the knowledge stored by a culture, and virtually all texts a culture has produced and by which a culture is constituted.

Writing is both an act of memory and a new interpretation.³⁷

Memory within literature therefore serves in part as a cultural differentiator, especially where shared narratives are identifiable across texts with differing cultural or regional origins. As

³⁵ Mierke, ‘The Old Saxon *Heliand*’, pp. 92–4.

³⁶ Catherine Cubitt, ‘Memory and Narrative in the Cult of the Early Anglo-Saxon Saints’, in *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. by Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (CUP, 2000), pp. 34–7.

³⁷ Lachmann, ‘Mnemonic and Intertextual’, p. 301.

Assmann notes, 'the task of [cultural] memory, above all, is to transmit a collective identity'.³⁸ The presentation of a shared narrative, the commonalities and variants of its redactions, even where merely a component within a larger story or text, reflect the cultural memories of regionally or temporally diverse social groups. Thus, within the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, varying traditions relating to the same events, figures, or stories, demonstrate how Icelanders in the Age of Saga Writing remembered and memorialised a shared past at different times and in different places.

As an example of this, it is illuminating to look at the interactions between Björn *Hítðælakappi* (the Hítardal champion) and Grettir Ásmundarson in their respective sagas. *Bjarnar saga* is, for most of its Icelandic episodes, set in and around the Hítardal region which gives Björn his sobriquet. While this extends out to wider Borgarfjörður and the Snæfellsnes peninsula (map 4), it is very much a west-coast tale. *Grettis saga* has far greater scope and touches on many more Icelandic regions. While it does have a focus on the northern quarter, there is also some concentration of activity near Hítardal. It is unsurprising then that the two men meet: both share a certain prominence, are active in the early eleventh century in the same region, and share an outsider status (though Björn only flirts with outlawry while Grettir lives as an outlaw for nineteen years). The dating of both sagas is somewhat contentious, though there is a consensus that *Bjarnar saga* was composed in the thirteenth century, *Grettis saga* in the fourteenth.³⁹ Thus, Grettir's appearance in *Bjarnar saga* demonstrates that a cultural memory of the Icelandic outlaw pre-existed the commitment to text of the extant redaction of *Grettis saga*. The specific regional concerns of *Bjarnar saga*, however, coupled with the gap in time between the recording of the two sagas, dictate that there are variants in the stories. Grettir's appearance in *Bjarnar saga* is brief:

³⁸ Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, pp. 6–7.

³⁹ For the dating of *Bjarnar saga*, see Alison Finlay, 'Interpretation or Over-Interpretation? The Dating of Two *Íslendingasögur*', *Gripla*, 14 (2004), 60–1, 69–75, 86–7; Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, pp. xlvii–lii; Bjarni Guðnason, 'Aldur og einkenni *Bjarnarsögu Hítðælakappa*', in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, ed. by Gísli Sigurðsson and others (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994), p. 74. For the dating of *Grettis saga*, see Paul Schach, *Icelandic sagas* (Boston: Twayne 1984), pp. 123–4; Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Um Grettis sögu', in *Grettis saga*, ed. by Örnólfur Thorsson, *Sígildar sögur* 4 (Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 1994), p. xxxviii.

Ofan frá Vøllum er Grettisbœli, ok var Grettir þar í raufinni þann vetr, er hann var með Birni, en hann bjó þá á Vøllum. Þeir lögðust ofan eptir ánni ok váru kallaðir jafnsterkir menn.⁴⁰

(Below Vellir is Grettir's Den, where Grettir stayed in a cave through the winter he spent with Björn when he was living at Vellir. They would swim down in the river and were thought to be equally strong men.)

Grettir appears to have been the more famous of the two heroes in Icelandic cultural memory. *Bjarnar saga* barely survives into the modern era; there are only two extant medieval folios, and the most complete redaction is a seventeenth-century copy with two significant lacunae. The character of Björn himself is poorly attested outside his own saga. His name is mentioned in *Landnámabók* in relation to his family ties, but otherwise his appearances in *Grettis saga* and Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* appear to borrow directly from *Bjarnar saga* itself.⁴¹ Most notably, for a supposed *skáld*, he leaves no recorded verse outside of his biography.⁴² In contrast, two of Grettir's stanzas are quoted in *Landnámabók*, while Snorri Sturluson cites a half-stanza attributed to Grettir's authorship in *Skáldskaparmál* as an example of skaldic verse.⁴³ The first of these is a geographical and genealogical reference text of Icelandic settlement, the second a sort of mythic dialogue explicating skaldic verse, both texts fall within the broader vernacular tradition in which the *Íslendingasögur* are situated without conforming to the archetypes that would see them categorised as such. It is important to recognise that identifying intertextual influence or exchange within any saga is not merely an intra-corpus exercise; inter-corpus intertextuality performs a correlative function as an external measure of perceived historicity.

Within the confines of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Grettis saga* is extant in four medieval manuscripts and, as a character, he is referenced in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*; has a brief role in the opening chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga* paralleling an episode of Grettir's outlawry (and sharing a

⁴⁰ *Bjarnar saga* 19.

⁴¹ AM 73 a fol. ff. 80^v–83^v (*Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*); Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 258; Lindow, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 1', p. 223; Marold, 'The Relation Between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*', p. 79.

⁴² Two lines of verse attributed to Björn in *Bjarnar saga* can be found in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, though there is quoted without attribution, *Bjarnar saga* 17 (st. 20), cf. [*Third Grammatical Treatise*], in *Den tredje og fjærde grammatiskie afhandling i Snorres Edda tilligemed de grammatiskie afhandlingers prolog og to andre tillæg*, ed. by Björn M. Ólsen (Copenhagen: Knudtzon, 1884), p. 70.

⁴³ *Skáldskaparmál* st. 231, cf. *Grettis saga* 72 (st. 61); *Landnámabók* H214, S250 (st. 25–6), cf. *Grettis saga* 63 (st. 56). On the authenticity, or otherwise, of verse in late texts such as *Grettis saga*, see Anthony Faulkes, *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas* (London: VSNR, 2004), pp. xiii–xv.

verse with it); and, of course, has his walk-on part in *Bjarnar saga*.⁴⁴ Notably, all these texts predate that of *Grettis saga* and it is demonstrable that the author drew upon a number of them, including *Bjarnar saga*, as sources for his narrative.⁴⁵ *Grettis saga* describes Björn as a man who willingly welcomed outlaws, something attested in *Bjarnar saga*, and thus establishes a precedent for Grettir to over-winter in a remote corner of Björn's property.⁴⁶ While there, Björn encourages Grettir to sustain himself at the expense of those people in the region who were *þingmenn* (followers) of Þórðr Kolbeinsson.⁴⁷ Thus, the *Grettis saga* author introduces the central feud of *Bjarnar saga* into his narrative and brings Grettir into its mechanics.

By engaging with the *Bjarnar saga* narrative, *Grettis saga* participates in its transmission. Neither the Björn–Þórðr rivalry, nor the Björn–Grettir relationship, is attested outside of these two sagas. Recalling Assmann's argument that cultural memory only truly achieves its full complexity in a literate society, it is important to recognise that, simply because *Grettis saga* is here drawing upon literary memory, this does not negate it as a medium of cultural memory.⁴⁸ Rather, in its transmission of the Björn–Grettir narrative, *Grettis saga* becomes a vehicle for cultural memory, exemplifying Lachmann's description of literature as 'knowledge stored by a culture' and of writing as 'both an act of memory and a new interpretation'.⁴⁹ Intertextual narrative elements that speak to shared knowledge may, for example, be seen in parallel passages from *Bjarnar saga* and *Grettis saga*. *Bjarnar saga* states of the two men, as quoted above:

Peir lögðust ofan eptir ánni ok váru kallaðir jafnsterkir men.⁵⁰

(They would swim down in the river and were thought to be equally strong men.)

Drawing from this, *Grettis saga* states:

Grettir var jafnan með Birni, ok reyndu þeir margan frøekneik, ok vísar svá til í sögu Bjarnar, at þeir kallaðisk jafnir að íþróttum.⁵¹

⁴⁴ *Grettis saga* 58, cf. *Bjarnar saga* 19; *Grettis saga* 52, cf. *Fóstbræðra saga* 1, ed. by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *ÍF VI* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1943), pp. 121–2; *Gísla saga Súrssonar* 22, ed. by Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *ÍF VI* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1943), p. 70.

⁴⁵ Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 234–8; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', pp. 114–15.

⁴⁶ *Bjarnar saga* 22.

⁴⁷ *Grettis saga* 58–59.

⁴⁸ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 8; Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual', 301.

⁵⁰ *Bjarnar saga* 19.

⁵¹ *Grettis saga* 58.

(Grettir was often with Björn and they challenged each other in many feats; it is told in the *Saga of Björn* that they were thought to be equal in sports.)

Here *Grettis saga's* use of the *Bjarnar saga* narrative is categorical, the trans-generational transfer of collectively held knowledge evident, writing as an 'act of memory' clear. In turn, Grettir is clearly not an invention of the *Bjarnar saga* author; his independent attestation across numerous sources speak to living narrative traditions that preserved memory of the outlaw's feats. Indeed, the author introduces the short passage in which the outlaw appears with the words, 'svá vilja menn segja' (as people say), and ends it by naming one Runólfr Dálksson as another source for his information.⁵² In his unequivocal use of both the 'common knowledge' of narrative tradition and the specific knowledge of individual narrators (the Björn–Grettir relationship seemingly derived from the former), the author makes explicit his role as a conduit for the transmission of cultural memory.

However, both *Bjarnar saga* and *Grettis saga* also engage in the act of writing as 'new interpretation'. The variations between the two sagas' accounts of Björn and Grettir's interactions demonstrate how cultural memory differentiates social groups. It is reasonable to suspect that Grettir's appearance in *Bjarnar saga* is primarily intended to augment Björn's reputation: an example of regional social identity manifesting a distinct cultural memory, in this case attached to the local hero of Hítardal. Certainly, from a narrative perspective, Grettir seems to serve no function within the saga story arc. Yet through this appearance, Björn is not only provided some small connection to Grettir's heroic legacy, but demonstrates that he is stronger than the famed Grettir *inn sterki* (the strong). In his turn, however, having noted this claim in *Bjarnar saga*, the *Grettis saga* author goes on to state that, whatever the people of Hítardal may believe of their hero, 'en það er flestra manna ætlan að Grettir hafi sterkastur verið á landinu' (still, most people believed Grettir to be the strongest man to have lived in this land]).⁵³ This author too is apparently engaging with common knowledge and it may be that this interpolation does reflect the memory of Grettir more widely held in Icelandic culture. What should be clear, though, is that this author, like his *Bjarnar saga* counterpart, interprets and synthesises cultural memory in the act of writing. Ultimately, in this example,

⁵² *Bjarnar saga* 19.

⁵³ *Grettis saga* 58.

the *Bjarnar saga* and *Grettis saga* narratives are inter-reliant, and their historicity is suspect; however, this does not negate the *memory* of the event. Rather, cultural memory is normalised and disseminated through this process for, as Carruthers highlights, the textual recording of a community's stories allows that community to share, relive, and reinterpret its memories.⁵⁴ Literary texts emphasise the socially constructed nature of memory as an expression of identity, and demonstrate those communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible aspects of cultural memory.

2.3 COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY & SKALDIC VERSE

If the intent to memorialise lies at the genesis of artefacts of cultural memory, it follows that the memorialising society is cognisant of the transient nature of experiential memory. Thus, it seems appropriate to briefly return to forgetfulness, the role that it plays in the transmission of cultural memory, and the fallibility of 'communicative memory'. The term 'communicative memory' is borrowed from Assmann, who identifies this as separate from cultural memory.⁵⁵ The core difference between the two concepts lies in how they transmit memory. Communicative memory rests on everyday interaction and the sharing of experience, it is trans-generational insofar as a number of generations co-exist within a society, yet when the last member of a generation dies, so too does the experiential memory of that generation.⁵⁶ As a concept, 'communicative memory' is greatly indebted to Halbwachs' frameworks of 'collective memory' and characterised by what Rigney terms 'plenitude and loss'.⁵⁷ This describes the sense that, when a society's memories of events are predicated on its members' experience, they are more authentic and numerous, authenticity and clarity subsequently dissipating through transmission over time (Rigney uses the metaphor of a leaky bucket being passed around).⁵⁸ Thereafter, those memories, if they are to be preserved, can only be transferred via ritual, art, or literary media, passing into cultural memory as the externalised memorialisations of a more distant past tied to social identity.

⁵⁴ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memories*, ed. by Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan and Edgar Wunder (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), pp. 16–19; Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, pp. 34–7.

⁵⁶ Assmann, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', p. 16; Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity', pp. 12–3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12

Though the distinction of communicative from cultural memory suggests a concise transition, in truth both coexist within a society. As described by Hermann, communicative memory is a 'storehouse of experience', but an 'imperfect' storehouse affected by forgetting, and for which societies necessarily and consciously develop mnemonic techniques.⁵⁹ This correlates with Assmann's observation that, as a witnessing generation ages, there is an attendant desire to preserve their experience, prompting the creation of mnemonic media such as literature which exist alongside communicative memory.⁶⁰ Such practice sits in opposition to Halbwachs' hypothesis that trans-generational oral histories hold primacy over literary media as vessels for authenticity.⁶¹ The externalisation of memory, even as recollection of personal experience, remains an interpretative memorialising responding to the culture in which the narrative is recounted. As Aleida Assmann identifies in her model of 'functional' and 'storage' memory, the rejection, selection, and ordering of knowledge and experience to provide it with meaning are highly subjective processes.⁶² This does not change if memory is only ever externalised within oral narrative: it is still reinterpreted and rewritten in every retelling. Indeed, as lived experience passes into cultural memory, its preservation as oral literature requires many more such editorial interventions than if preserved in more tangible media. It was, after all, concerns around the degradation of oral lore and the loss of knowledge from the storehouse of experience that prompted Snorri, Theodoric, Saxo, and the *Hungrova* author to compose their texts. The concept of 'plenitude and loss' is not a modern one.

There are no extant *Íslendingasögur* texts written within the frame of communicative memory, by those who experienced events. Whether based upon written or oral progenitors, the surviving narratives are layered with the reinterpretations of multiple redactors. Nonetheless, the *Íslendingasögur* remain expressions of that intent to memorialise that is characteristic of medieval *memoria*; they are framed as histories in their references to historical figures and events, even if these are frequently imbued with folkloric and 'fictional' elements. And even those 'fictional' elements may be understood as a part of Icelandic mnemotechnics aiding narrative transmission. Recognisable motifs such as the travelling *skáld*; the

⁵⁹ Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory', pp. 287–90.

⁶⁰ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 36.

⁶¹ Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, pp. 78–80; Hermann, 'Concepts of Memory', p. 289 (n. 4); Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity', pp. 12–13.

⁶² Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 123–32.

identification of familiar peoples, places, and folklore, irrespective of their historical viability within the narrative; these are culturally identifiable elements of a story that aid in its trans-generational preservation. As Carruthers asserts of medieval book culture more widely, written texts were not equated with narrative, but were rather seen as mnemonics to recall narrative.⁶³ Functionally, the *Íslendingasögur* are representative of this, especially where they are believed to derive from the transmission of oral literature.

Such oral progenitors are perhaps most identifiable in verse passages. A useful example of this is verse 20 of *Gunnlaugs saga*, which also appears as verse 3 of *Kormáks saga*, in both instances the stanza being credited to the eponymous *skáld*. In commenting on the verse, the editors of *Gunnlaugs saga* argue that its attribution to the tenth-century *skáld* Kormákr in *Kormáks saga* was done ‘doubtless correctly’.⁶⁴ Traditionally understood as one of the earliest written sagas, *Kormáks saga* has been the site of much scholarly debate around the authenticity of the eighty-four verses it contains and positions as contemporary with the narrative’s setting.⁶⁵ Though verse 3 has occasionally come under suspicion, its linguistic and metrical features do recommend it as an early, possibly tenth-century composition, while its thematic orientation in *Kormáks saga* suggests it belongs there more so than in *Gunnlaugs saga*.⁶⁶

Brámáni skein brúna	The moon of her eyelash—that valkyrie
brims und ljósum himni	adorned with linen, server of herb-surf,
Hristar hǫrvi glæstrar	shone hawk-sharp upon me
haukfránn á mik lauka;	beneath her brow’s bright-sky
en sá geisli sýslir	but that beam from the eyelid-moon
síðan gullmens Fríðar	of the goddess of the golden torque
hvarmatungls ok hringa	will later bring trouble to me
Hlínar óþurft mína.	and to the ring goddess herself. ⁶⁷

⁶³ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, pp. 9–10.

⁶⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11 (st. 20), ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 32 (n. 7).

⁶⁵ Russell Poole, ‘Composition, Transmission, Performance: The First Ten *lausavísur* in *Kormáks saga*’, *alvissmál*, 7 (1997), 43–4; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 234–8.

⁶⁶ M.A. Jacobs, ‘*Hon Stóð Ok Starði: Vision, Love and Gender in Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 86 (2014), 161–2; Poole, ‘Composition Transmission’, pp. 43–5; Poole, ‘Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar* and *Gunnlaug*’, p. 162.

⁶⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11 (st. 20); *Kormáks saga* 3 (st. 3), ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF VIII* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1939), p. 209. Verse translation drawn from *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* 11 (st. 20), trans. by Katrina C. Attwood, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson and others, 5 vols (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), i, p. 328.

The poem is similarly framed by the prose of both sagas, with Kormákr and Gunnlaugr speaking this verse while observing the women they each desire (albeit covertly or from a distance). Though the verse fits more comfortably in *Kormáks saga* (he is specifically observing Steingerd's eyes), it seems the poem recalled, or was seen to be a part of, a specific trope or narrative setting. As such, there are two possible explanations for the verse being shared by the sagas: firstly, that the *Gunnlaugs saga* author borrowed the verse from *Kormáks saga*; secondly, that the verse was remembered in two divergent oral traditions, attributed to different *skáld*.

Considered more broadly across the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, the potential explanations for the shared *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse are a microcosm of the opposing book-prose and free-prose positions, some sense of which was given in chapter 1.⁶⁸ Focused on shared motifs and passages, like the exemplar verse, 'book-prose' scholars argued for authorial intervention in the construction of narrative via deliberate intertextual borrowing. In contrast, the 'free-prose' position identified such passages as primarily the product of oral transmission.⁶⁹ Insofar as this relates to skaldic verse, the question then becomes whether verse was transmitted as an element of a fully formed prose narrative, or if it served as a mnemonic facilitating the recall of the prose narrative. In truth, depending on the saga, either is possible and, as the *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse demonstrates, at times equally plausible. Even Russell Poole, a critic who has commented on this problematic verse numerous times, seems undecided. On the one hand, he uses the verse as evidence that *Gunnlaugs saga* 'evolved in parasitism upon the Kormákr material'; on the other, he declares with far less certainty that it is 'not wildly discrepant with the prose narrative, [though] gives the distinct impression of having been lifted from a different context'.⁷⁰ This ambiguity of derivation is common across the corpus; examples of oral and textual transmission co-exist throughout the literature, the authors of individual sagas drawing on both.⁷¹ Yet, in selecting their sources—both oral and written—the saga authors remain concerned to preserve the storehouse of experience. This is foundational to the historical mode of the *Íslendingasögur*,

⁶⁸ Chapter 1, pp. 14–17; Callow, 'Dating and Origins', pp. 15–33; Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 17–50.

⁶⁹ Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy', pp. 285–6

⁷⁰ Poole, 'Composition Transmission', p. 45; Poole, 'Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar* and *Gunnlaug*', p. 162.

⁷¹ Hermann notes the mediation of the *Kormáks saga* author specifically, and the literary nature inherent within the sagas, highlighting an instance of internal reference within the text: Pernille Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory, and Storage', pp. 345–6.

whatever their origins and however they evolved in their transmission and commitment to text. With this understood, the sources of skaldic verse within the *Íslendingasögur*—oral, textual, or authorial—take on less importance, for they do not change the intrinsic memorial *function* of poetry.

Poetry is of itself a mnemonic aiding in recall. This is particularly true of skaldic poetry by virtue of its formulaic and familiar elements; its periphrastic kennings through which the audience is forced to engage with and interpret that which is being narrated; and its highly complex and stylised metrical requirements.⁷² Indeed, both Judy Quinn and Diana Whaley have drawn attention to the ‘ornate metrical pattern’ of skaldic *dróttkvætt* as intrinsically mnemonic, suggesting the verse style favoured accurate memorisation and was thus less likely to suffer alteration through transmission.⁷³ That historians in the Age of Saga Writing considered verse to store knowledge that would otherwise be lost, to be mnemonic devices preserving the depleted storehouse of experience, is evident in the statements of Snorri, Theodoric, Saxo, and the *Hungrvaka* author. Their presumption that skaldic verse was composed by those who experienced events they recount implied a proximity to communicative memory which, alongside its formulae, recommended it as a reliable witness to events. Poetry seemed to avoid the layers of reinterpretation inherent within the transmission of prose narrative.

However, beliefs as to the origin of verses were themselves a product of cultural memory. Skaldic verse was not necessarily contextually original in composition, and was at times corrupted or adapted in transmission. The cultural attitude to skaldic verse, however, does suggest that it was primarily a literary form intended as an oral mnemonic, irrespective of when in a narrative’s transmission cycle the verse was introduced, and the evidence is that saga authors believed it to hold an authoritative authenticity. Indeed, in noting its evidentiary use across the wider saga corpus, Clunies Ross asserts that, with but a few exceptions, *all* medieval Old Norse-Icelandic verse was ‘quotation’ of oral composition.⁷⁴ Thus, even if it is the case that *Gunnlaugs saga* verse 20 was copied from *Kormáks saga*, it is still a quotation of the same, comparatively early verse, irrespective of its new context. This may also be said of

⁷² Birgisson, ‘The Old Norse Kenning’, pp. 199–201; Goeres, *The Poetics of Commemoration*, pp. 9–12, 33–4.

⁷³ Quinn, ‘From Orality to Literacy’, pp. 41–6; Diana Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry’, in *A Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture*, pp. 488–9.

⁷⁴ Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 69–71.

the verse if it entered the *Gunnlaugs saga* narrative within the process of non-textual transmission, prior to its written composition. If the former case, then it seems that, in his efforts to memorialise the narrative of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the author has appropriated the verse as a demonstrably effective mnemonic. If the latter case, the identical verses represent the faithful recall of an oral mnemonic, while the surrounding prose represents the narrative that the mnemonic recalled, adapted within cultures differentiated by place or time. No matter its mode of transmission, the appearance of the verse across both texts implies a conscious cultural transference of memory through verse (and narrative) as a trans-generational *memoria* technique. The textual codification of the narratives, of the verses, of cultural memory, captures the processes of transmission in the *Íslendingasögur*, while simultaneously preserving the storehouse of experience as it existed at that point in time.

2.4 MEMORY AND LITERATURE

Memory informs literature and literature represents memory in various and nuanced ways. Erll observes three key intersections of memory and narrative within literature which, as both Glauser and Hermann note, are also characteristic of the *Íslendingasögur*: ‘memory of literature’, ‘memory in literature’ and ‘literature as medium for memory’.⁷⁵ The first of these corresponds to literature’s reuse and reinterpretation of earlier texts; the second to literary representations of remembering; and the last to literature’s participation in the preservation and shaping of cultural memory. These interactions between memory and literature are observable in the Björn-Grettir and *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* examples. The memory of literature is perceptible in both: *Grettis saga* directly references *Bjarnar saga*, while *Gunnlaugs saga* borrows a pre-existing verse, either from *Kormáks saga* or oral literature. Memory in literature is most clearly identifiable in the *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse, with *Gunnlaugs saga* in particular framing the poem as the utterance of the *skáld* recalling a longed-for love.⁷⁶ In turn, literature’s role as a medium for memory has been widely observed above in reference to these examples. As categories, Erll’s classifications are functional representations of cultural

⁷⁵ Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 67–8; Glauser, ‘Literary Studies’, p. 231; Glauser, ‘The Speaking Bodies’, p. 21; Hermann, ‘Saga Literature, Cultural Memory’, p. 332.

⁷⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11; *Kormáks saga* 3.

memory in the saga corpus, and useful concepts to the examination of the processes of trans-generational narrative evolution and the textual constructs of the *Íslendingasögur*.

Memory of literature is an important element of saga narrative, manifesting in tropes, characters, events, phrases, and verses that are shared across texts. The deployment of these common narrative elements is often tonally varied, yet their presence indicates that the *Íslendingasögur* drew from mutual sources. To a large degree, this is synonymous with intertextuality, where that term is understood as describing the relationship between a new literary work and the pre-existing written *or* oral texts from which its author(s) drew. As a defining characteristic of literary media, Lachmann has theorised the role of intertextuality in a number of influential articles, and the concept is at the centre of her assertion that 'literature is culture's memory'.⁷⁷ Which is to say that literature remembers literature as new texts recall, rewrite, and redefine existing narratives. Indeed, alongside a number of other literary scholars, including those that focus on Old Norse-Icelandic texts, Lachmann posits that intertextuality is *the* defining compositional element of narrative.⁷⁸

Though the ubiquity of intertextuality in literature has broad acceptance, its centrality to the composition of written narrative has been the subject of some debate. It is good to recall Spiegel's exhortation to historians to argue for history itself as 'an active constituent of the elements' which comprise a text.⁷⁹ Indeed, Spiegel contends that to understand literature as wholly intertextual is to deny that it can represent reality which, following the same logic, must deny that the past can be represented or subsequently located in *any* written text.⁸⁰ It is a problematic thesis and thus intertextuality as a concept has been refined and qualified, including within saga scholarship, with an understanding of the other influences that inform textual composition. Both Vésteinn Ólason and Hermann, for example, locate the *Íslendingasögur* within a genre-defying inter-cultural and multi-lingual textual network, yet suggest that the introduction of specifically Icelandic innovations (vernacular language, historical mode, oral narrative conventions and so on) so diverge from these models as to

⁷⁷ Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual', p. 301; see also Lachmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature', pp. 165–78 (especially pp. 172–3).

⁷⁸ Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual', pp. 301, 305; Lachmann, 'Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature', p. 173. See also for example: Erll, *Memory in Culture*, pp. 70–2; Glauser, 'Literary Studies', pp. 241–2; Heinemann, 'Intertextuality in *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 419–20; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Kapitler af Nordens litteratur i oldtid og middelalder* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2006), p. 165.

⁷⁹ Spiegel 'History, Historicism', p. 84.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 63–4.

constitute a new literary form.⁸¹ Intertextuality may be intrinsic to the *Íslendingasögur*, but it does not by itself define the characteristics of a narrative, nor necessarily transmit meaning to its audience. With this understood, the memory of literature in the saga corpus may perhaps be best characterised as a text's representations of other sources by which it, to quote Glauser, 'always remembers these other voices and texts and recalls them by re-using them'.⁸² In this way, intertextuality functions as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural memory as it is synthesised within, and adapted to, new interpretations.

Intertextuality can be understood to exist on three levels within Old Norse-Icelandic literature: manifest, explicit and implicit. Manifest intertextuality is used here of deliberate borrowing from other texts either as a direct quote, a direct reference, or the adoption of an episode specifically identifiable by participants or context. Theodoric exemplifies manifest intertextuality, alluding to classical writers like Sallust, Horace, and Ovid, through to medieval theologians such as Bede and Isidore.⁸³ The use of pre-existing verse in *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Kormáks saga*, though drawn from different and potentially non-textual sources, is another example of manifest intertextuality, as is the reference to *Bjarnar saga* by the *Grettis saga* author. In so defining 'manifest' intertextuality, this departs from Hermann's hypotheses of a binary understanding of intertextual references, in which she posits they are best understood as either conscious or subconscious: 'manifest' or 'latent'.⁸⁴ The conscious use of other texts, what she terms 'manifest' has in itself a twofold character: the deliberate adaptation of content (as per the above examples), and the deliberate adaptation of convention. Here the former, usually the most self-evident form of intertextuality, is termed 'manifest', the latter 'explicit'.

Explicit intertextuality is most often represented by tropes or motifs that appear across texts and provide the semblance of genre. It is explicit intertextuality that identifies saga 'genres'. For the purpose of this study, the most obvious examples of explicit intertextuality occur within the sagas grouped as *skáldasögur*. The focus on the troubled lives of noted Icelandic *skáld*, their travels to the courts of Northern Europe, their frustrated desires and

⁸¹ Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory', pp. 335–40; Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 30–2, 36–7.

⁸² Jürg Glauser, 'Foreword', in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture*, p. x.

⁸³ Bagge, 'Theodoricus Monachus', pp. 75–6.

⁸⁴ Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory', pp. 337–40

socially problematic behaviours, are all explicit intertextual topoi that define the ‘sub-genre’.⁸⁵ Indeed, even the central case-studies of this thesis—Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn’s appearances at the English court—are manifestations of a shared trope representative of explicit intertextuality. Motifs such as these, which underlie a culture’s literature, are what James Wertsch has termed ‘schematic narrative elements’, and are closely associated with cultural memory in as far as cultural memory is tied to the identity of a social group.⁸⁶ The *skáldasögur* narratives impart culturally specific meaning through deliberate engagement with, and adaptation of, Icelandic storytelling conventions. Such thematic commonalities, dependent as they are on the adoption of pre-existing tropes and motifs, cannot be perceived as incidental or implicit.

Implicit intertextuality is then those narrative elements that unconsciously code a story within a tradition. These can often be difficult to identify or demonstrate with any specificity within the *Íslendingasögur* as earlier, correlative texts are non-extant.⁸⁷ Fredrik Heinemann suggests as an example the image of Þórðr making an apparently peaceful approach to Björn while wearing a blue cloak.⁸⁸ On a surface level, the passage implies that Þórðr’s mission, a visit to invite Björn to winter with him, is an amiable one. However, the symbolism of the blue cloak within saga literature inscribes hostile intent on the wearer (though it does not in this case occur), thus imparting meaning that runs counter to the narrative.⁸⁹ As an allusion to violent purpose, though, blue clothing is so ubiquitous to the *Íslendingasögur* that it is difficult to read any reference to it as having, as Heinemann suggests of this case, ‘mostly unconscious relations to other sagas’.⁹⁰ This example could be more accurately categorised as explicitly intertextual. Examples of implicit intertextuality are best derived from the basic frameworks that give the sagas their character. Thus, it may be posited that the laconic prose so peculiar to the *Íslendingasögur* is an example of implicit intertextuality, so too their pretensions to historicity, as writers narrate according to the conventions of native storytelling traditions.

⁸⁵ Clunies Ross, ‘The Skald Sagas as a Genre’, pp. 44–8

⁸⁶ Roediger and Wertsch, ‘Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies’, p. 13.

⁸⁷ Hermann, ‘Saga Literature, Cultural Memory’, p. 338.

⁸⁸ *Bjarnar saga* 11; Heinemann, ‘Intertextuality in *Bjarnar saga*’, p. 424–7.

⁸⁹ Heinemann, ‘Intertextuality in *Bjarnar saga*’, p. 427; Kirsten Wolf, ‘The Color Blue in Old Norse–Icelandic Literature’, *Scripta Islandica* 57 (2006), 55–78.

⁹⁰ Heinemann, ‘Intertextuality in *Bjarnar saga*’, p. 420.

Similarly, the feud paradigms that inform the narrative progression in many *Íslendingasögur* have inherent within them some degree of implicit intertextuality. As an example, the aftermath of the feud between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in *Gunnlaugs saga* is quite illustrative. Both men die in a duel toward the end of the saga, though Hrafn acts treacherously in his dying moment to ensure his rival does not leave the duelling ground alive; it is on this basis that Gunnlaugr's family enacts vengeance.⁹¹ Gunnlaugr's father kills one member of Hrafn's family, mutilates another, while yet a third is killed by Gunnlaugr's brother. The author is at pains to note that Hrafn's father seeks neither revenge nor compensation for these acts, and states that these killings ended the feud between the families.⁹² However, why this would be the case, why this seemingly excessive reaction did not in fact perpetuate the feud, is not explained. The authorial use of a common feud paradigm may be deliberate and thus explicit, but the way in which it informs the responses of the saga's characters and audience are complex and implicit, reliant on a functional understanding of Icelandic social norms and legislation. It is important though, to note that it is not possible to make a universal determination that examples are implicit. Individual authors have varying degrees of awareness of the literary space their narratives occupy, and the identifiable memory of literature must necessarily be judged on a case-by-case basis.

Memory *in* literature, in contrast, is invariably a deliberate literary representation of remembering. This of course does not mean there is no overlap with memory of literature; memory and literature can intersect on numerous levels simultaneously. Eleanor Barraclough's theory that saga descriptions of sea voyages constitute an act of remembering is a good example of this.⁹³ Sea voyages are ubiquitous to the *Íslendingasögur* and thus are fundamentally intertextual, as demonstrated by Barraclough's identification of thematic commonalities between the portrayals of various sea-routes across numerous texts.⁹⁴ Yet each saga that recalls a specific voyage also engages in a literary act of remembering as it deliberately recalls an extra-literary person, place, or event. Narrative portrayal of remembering thus has both diachronic and synchronic value to the study of historicity in the

⁹¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Sailing the Saga Seas: Narrative, Cultural, and Geographical Perspectives in the North Atlantic Voyages of the *Íslendingasögur*', *Journal of the North Atlantic*, 18 (2012), pp. 1–2.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–8.

Íslendingasögur: their intertextuality demonstrates the transmission of cultural memory over time, while the text's individual act of remembering preserves cultural memory at a point in time. Indeed, as Erll and Rigney assert, '[b]y imaginatively representing acts of recollection, literature makes remembrance observable'.⁹⁵ This is more specifically discernible where a scene of remembering forms a part of the narrative, as observed in the framing of the *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse in *Gunnlaugs saga*. In that instance, the *skáld* is shown in a scene of memorialisation or reminiscence, doing so via the medium of skaldic verse. Another, and particularly rich, example of memory *in* literature is found in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* in a brief episode upon which much of the narrative conflict is predicated. In it, Gísli, on the cusp of outlawry for having performed a secret killing, looks to the mound in which his murdered rival was interred and then, as the saga states 'Gísli kvað þá vísu er æva skyldi' (Gísli delivered a verse that should not have been spoken):

Teina sák í túni	I saw the shoots reach
tál gríms vinar fólgu,	up through the melting frost
Gaus þess 's geig of veittak	on the grim Thor's mound;
gunnbliks þáamiklu;	I slew that sword of Gaut.
nú hefr gnýstærir geira	Thrott's helmet has slain
grímu Þrótt of sóttan,	that tree of gold, and given
þann lét sundr of lendan	one, greedy for new land,
landkostað ábranda.	a plot of his own forever. ⁹⁶

Though some of the kennings are characteristically obscure, taken as a whole, the verse is perhaps not as subtle of meaning as the *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse, and *Gísla saga* goes on to state that the slain man's wife (who is also Gísli's sister) overheard and remembered the verse, puzzling out its meaning once she returned home. There are, therefore, three acts of remembering in this short passage: first, the physical landscape mnemonic of the burial mound which recalls the killing to Gísli's mind; secondly, the skaldic verse in which he recalls the deed; thirdly, the memorisation and subsequent analysis of the verse by the narrative's internal audience. Here *Gísla saga* exemplifies how memory *in* literature can inform our

⁹⁵ Erll and Rigney, 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory', p. 113.

⁹⁶ *Gísla saga* 18 (st. 11). Verse translation drawn from *Gísli Súrsson's Saga* 18 (st. 10), trans. by Martin S. Regal, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ii, p. 21. Glauser also notes this verse as an example of a 'literary scene of remembering', Glauser, 'Literary Studies', pp. 236-7.

understanding of how a society interacts with its cultural memory and develops strategies by which to preserve it. This passage engages with memory of a single event by demonstrating three different ways in which it could be memorialised within Icelandic culture: physical mnemonic, oral mnemonic, and subsequent reception and memorisation. As Hermann observes, it is in identifiable acts of remembering that sagas most clearly engage with their extra-textual context.⁹⁷ By narrating acts of remembering, the sagas reveal underlying approaches to memory and its transmission, and the explanatory, interpretive, and mnemonic strategies of the societies which composed them.

Which then brings the discussion to ‘literature as medium for memory’ or, rather, returns us to it, for much of cultural memory theory is concerned with the effects of literary media on the transmission and recall of collective knowledge. Works of literature, particularly those that posit a historicity to their narratives, participate in the preservation and shaping of cultural memory as they interpret a society’s storehouse of experience for future generations. In this, literature exemplifies those communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible characteristics of cultural memory media. Yet remembering the past is not objective; writing it is an interpretive act informed by literary convention, by transmission between media, by transmission between generations, and by authorial perspective. The *Íslendingasögur* were shaped by the context of their composition and by their very textualisation, meaning that, as Glauser notes, they ‘may potentially codify diverse versions of the past’.⁹⁸ This is the phenomenon seen in the different authorial approaches to the Björn–Grettir relationship and, of course, the variant uses of the *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse. Therefore, as media for memory, in seeking to identify whether the *Íslendingasögur* may also be media for history, it is necessary to test the narratives of Icelandic cultural memory against external sources. In order to fully assess the historicity of *Íslendingasögur* depictions of Viking Age England, it is necessary to draw on correlative evidence from outside the saga corpus, both textual and material.

⁹⁷ Hermann, ‘Saga Literature, Cultural Memory’, p. 341.

⁹⁸ Glauser, ‘The Speaking Bodies of Saga Texts’, p. 21.

ENGLAND IN THE SAGA AGE

There are three historical contexts critical to this study: England in the Saga or Viking Age; Iceland and Scandinavia at that time; and the Iceland of the Age of Saga Writing. All three have a bearing on the composition of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga*, and all three have a bearing on how English kingship can be read across these texts. As such, and as part of the critical apparatus required to examine representations of England in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is important to have a clear understanding of these cultures and their socio-political attitudes toward kingship as an institution. Likewise, it is important to be aware of how these cultures interacted—both in the context of Anglo-Scandinavian contact resulting from the movement and migration of the Viking Age, and of the transmission of cultural memory between generations of Icelanders. This chapter focuses on the first of these historical contexts—tenth- and eleventh-century England—and the interactions of its peoples with the Scandinavians who arrived on its shores. It takes as its starting point the historiography and archaeology of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the century from the start of Æthelstan’s reign in 924 to the end of Knútr’s in 1035, and sets out to locate saga narrative in the light of its historical context. Moreover, it seeks to illuminate how such interaction may have caused Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr’s legacies to enter into and be perpetuated within Scandinavian cultural memory.

While memory theory provides insight into the composition and function of the *Íslendingasögur* as historical narratives, there is also a degree to which such theoretical lenses deny historicity within literature. The English court episodes of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* may be surrounded by fictionalised detail, but each does display some knowledge of an England where a *skáld* may plausibly have been welcomed into the king’s retinue. English historiography and archaeology demonstrate ongoing Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact during the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. Moreover, ideas and experience and knowledge were exchanged as Scandinavians and English fought and traded and became neighbours throughout the Viking Age. In this way, the legacies of the three kings

were adopted into, adapted by, and perpetuated within, Scandinavian and Icelandic cultural memory, manifesting in their *Íslendingasögur* characterisations.

In form, evidence that may corroborate *Íslendingasögur* narratives can be categorised as either literary or material. The literary artefacts of other cultures, particularly those of England, provide analogous narratives that either substantiate or refute Icelandic accounts of specific events or peoples. Where such alternative accounts can be understood to have been composed closer in time and place to events than the *Íslendingasögur*, they can usually be understood to have historical primacy. It may be that some *Íslendingasögur* have direct intertextual relationships with these sources, that the authors had access to the historical records of other cultures, but such connections are not always identifiable or demonstrable. However, where such parallel narratives appear in texts that date closer to the recording of the *Íslendingasögur*, analogous adaptations may give evidence of direct or indirect contact between English and Icelandic historical traditions.

In turn, examples of material and artefacts of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction exist in symbiosis with the historical record, at once contextualised by literary accounts of the past, while also affirming (or gainsaying) those accounts. Thus, for example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that the so-called Heathen Army—the coalition of Scandinavian invasion forces that shaped Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the late ninth century—overwintered in Repton, Derbyshire in 873/4.¹ This account led archaeologists to hypothesise, supported by the numismatic evidence uncovered on site, that a medieval defensive earthwork and charnel deposit excavated in the vicinity of St Wystan's Church in Repton between 1980 and 1986 (fig. 3) were associated with the Army's winter camp.² Subsequent research has supported this conjecture. The charnel deposit contains the remains of over 264 people of whom around 80% were males aged 15–45. Isotope analysis and grave goods indicate them to be of Scandinavian origin, while radiocarbon dating supports an inhumation date range of 872–85 (table 2).³ A

¹ ASC A–E 874; Chapter 1, pp. 36–7.

² Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle, 'Repton and the Vikings', *Antiquity*, 66 (1992), 43–8; Richard Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology in Britain and Ireland* (Princes Risborough: Shire Publications, 1990), 14–16; though cf. Julian D. Richards, 'Pagans and Christians at a Frontier: Viking Burial in the Danelaw', in *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300–1300*, ed. by Martin Carver (York: York Medieval Press, 2003), 389–94.

³ Martin Biddle and Birthe Kjølbye-Biddle, 'Repton and the "Great Heathen Army", 873–4', in *Vikings and the Danelaw: Selected Papers from the Proceedings of the Thirteenth Viking Congress*, ed. by James Graham-Campbell and others (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001), pp. 45–74; Catrine L. Jarman and others, 'The Viking Great Army in England: New Dates from the Repton Charnel', *Antiquity*, 92 (2018), 192–6.

such, the archaeological evidence supports the *Chronicle's* entry, the *Chronicle's* entry contextualises the archaeological evidence: the literary and material evidence are reciprocal and complementary.

Table 2: Calibrated ¹⁴C dates (Repton) (Jarmen et al., 2018)

Grave/bone ID	Lab. ID	¹⁴ C BP	Marine/terrestrial calibration (95.4% certainty)	Contextual date (combined ¹⁴ C BP and artefacts)
Graves				
G529	OxA-12024	1281±27	690–939	873–939
G511	OxA-12023	1250±25	772–975	873–886
G295	OxA-12004	1209±27	773–972	873–886
F940				
G360	OxA-12005	1230±24	720–966	872–885
G361	OxA-12006	1193±25	770–980	872–885
G362	OxA-12007	1218±25	720–968	872–885
G363	OxA-12008	1236±25	682–894	872–885
Charnel				
X-03	OxA-13076	1273±27	694–951	779–887
X-17	OxA-31524	1256±28	724–977	779–887
X-23	OxA-31449	1267±22	693–948	779–887
X-70	OxA-31450	1217±28	780–1017	779–887
H-537	OxA-31611	1333±25	675–876	779–887
U-480	OxA-12001	1271±26	690–942	779–887
F359	OxA-12002	1223±25	773–980	779–887
F391	OxA-12003	1230±25	773–981	779–887



Map 5: Repton, Oxford and Dorset burials (M. Firth)

Removed due to copyright restrictions

Fig. 3 Repton site plan, winter camp with adjacent charnel mound and selected Scandinavian-identified graves (Jarmen et al., 2018)

Repton is not an isolated example. The mass burials at Oxford and Dorset, though smaller in scale, have already been noted (map 5).⁴ The individuals at these sites—around thirty-four in the former and fifty in the latter—are overwhelmingly young males who show evidence of execution, or wounding, or post-mortem burning. For a number of reasons discussed below, these suggest parallels with the St Brice's Day massacre, recounted in the *Chronicle* for the year 1002 and also recalled in a charter of renewal for the Abbey of St Frideswide in Oxford dated 1004.⁵ This supposition is supported by isotope analyses identifying the men as being of Scandinavian origin, and radiocarbon dates for the bones that fall within Æthelred's reign.⁶ Given the wealth of apparently correlating evidence, as Levi Roach notes, '[i]t is almost *too* tempting to associate these finds with St Brice's Day [13 November] 1002'.⁷ This is no doubt true; certainly the site excavators at Oxford succumbed to the temptation of that explanation, and Roach himself seems persuaded.⁸ However, the excavators at Dorset, and the earliest commentators on Oxford, sound a note of caution;⁹ St Brice's Day was likely symptomatic of a broader English reaction to the presence of Scandinavian mercenaries. Importantly, whether attesting a single moment of violence or a wider cultural milieu, the archaeological record may once more serve to illuminate the historical record and vice versa.

Any overview of pre-Norman Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact is necessarily Anglo-centric, at least insofar as contemporary or near-contemporary historiography is concerned. Viking Age Scandinavian societies rarely kept documentary records. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is perhaps the best-known historical record of Viking Age England. Extant in six (to nine) primary manuscripts, the *Chronicle* is an annalistic record of English history initially commissioned by Alfred the Great in the late ninth century, the resulting text comprising a 'common stock' that covers the years 1–892 AD. From the first recording of a raid in 787, the 'common stock' has an evident concern with the arrival of the vikings.¹⁰

⁴ Chapter 1, pp. 29–30.

⁵ ASC C–E 1002; S 909.

⁶ For Oxford, see Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', pp. 89–97; Sean Wallis, *The Oxford Henge and Late Saxon Massacre, with Medieval and Later Occupation, at St John's College, Oxford* (Reading: Thames Valley Archaeological Services, 2014), pp. 137–58. For Dorset, see Louise Loe and others, 'Given to the Ground': *A Viking Age Mass Grave on Ridgeway Hill, Weymouth* (Oxford: Oxford Archaeology, 2014), pp. 10–15, 42–3; Boyle, 'Death on the Dorset Ridgeway', pp. 113–14.

⁷ Roach, *Æthelred*, p. 199.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–9; Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 233–5.

⁹ Boyle, 'Death on the Dorset Ridgeway', 117–18; Loe, 'Given to the Ground', pp. 9–12; Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', p. 98, cf. Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, p. 157.

¹⁰ ASC A–F 787; see also *Æthelweard* 3.1.

Alfred's early reign was consumed by the ongoing conflict with the Heathen Army, which had conducted a near-twenty-year campaign from c.865 that appeared intent on conquest more so than loot. Alfred's success in repelling the viking threat placed Wessex in a position to exploit the power vacuum that derived from the vikings' overthrow of the other English monarchies. This situation informs two ideological underpinnings of the 'common stock': the alterity and hostility of the Scandinavians, and the pre-eminence of Wessex and its kings.¹¹

The 'common stock' of the *Chronicle* was subsequently disseminated to various clerical centres which undertook continuations. The composition, detail, and range of coverage of these depends upon the regional and political interests of the house that maintained the text, and upon the text's subsequent transmission and copying history. Nonetheless, the *Chronicle* continuations attest constant Anglo-Scandinavian interaction over the subsequent centuries and, moreover, maintain a thematic interest in the kings of Wessex.¹² Taken as a corpus, the *Chronicle* thus provides an overview of English history that is at once interested in Scandinavian activity in England, and invested in recording key events of the reigns of English kings. As such, with due awareness of its discernible agendas, the *Chronicle* provide a chronological framework upon which to build an analysis of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact in the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. First, however, the vikings. The Scandinavian raiders hold a prominent position in the history of medieval Anglo-Scandinavian interaction, and it is worth considering how they were perceived, both in Saga Age England, and in Iceland in the Age of Saga Writing.

3.1 IDENTITIES AND DEFINITIONS: VÍKING AND THE VÍKINGAR

The legacy of the vikings colours perceptions of Anglo-Scandinavian contact in the ninth to eleventh centuries, and not without reason. The types of interaction that occurred between English and Scandinavian prior to the Norman Conquest were numerous and varied, as are the sources for Scandinavian activity in England, both literary and material. However, it is as raiders, as the infamous 'vikings', that Scandinavian visitors to English shores are best known.

¹¹ Courtney Konshuh, 'Constructing Early Anglo-Saxon Identity in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*', in *The Land of the English Kin*, ed. by Alexander Langlands and Ryan Lavelle (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 157–60, 177–9.

¹² Stafford, *After Alfred*, pp. 50–1, 73–6; 104–5; 129.

Military activity is the most prevalent aspect of the Scandinavian presence in England recorded in narrative sources and is likewise attested by such archaeological examples as Repton, Oxford, and Dorset. Indeed, despite any poetic achievement as *skáld* during their time in England, Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn primarily perform in a martial capacity. That the England of the sagas provides a platform from which the *skáld* can demonstrate their prowess as warriors surely reflects Icelandic cultural memory of Viking Age England as a place of conflict.

However, the term ‘viking’ itself is a fraught one that requires some definition. Further, its use in Old Norse-Icelandic texts requires analysis for what it may reveal of how Icelanders of the Age of Saga Writing perceived the viking activity of their ancestors. The etymology, function, and shifting meaning of the term ‘viking’ from Old Norse *viking* (the act of raiding), or *vikingr* (a raider)—and their Old English cognate *wicing*—into modern English have been extensively discussed by Christine Fell and Judith Jesch.¹³ In modern Anglophone scholarship it is usually intended to mean peoples of Scandinavian ancestry who, from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, traversed the northeast Atlantic, engaging in piracy, politics, trading, and settlement. However, the earliest attestations of the Old English word *wicing*, preserved in the Épinial, Erfurt, and Corpus glossaries, equated it with the Latin *piraticus* (pirate), with no regional associations.¹⁴ Fell argues that the use of the term *wicing* for Scandinavian raiders represents a tenth-century development, and one that was not common, with ‘Danes’, ‘pagans’, and ‘heathens’ more usual designations.¹⁵ In this context, *wicing* takes on a pejorative sense referring, like the Old Norse *vikingr*, to the raiders rather than the act of raiding or piracy which, negative as it may be, has little deprecatory force.

It follows then that *vikingr* too may take on a pejorative aspect. Old Norse texts use the term to denote warrior bands of Nordic origin who could be compatriots, or who could be enemies, with positive or negative connotations informed by literary context.¹⁶ In turn, the

¹³ Christine Fell, ‘Modern English Viking,’ *Leeds Studies in English*, 18 (1987), 111–23; Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 4–8.

¹⁴ *Old English Glosses in the Épinial-Erfurt Glossary*, ed. by J.D. Pfeifer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 39; Christine Fell, ‘Old English *wicing*: A Question of Semantics,’ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 72 (1986), 297–9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 300–15. See also, for example: Ælfric, *Passio S. Edmundi Regis et Martyris*, in *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, ed. by Walter W. Skeat, 2 vols (London: EETS, 1890), i, pp. 314–34; Abbo of Fleury, *Passio S. Eadmundi*; *Asser* 3–6, 9–10; ASC A–E 879, 885, A 917, C 982; Wulfstan II of York, *Sermo lupi ad Anglos*. In his turn, Æthelweard favours the term ‘barbarians’ in his Latin chronicle, though the use of the term in this context is elsewhere limited. See for example, *Æthelweard* 4.3.

¹⁶ Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora*, pp. 5–6.

term *viking*, denoting the act of raiding, tends to take on a neutral aspect, particularly in the *Íslendingasögur*, where *viking* is often portrayed as an accepted form of labour. Thus, for example, Egill's ancestors partake in *viking* in pursuit of booty in the opening chapter of *Egils saga* and are even lauded for their success.¹⁷ Egill's own *viking* activities are central to the narrative and, while it cannot be argued that these pursue any noble ends, Egill rarely attracts authorial censure. Moreover, Egill's adventures frequently demonstrate that *viking*, at least as it was perceived in the Age of Saga Writing, denoted and entailed more than relentless plundering. Thus, for example, while moored off the Danish coast during a *viking* expedition, Þorolfr and Egill's ships are approached by the men of a local landowner to establish 'hvárt þeir vildi þar friðland hafa eða hernað' (whether they sought to have peace or war). When the reply comes 'at þeim var engi nauðsyn til at herja þar ok fara herskildi' (that there was no need for them to fight or raid there), the landowner fêtes the brothers and they depart in friendship.¹⁸ It is only two chapters later, while on the same expedition, that the brothers turn their *viking* force to mercenary work in aid of Æthelstan.¹⁹ Nonetheless, and no matter any nuances implied of the activity, the military sense of *viking* in the *Íslendingasögur* is clear; expeditions and men focused on trade or settlement are not designated as *viking* or *vikingr* in those moments.²⁰ Given that this distinction is made by the texts at the centre of this study, the term 'viking' is here limited to refer to Scandinavian warrior bands.

As Old Norse-Icelandic texts postdate the Viking Age, it can only be speculated as to how the Scandinavian raiders themselves self-identified. Nonetheless, the *Íslendingasögur* preserve some memory of viking activity; after all, the vikings cast a long shadow over the annals of western European history. The type of activity ascribed to Þorolfr and Egill by the saga author—both the raiding and the mercenary service—is seemingly typical of the early tenth century, the period in which the brothers' story can be located, and the centuries that bracket it.

The historical record of the century leading into the reigns of Alfred and his grandson Æthelstan is punctuated by viking activity. While 787 may be the earliest raid recorded in the

¹⁷ *Egils saga* 1.

¹⁸ *Egils saga* 48.

¹⁹ *Egils saga* 50.

²⁰ See for example, *Egils saga* 17, 27, 38–9.

Chronicle, the most famous early viking attack in England is that on Lindisfarne in 793, framed in eschatological terms in the D-text:

Her wæron reðe forebecna cumene ofer Norðhymbra land, 7 þæt folc earmlic bregdon, þæt wæron ormete þodenas 7 ligrescas, 7 fyrenne dracan wæron gesewene on þam lifte fleogende. Þam tacnum sona fyligde mycel hunger, 7 litel æfter þam, þæs ilcan geares on .vi. idus Ianuarii, earmlice hæþenra manna hergunc adilegode Godes cyrican in Lindisfarnæe þurh hreaflac 7 mansliht.²¹

([In this year] terrible omens came over Northumbria, grievously terrifying those people; there were great whirlwinds and flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen winging through the air. Following those signs came a great famine and, a little after that, on 8 June the same year, the depredations of wretched heathen men destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne with plunder and slaughter.)

The scholar Alcuin—originally of York though resident in Francia in 793—expresses similar sentiments in the bombastic rhetoric of his letter to the Abbot of Lindisfarne after the raid:

...vestrae tribulationis calamitas licet absentem multum me cotidie contristat, quando pagani contaminaverunt sanctuaria Dei et fuderunt sanguinem sanctorum in circuitu altaris, vestaverunt domum spei nostre, calcaverunt corpora sanctorum in templo Dei quasi sterquilinum in platea ... Aut hoc maioris initium est doloris aut peccata habitantium hic exigerunt. Non equidem casu contigit, sed magni cuiuslibet meriti indicium est.²²

(... every day, though I am absent [from you], the calamity of your tribulation greatly saddens me: when the pagans desecrated God's sanctuaries and spilled the blood of the saints around the altar, destroyed the house of our hope, trod the bodies of the saints underfoot in the temple of God, like waste in the street ... Either this is the start of yet greater pain, or the sins of the inhabitants have been exacted upon them. Indeed, this has not happened by chance, rather it is indicative that it was greatly merited by someone.)

²¹ ASC D-F 793.

²² Alcuin of Tours, *Epist.* 20

While these colourful descriptions have ensured that the attack on Lindisfarne looms large in modern English perceptions of the Viking Age, it does not appear to have taken equal place in medieval English or Scandinavian cultural memory. The *Chronicle's* account is only found in its Northern Recension—extant in manuscripts D, E and F—and leaves little trace in Anglo-Norman histories; Alcuin's letter is only quoted in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*.²³ Moreover, the similarities between the rhetoric of the *Chronicle* and the admonitions of Alcuin are not incidental. The Northern Recension at this point draws from a text known as *York Annals* which, as Joanna Story identifies, display 'Alcuin's stylistic influence', whether through direct editorial intervention or later borrowing in the mode of William.²⁴ There is, however, no Scandinavian record of this raid. The most plausible reason for this is implied by the 793 entry in the *Annals of Ulster*, which simply states, 'Uastatio omnium insularum Britannie a gentilibus' (Devastation of all the island of Britain by pagans).²⁵ The Insular world had a long history of intense viking raiding, and specific events tended to only attract regional interest—both the Northern Recension of the *Chronicle* and Alcuin's letter can be characterised as such.

However, the eschatological rhetoric Alcuin's letter embodies is observable across the historical record. Clerical explanations of the vikings as God's divine retribution are found throughout English and Frankish histories from the eighth century through to the time of Æthelred's reign.²⁶ During Æthelred's kingship, this eschatological dialogue was led by Archbishop Wulfstan II of York (1002–23), the most prominent cleric of the English court. Wulfstan-authored charters and laws, his possible editorial interpolations in the *Æthelred Annals*, his homily *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, all preserve some echo of Alcuin's rhetoric.²⁷ Wulfstan was a student of Alcuin's correspondence and likely drew on his interpretation of the vikings as tools of God's judgement in formulating his own views.²⁸ However, the nature of viking activity had changed in the centuries that separated Alcuin and Wulfstan. Sources describe

²³ G. Pont. iii.127.

²⁴ Joanna Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750–870* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 116–33 (at 132). See also Stafford, *After Alfred*, pp. 114, 116 (n. 49).

²⁵ *Annals of Ulster* 793.7.

²⁶ See for example, *Annales de Saint-Bertin* 881; Ermentarius de Noirmoutier, *De Translationibus et Miraculis Sancti Filiberti*, in *Monuments de l'Histoire des Abbayes de Saint-Philibert (Noirmoutier, Grandlieu, Tournus)*, ed. by René Poupardin (Paris: Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1905), p. 59; Wulfstan II of York, *Sermo lupi ad Anglos*.

²⁷ Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 279–83; Stafford, *After Alfred*, pp. 182–8.

²⁸ Gareth Mann, 'The Development of Wulfstan's Alcuin Manuscript', in *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York*, ed. by Matthew Townend (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 235–78; Roach, *Æthelred*, p. 283.

increasingly regular viking raids preying on monasteries and on cities, turning to larger-scale military campaigning through the ninth and tenth centuries. This shift to more ambitious and sizable inland raiding is attested in the archaeological record, being the type of military presence implied by the mass burials at Repton, Oxford and Dorset. These are sites that go some way to corroborating the historical record while simultaneously bypassing the eschatological rhetoric of clerical writers who so often perceived the raids as a Christian-pagan conflict.

However, it is important to recall that 'Scandinavian' and 'viking' were not equivalent terms. The North Sea is not a large sea, and Anglo-Scandinavian interaction was frequent, extended over a long period, and took many forms.²⁹ Scandinavians arrived on English shores not just as raiders and mercenaries, but as traders and emissaries, settlers and conquerors. As historical sources grow in number and complexity from the eighth century, so too does the picture of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the early Middle Ages become richer and more nuanced. There is little subtlety to depictions of the vikings as a relentless destructive force sent by God.

Old Norse-Icelandic sagas, as stories derived from the cultures from which the vikings came, present different perspectives on raiding than English and Frankish sources. This is not to say that these portrayals are always positive, though they can be, but rather that they describe an activity with more nuance than can be divined from the shrill tones of Christian clerics. Egill and Björn, for example, are both described as partaking in viking activity through their careers. In Björn's case, this *is* given a positive slant: the author tells us that, shortly after his time in Knútr's court, 'Björn var nú í víkingu að afla sér fjár ok virðingar' (Björn was now *víking* to win himself wealth and renown).³⁰ The viking interest in loot is well attested in English accounts of their activities, that raiding could also augment reputation less so. Here the evidence is that Björn's raids were restricted to the Baltic. Björn's activities in England, though they cannot be characterised as peaceful, do not victimise the English and are not portrayed as raiding. This similarly holds true of Egill and Gunnlaugr (though neither is Gunnlaugr involved in *víking* at any point in his saga). The viking expeditions of Björn and

²⁹ John Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 40–6; John Hines, 'The Origins of East Anglia in a North Sea Zone', in *East Anglia and its North Sea World in the Middle Ages*, ed. by David Bates and Robert Liddiard (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), pp. 16–43.

³⁰ *Bjarnar saga* 6.

Egill were primarily directed, as raiding often was, toward other Scandinavians, and their Baltic neighbours. It follows then that positive portrayals of raiding in Old Norse-Icelandic texts, as a contrast to the rhetoric of clerical commentators, cannot simply be explained away as the perspectives of perpetrator versus victim. Scandinavians were also the victims of vikings, and the *Íslendingasögur* do at times hold the vikings in disdain. This is demonstrated in *Bjarnar saga*. Björn is described as *viking* just the once, in the quoted passage, but he is never called a *vikingr*. He is, however, accused of being a *vikingr* by King Óláfr II in what appears to be a proverb: ‘vikingum auðfengnar sakar við kaupmenn, er þeir girnask fé þeira’ (it is easy for vikings to pick fights with merchants when they crave their money).³¹ While this situation ends amicably between the king and the *skáld*, if this is indeed a proverb—trans-generational maxims that embody cultural memory—then it recalls something of the reputation of vikings in their own time and in their own lands.

The different connotations of *viking* and *vikingr* in *Bjarnar saga* reinforce Jesch’s point that, whereas the former has something of a neutral meaning, the latter often takes on a pejorative sense.³² The dim view of *vikingar* (pl.) seen in some Old Norse-Icelandic texts is reinforced in *Gunnlaugs saga* in the hero’s defence of Æthelred.³³ Raiding is not an integral part of the *Gunnlaugs saga* narrative, with the *skáld*’s travels more directly defined by a desire to compose and perform verse for great men. As such, the word *viking* is not used in the text, and the term *vikingr* only twice—in close succession—to describe the *berserkr* with whom Gunnlaugr fights a *hólmganga* on Æthelred’s behalf. *Berserkr* is itself a fraught term, though not one central to this discussion, and the modern sense of the word as something akin to a ‘wild warrior’ suffices.³⁴ In the *Íslendingasögur*, the word often attracts a negative connotation and it is not uncommon to find it partnered with *vikingr* to describe a particularly unruly or reprehensible warrior.³⁵ This is certainly the characterisation of Gunnlaugr’s opponent at the English court, Þórormr, a *berserkr* and a *vikingr* feared by the king himself.

In contrast, Egill is portrayed as a viking in his first expedition to England. Here there is something of that more basic definition of *vikingr* as identifying Scandinavian warrior

³¹ *Bjarnar saga* 8.

³² Jesch, *Viking Diaspora*, pp. 5–6, she notes this particularly of the *konungasögur*, though it is a dynamic that is clearly displayed in the *Íslendingasögur* in this instance.

³³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

³⁴ For an overview of the term and its potential etymologies, see Cleasby-Vigfusson s.v. ‘ber-serkr’.

³⁵ See for example *Egils saga* 1; *Grettis saga* 19.

bands. During the episode in which Þorolfr and Egill befriend the Norwegian landholder, not only are they described as *viking*, but they and their crew are also termed *víkingar*.³⁶ In the following chapter, in an act clearly aimed at the brothers, the Danish king sets their rival Eyvindr ‘þar til landvarnar fyrir víkingum’ (to defend his lands from vikings).³⁷ When Þorolfr and Egill do meet Eyvindr in battle, Eyvindr escapes the fray by swimming to shore from his ship. In a verse mocking his cowardice, Egill ironically terms Eyvindr a *víkingr* and defender of Denmark, implying positive connections between vikings and bravery.³⁸ This is perhaps not unexpected considering Egill himself is acting as a viking at this point of the narrative. But, bearing in mind that *Egils saga* is set around a century before *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, it may also be that cultural memory of Egill preserves within it attitudes toward the vikings from an earlier time. Björn and Gunnlaugr are heroes of the post-conversion decades, and later redactors may have deemed it problematic to attribute viking raiding activity, especially that directed toward other Christian societies, to their agency. This ambiguity of identity does not exist in *Egils saga*. Egill was a known pagan in a pagan era and, indeed, it is not difficult to find examples of *Íslendingasögur* describing pre-conversion *víkingar* as great and successful men.³⁹ It is this characterisation of the vikings, as accomplished and formidable warriors, that is inherent in the *Egils saga* description of Þorolfr and Egill and the Scandinavian men under their command at Vínheiðr/Brunanburh as *víkingar*:

En sá herr er þá var flar saman kominn, þá setti konungr flar yfir höfðingja Þórólfr ok Egill; skyldu þeir ráða fyrir því liði er víkingar höfðu þangat haft til konungs.⁴⁰

(The king set Þorolfr and Egill as leaders over the troops that had gathered there; they were to command those forces the *víkingar* had brought to the king.)

It becomes increasingly clear through the course of the battle that the author is again using *víkingr* in the broader sense of ‘Scandinavian soldiers’, equating the term with *norrænir menn* (Norsemen).⁴¹ Interestingly, however, the Hiberno-Scandinavian and Anglo-Scandinavian

³⁶ *Egils saga* 48.

³⁷ *Egils saga* 40.

³⁸ *Egils saga* 49 (st. 15).

³⁹ See for example, Harvard of *Hávarðar saga Ísfríðings* 1, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, *ÍF* VI (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1943), pp. 290–1; Qnund *tréfót* (tree-foot) of *Grettis saga* and his compatriots; and the Ingimundarsons of *Vatnsdæla saga* 7–9, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* VIII, (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1939), pp. 17–27.

⁴⁰ *Egils saga* 51.

⁴¹ *Egils saga* 53.

soldiers arrayed against Æthelstan at Vínheiðr are not so described: Óláfr's men were, after all, soldiers serving their king, not mercenaries. This suggests three presumptions underpinning the saga's portrayal of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction: firstly, that itinerancy was definitional to being a viking; secondly, that categorisation as a viking was not inherently pejorative, nor was it problematic for a viking to serve in a mercenary capacity under a king's command; lastly, that Insular Scandinavians were culturally distinct from their Nordic brethren, their own activity informed by regional political life.

3.2 CULTURAL CONTACT IN THE REIGN OF ÆTHELSTAN (924–39)

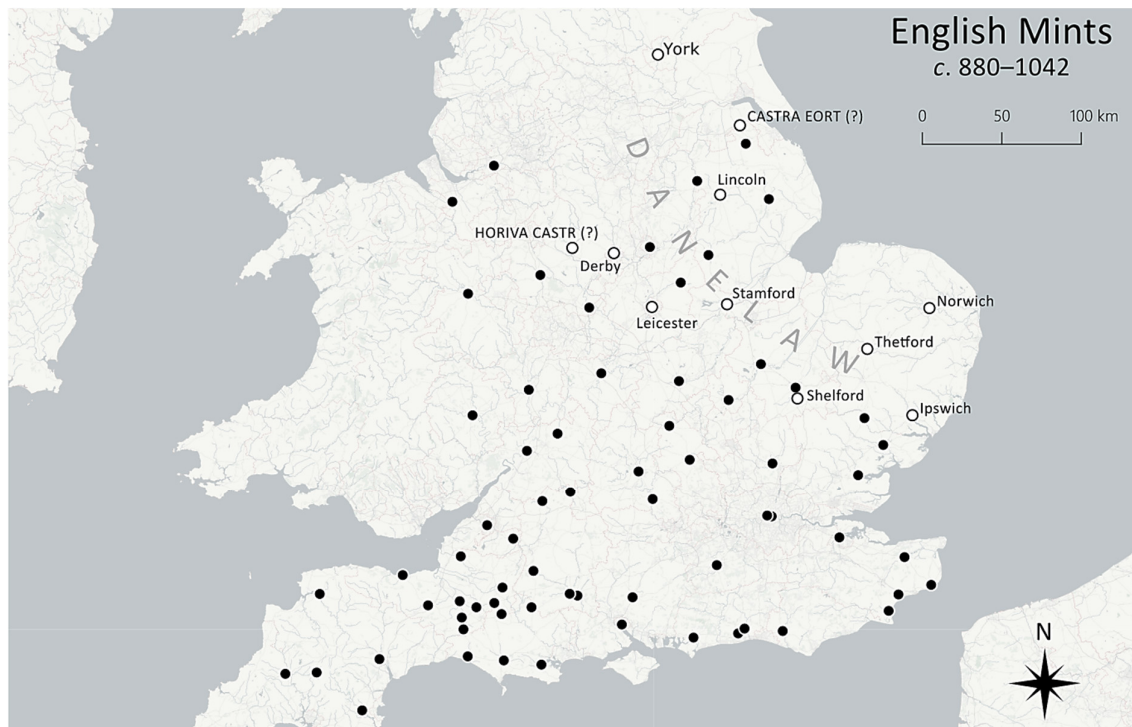
Egils saga's characterisation of Insular Scandinavian settlers and their hierarchies and hegemonies is quite perspicacious, establishing the narrative within a plausible historical setting, even if historical detail is obscured. This implies the *Egils saga* tradition held within it some knowledge, or cultural memory, of England in the early tenth century. Certainly, by the time of Æthelstan's reign, settler communities of Scandinavian origin had been present throughout the Insular world for multiple generations, governing in various states of autonomy. The attendant Anglo-Scandinavian cultural milieu not only provides a believable setting for Egill's time in England, but suggests an environment from which such stories may have originated to be disseminated in Scandinavian oral literature. It is, as such, worth a brief overview of Scandinavian settlement in northern England, before going on to consider the nature of, and evidence for, Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact in Æthelstan's reign.

The *Chronicle* makes the first clear statement that the vikings in England had turned to settlement in an entry for 876, '7 þy geare Halfdene Norðhymbraland gedælde, 7 hergende wæron, heor 7 tilgende wæron' (and in this year Halfdan divided Northumbria [among the Danes], and they began to plough and to support themselves).⁴² Halfdan was one of the leaders of the Heathen Army and seems to have taken control of Northumbria from 875, thereafter confining his activities to the north and to Ireland where he died in 877.⁴³ The leader of that part of the Army that drove Alfred to the brink was named Guthrum. However, in May 878, Alfred defeated Guthrum's forces at the Battle of Edington, thereby reasserting West

⁴² ASC A–E 876; see also *Asser* 50.

⁴³ ASC A–E 875–876; *Annals of Ulster 877.5*; David Rollason, *Northumbria*, pp. 215–16.

Saxon self-determination and expanding his hegemony. Guthrum and his men subsequently retreated to East Anglia where they settled, just as their compatriots had earlier done in Northumbria.⁴⁴ Written in the knowledge of Guthrum's ensuing overlordship in East Anglia, the *Chronicle* style him as 'king' from 878.⁴⁵ This delineation of regions under English and Danish jurisdiction was formalised in the 880s through a 'treaty' between Alfred and Guthrum, in which Alfred recognised Scandinavian control over East Anglia, Northumbria and much of Mercia. It was an agreement that, in many ways, simply ratified the *status quo*.



Map 6: Active minting centres between c.880 and 1042, ○ marks mints associated with the production of coinage for Anglo-Scandinavian rulers before c.954 (M. Firth, after MEC, pp. 337–57)

The resulting Scandinavian character of north-eastern England persisted through the tenth century, despite often falling under West Saxon hegemony. Onomastic evidence demonstrates extensive Scandinavian settlement in the region; supporting archaeological evidence attests communities that produced Scandinavian-influenced crafts and goods and maintained economic and cultural links to Scandinavia.⁴⁶ Further, numismatic evidence attests periods of

⁴⁴ ASC A–F 878–880. See also *Asser* 56, 60; *Æthelweard* 4.3.

⁴⁵ ASC A–F 878, 890.

⁴⁶ R.A. Hall, 'Scandinavian Settlement in England: The Archaeological Evidence', *Acta Archaeologica*, 71, no. 1 (2000), 147–57; Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology*, 13–30; Julian D. Richards, and Dave Haldenby, 'The Scale and Impact of Viking Settlement in

Norse governance into the 950s, with coins from Northumbrian and Danelaw mints attesting the names of regional kings and corroborating the historical record of Scandinavian rule (map 6).⁴⁷ Events such as the uprising that brought about the Battle of Brunanburh, the collapse of West Saxon regional control in the north on Æthelstan's death, and the crowning of the exiled Norwegian King Eiríkr *blóðøx* as King of York, moreover speak to a society that desired independence from Winchester's rule.⁴⁸ Nor is evidence of a persistent Scandinavian identity only found in artefacts from the region and accounts of events that occurred there. Northumbria and the Danelaw are perceived as culturally distinct by their southern neighbours. Thus, for example, a law code c.962 originating from the court of King Edgar (959–75) states:

7 ic wille, þæt woruldgeriht mid Denum standan be swa godum lagum, swa hy betste geceosan mægen. Stande þonne mid Anglum þæt ic 7 mine witan to minra yldrena domum geyhton, eallum leodscipe to þearfe.⁴⁹

(And I will that secular justice stand among the Danes according to such good laws as best they may decide. Though among the English that which I and my council have added to my ancestor's ordinances is to stand, for the benefit of all the land.)

Here the king and his legislators identify the Danelaw as culturally distinct from the rest of England and even to some degree self-governing, this some eight years after Eiríkr, likely the last Scandinavian King of York, had been killed.⁵⁰ Æthelred's 997 *Wantage Code* supports this observation; seemingly a code drafted for regional usage in the Danelaw, it preserves uniquely Scandinavian terminology and practice, where such was perceived to augment English custom.⁵¹ The regional distinction is made as late as 1008 in the law-code *VI Æthelred*, which states innocence can be proved by oath or threefold ordeal 'on Ængla lage 7 on Dena lage be þam þe heora lagu sy' (in regions under English law, and in regions under Danish law

Northumbria', *Medieval Archaeology*, 62 (2018), 336–44; Ailsa Mainman and Nicola Rogers, 'Craft and Economy in Anglo-Scandinavian York', in *Aspects of Scandinavian York*, pp. 477–82; Dominic Tweddle, 'Art in Pre-Conquest York', in *Aspects of Scandinavian York*, pp. 446–58.

⁴⁷ Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', pp. 326, 335–8; Jane Kershaw, 'An Early Medieval Dual-Currency Economy: Bullion and Coin in the Danelaw', *Antiquity*, 91, no. 355 (2017), pp. 176–85.

⁴⁸ ASC A–D 937, D–E 940–954. See also Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', p. 49.

⁴⁹ *IV Edgar* 2.1, in Liebermann, i, p. 210.

⁵⁰ ASC D 954.

⁵¹ *III Æthelred* 2.1, in Liebermann, i, p. 228–33; Charlotte Neff, 'Scandinavian elements in the Wantage Code of Æthelred II', *The Journal of Legal History*, 10, no. 3 (1989), 307–11; Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century, Legislation and Its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 328–9.

according to their own legal practice).⁵² Both law codes maintain the king's rights over the Danelaw, but also acknowledge and support the existence of local practice.⁵³ Such merging of English and Scandinavian legal norms typifies the multicultural, or Anglo-Scandinavian nature of the region from the tenth century.

To return then to Æthelstan, Scandinavian settlers had been present in England's northeast for fifty years before he claimed the West Saxon throne. West Saxon hegemony over East Anglia and much of the Midlands had been reasserted by Alfred and his successors in the decades leading to Æthelstan's rule, while Æthelstan brought Northumbria, at least temporarily, under Winchester's rule.⁵⁴ It is curious that in the D-text of the *Chronicle*—one of those that recounts the viking raid on Lindisfarne—Æthelstan's annexation of the region is foreshadowed by similar omens, 'Her oðeowdon fyrena leoman on norðæle þære lyfte' ([In this year] fiery lights appeared in the northern part of the sky).⁵⁵ That the earliest extant manuscript of the Northern Recension, the D-text, was copied in the 1040s presents some problems. The entry for 793 could be the interpolation of chroniclers at that time adapting cultural memory of earlier English history to reflect the eleventh-century experience of the vikings.⁵⁶ Yet, the 793 raid on Lindisfarne is attested in all Northern Recension manuscripts as well as the *Historia Regum* attributed to Simeon of Durham, which drew on the same source.⁵⁷ This does imply some correlation with regional tradition. However, the above-quoted entry for 927 is only in the D-text and is recorded in a different scribal hand from that of 793.⁵⁸ Thus, the parallel wording may be indicative of manifest intertextuality—a later scribe's borrowing from the Lindisfarne entry to indicate Æthelstan's overlordship bode ill for the Northumbrians. This would suggest the D-text preserves a peculiarly Anglo-Scandinavian worldview not present in other *Chronicle* texts.

Alternatively, the rhetoric of the 927 entry may represent an instance of explicit intertextuality—the use of a known foreshadowing motif that emphasises the dramatic nature

⁵² VI Æthelred 38, in Liebermann, i, p. 256.

⁵³ Lesley Abrams, 'King Edgar and the Men of the Danelaw,' in *Edgar, King of the English, 959–975: New Interpretations*, ed by Donald Scragg (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 172–3; Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, pp. 317–19.

⁵⁴ ASC D 926–927, E 927.

⁵⁵ ASC D 927 (*recte*).

⁵⁶ Marilina Cesario, 'Fyrenne Dracan in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', *Textiles, Text, Intertext: Essays in Honour of Gale R. Owen-Crocker*, ed. by Maren Clegg Hyer and Jill Frederick (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2016), pp. 166–8.

⁵⁷ SD, i, pp. 55–6.

⁵⁸ G.P. Cubbin, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition MS D* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1996), pp. xi–xiii.

of events. The portion of the D-text that covers to the year 1016 is a copy of a non-extant compilation drawn together under the supervision of Archbishop Wulfstan.⁵⁹ Anything that is unique to that text is suspect of his intervention, especially where these depart from the Northern Recension tradition paralleled in the E-text, and display thematically characteristic Wulfstanian interests. The eschatological tone of the D-text 927 entry is certainly in keeping with Wulfstan's other writings and, as Stafford notes, in content it appears a likely 'Wulfstanian intervention'.⁶⁰ Moreover, the appearance of 'fiery lights' — comets and the like — was commonly interpreted as foreboding regime change, promoted in the works of such well-regarded and widely-taught scholars as Isidore and Bede.⁶¹ However, it must also be considered that the entry may have been intended literally. Chinese sources and scientific modelling suggest significant meteor showers in the northern hemisphere in 927.⁶² Certainly, composed in typical annalistic style, the phrasing does not necessitate that the appearance of lights in the sky be directly associated with Æthelstan's rise to the Northumbrian kingship.⁶³ No matter its intent, as in its entry for 793, the D-text is here relating matters of regional Northumbrian interest.

It is fortunate that the D-text does take an interest in Æthelstan's activities in the north, as the *Chronicle* manuscripts are remarkably reticent on details of his life and kingship. In the fifteen years of his reign, from 924 to 939, the *Chronicle* only references Æthelstan by name in entries for five of them, two of which are preserved in the D-text alone.⁶⁴ The D-text is also the only manuscript of the *Chronicle* to record that in 940/1 'Norðhymbra alugon hira getreowaða 7 Anlaf of Yrlande him to cinge gecuron' (the Northumbrians betrayed their oaths and chose Óláfr from Ireland to be king). This, the return at the behest of the Northumbrian elites of the same Óláfr Guðrøðsson that Æthelstan had defeated at Brunanburh, marked a rejection of West Saxon overlordship upon Æthelstan's death. It also marked an acknowledgement of their regional Northumbrian identity. The Norse King of Dublin and kin to Sigtryggr, the previous Scandinavian king of York, Óláfr was an obvious and legitimate heir to the

⁵⁹ Roach, *Æthelred*, p. 52; Stafford, *After Alfred*, pp. 160–3, 182–4, 241–5.

⁶⁰ Stafford, *After Alfred*, p. 244, see also pp. 166–7.

⁶¹ William D. McReady, 'Bede, Isidore, and the *Epistola Cuthberti*', *Traditio*, 50 (1995), 84.

⁶² Peter Jenniskens, *Meteor Showers and Their Parent Comets* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 308, 599. See also, Cesario, 'Fyrenne Dracan', pp. 166–7.

⁶³ BL Cotton MS Tiberius B IV f.48v.

⁶⁴ ASC D 926, D–E 927, A–F 934, A–D 937, 939 (*recte*).

Northumbrian throne. It was not until 944, according to the *Chronicle* that Æthelstan's brother and heir, Edmund, was able to reassert English hegemony over Northumbria. Clare Downham suggests that Edmund's failure to immediately repel Óláfr's incursion explains the sparse narrative of Æthelstan's reign in the *Chronicle*.⁶⁵ If the Northern Recension is removed from consideration, the *Chronicle* moves from King Edward's death in 924, to Æthelstan's campaign in Scotland in 934, to Brunanburh in 937, to his death in 939. There is no account of Æthelstan's conquest of the north, nor any indication that Edmund's own conquest of Northumbria in 944 was anything but the first such victory for the West Saxon dynasty. This, Downham argues, is deliberate 'political amnesia' emanating from Edmund's court.⁶⁶

The paucity of contemporary narrative sources for Æthelstan's reign necessitates some cautious reliance on later chronicles. The most detailed of these is William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum*, from which comes the earlier mentioned account of Norwegian envoys attending Æthelstan's court in York.⁶⁷ It is this need for alternative sources relating Æthelstan's kingship that has led to scholarly interest in the potential historicity of *Egils saga*. The *Vínheiðr* passages give strategic detail of the battle that may be Brunanburh which are not attested in William's panegyric, nor that of the *Chronicle*, nor in the more sober accounts of other medieval historians.⁶⁸ *Vínheiðr* also provides topographical and onomastic references that have encouraged a number of attempts to locate the battle site based on *Egils saga*.⁶⁹ These have proved unfruitful in the assessment of wider scholarly discourse, and archaeologists, historians, and philologists alike are still seeking definitive evidence of, and debating various

⁶⁵ Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', pp. 31–2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Firth, 'Integration, Assimilation, Annexation', pp. 94–5.

⁶⁷ *G. Reg.* ii.135.1; Chapter 1, p. 38. For an overview of William's biography of Æthelstan, see Matthew Firth, 'Constructing a King: William of Malmesbury and the Life of Æthelstan', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, 13 (2017), 69–92.

⁶⁸ *G. Reg.* ii.135.7–9; *ASC* A–D 937. See also *Æthelweard* 4.5; *JW* 937; *HH* v.18–20.

⁶⁹ See for example: W.S. Angus, 'The Battlefield of Brunanburh', *Antiquity*, 11 (1937), 283–93; Alfred. H. Burne, *More Battlefields of England* (London: Methuen, 1952), pp. 44–60; A. Keith Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story: *Egils saga* and Brunanburh', in *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook*, ed. by Michael Livingstone (Exeter: The University of Exeter Press, 2011), pp. 308–10; Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian York and Dublin: The History and Archaeology of Two Related Viking Kingdoms* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), ii, pp. 72–7; Matthew Townend, *English Place-Names in Skaldic Verse* (Nottingham: English Place-Names Society, 1998), pp. 88–93; Michael Wood, 'Searching for Brunanburh: The Yorkshire Context of the 'Great War' of 937', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 85, no. 1 (2013), 158 (n. 96) (this latter, moreover, a superb exemplar of *apophasis*). Though certain historians and archaeologists, of whom this is but a small sample, may be united in their conviction that *Egils saga* can help locate the site of Brunanburh, their arguments and conclusions are often oppositional. For some overview of the debate, see Paul Cavill, 'Scandinavian *vina* and English battles', *Notes & Queries* 63, no. 3 (2016), 357–61; Ian McDougall, 'Discretion and Deceit: A Re-Examination of a Military Stratagem in *Egils Saga*', in *The Middle Ages in the Northwest*, ed. by Tom Scott and Pat Starkey (Oxford: Leopard's Head Press, 1995), pp. 116–24.

positions on, the conflict's location.⁷⁰ The nature of cultural memory is such that it would indeed be a remarkable feat of trans-generational knowledge transmission were oral narratives of Brunanburh to preserve accurate geographical and strategic detail over some three centuries. *Egils saga's* commitment to text in early thirteenth-century Iceland is both geographically and temporally remote from events in England in 937. As such, and given the conventions of the *skáldasögur*, scholars readily dismiss Egill's involvement in the battle, or deem *Vínheiðr* a 'fictionalised' account of events at Brunanburh.⁷¹ It is surely hope alone that encourages the acceptance of certain implausibly specific details within the *Vínheiðr* narrative.

Nonetheless, there may be some historical knowledge underlying *Vínheiðr* as a depiction of Brunanburh even if, as Foot notes, 'there is no known source on which its author may have depended'.⁷² Óláfr's antagonisms are plausible, though he is conflated with the figure of the *Skotakonungr* (King of Scots),⁷³ the fractious political situation leading to the battle too is creditable, as is the presence of Scandinavian mercenaries among the English armies.⁷⁴ Nor is it unreasonable to suppose some circulation of knowledge of Brunanburh—either as written or oral text—outside the extant canon of relevant literature. The historian and ealdorman Æthelweard attests that, some fifty years later, Brunanburh was a well-remembered event in England, recalled as *bellum magnum* (the great battle).⁷⁵ There is little reason to think this did not extend to Northumbria and the Danelaw, the regions theoretically at stake in the battle, from there passing into Scandinavian cultural knowledge. Certainly, the Anglo-Scandinavian societies of northern England maintained contact with the Scandinavian homelands of their ancestors. Further, numerous *Íslendingasögur* recount normalised trade

⁷⁰ Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 5–7; Cavill, 'Scandinavian *vína*', 357–61; Michael Deakin, 'Bromborough, Brunanburh, and Dingsmere', *Notes & Queries* (2022); Clare Downham, 'A Wirral Location for the Battle of Brunanburh', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 170 (2021), 15–32; Kevin Halloran, 'The Brunanburh Campaign: A Reappraisal', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 84, no. 2 (2005), pp. 137–8, 144; McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', pp. 131–2. On the most recent proposed location, see Michael Livingstone, *Never Greater Slaughter: Brunanburh and the Birth of England* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2021). For an overview of the potentially historical elements of the *Vínheiðr* episode (arguments and counter arguments), see Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 72–5; Magnús Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan: Historical and Literary Considerations in the *Vínheiðr* Episode of *Egils Saga*', *English Studies*, 77 (1996), 16–20.

⁷¹ For example: Barnes, 'The Medieval Anglophile', pp. 20–1; Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1975), pp. 238–44; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 73–4; Wood, 'Searching for Brunanburh', p. 148.

⁷² Foot, *Æthelstan*, p. 180.

⁷³ The *Íslendingasögur* do not reference regional identities like *Dál Riata*, Pictavia, or Alba, preferring the terms *Skotland* and *skotar* (Scotland and Scottish), Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2007), 277–85.

⁷⁴ Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 180–1. On early English kings' use of mercenaries, see *Asser* 76; *John of Wallingford*, p. 60; Shashi Jayakumar, 'Some Reflections on the "Foreign Policies" of Edgar "the Peaceable"', *Haskins Society Journal*, 10 (2002), 25–8.

⁷⁵ *Æthelweard* 4.5.

and settlement links with England, particularly in the 980s around the time Æthelweard was writing.⁷⁶ Thus, knowledge of events in England was being constantly refreshed, Scandinavian cultural memory augmented, by reports of travellers. This process continued long after the close of the Viking Age, and not just among Scandinavian travellers; English clerics, for example, are known to have travelled throughout Scandinavia (if not Iceland) from the Saga Age into the Age of Saga Writing.⁷⁷ The extent to which this type of contact influenced the *Íslendingasögur* is, however, questionable: no account of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction recorded in the corpus is of an English traveller in Scandinavia. Of course, stories of Saga Age cultural exchange could become garbled in transmission or been altered to accord with other narratives. This is likely what is seen in the *Egils saga* account of Brunanburh. Yet, some reliability in saga descriptions of the broader political and cultural situation in England—particularly the Danelaw and Northumbria—may be posited. Despite this, the best evidence for Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact during Æthelstan's reign may be the archaeological record, bearing in mind the fragmentary nature of the historical record.

Ongoing contact between Scandinavians and English, as attested in the *Íslendingasögur*, is affirmed in the material culture of Viking Age England. However, dating archaeological evidence of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction to the rule of a specific king can often prove difficult. Æthelstan's reign lasted a mere fifteen years, and it is rare that archaeological artefacts can be so narrowly dated, though not impossible. The archaeology of Scandinavian England has long fascinated researchers and, as observed of the Repton charnel deposit, the archaeological and the historical record of Viking Age England do at times coalesce in helpful ways.⁷⁸ The most obvious such case for Æthelstan's kingship is the Coppergate excavation in York.

Scandinavian material culture in England can be divided into two categories: conflict archaeology and settlement archaeology. The different types of archaeological site represent

⁷⁶ See for example, *Egils saga* 17; *Grettis saga* 22; *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* 1, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF VIII* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1939), pp. 134–5; *Laxdæla saga* 41.

⁷⁷ See for example, Lesley Abrams, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Christianization of Scandinavia', *ASE*, 24 (1995), 213–49; Laura Gazzoli (as P. Gazzoli), 'Anglo-Danish Relations in the Later Eleventh Century', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2010); Björn Weiler, 'Matthew Paris in Norway', *Revue Bénédictine*, 122, no. 1 (2012), 153–81.

⁷⁸ For an overview of the archaeology of Anglo-Scandinavian England, see for example: Jo Buckberry and others, 'Finding vikings in the Danelaw', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 33, no. 4 (2014), 413–34; Shane McLeod, *The Beginning of Scandinavian Settlement in England The Viking "Great Army" and Early Settlers, c. 865–900* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 109–71; Richards and Haldenby, 'The Scale and Impact of Viking Settlement', 322–50; Gabor Thomas, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork from the Danelaw: Exploring Social and Cultural Interaction', in *Cultures in Contact*, pp. 237–58.

how Scandinavian activity in England developed through the Viking Age, from invasion to settlement to assimilation to invasion. Repton represents conflict archaeology, as do the sites at Oxford and Dorset. The dating of these burial sites coincides with the two periods of most intense viking activity in England: the late ninth and early eleventh centuries. In contrast, and despite the noted exception of Brunanburh, the tenth century was comparatively peaceful. The Scandinavians who had settled during Alfred's reign became part of the fabric of English society, if not always accepting of English hegemony. Thus, much of the archaeological evidence relating to Anglo-Scandinavian societies in the Danelaw and Northumbria in the tenth century can be categorised as settlement archaeology. This is the case with Coppergate.

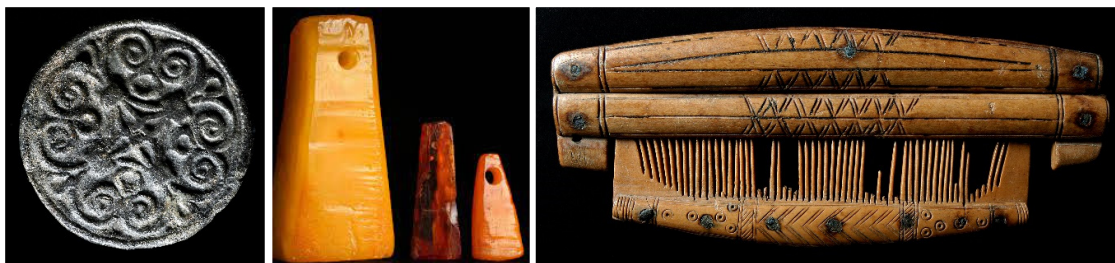


Fig. 4: Viking Age artisan artefacts found in York: (1) disc brooch (3.8 cm dia.), (2) amber pendants (left 5 cm l.), (3) antler comb and case (10 cm l.) © York Archaeological Trust (Mainman and Rogers, 2004)

The Coppergate excavation of 1976–82 logged tens of thousands of archaeological contexts relating to Viking York, preserved in the oxygen-deprived peat that results from the Ouse and Foss rivers' confluence.⁷⁹ Coppergate provides an unrivalled glimpse into Anglo-Scandinavian culture and society in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Included among the finds were significant volumes of imported Danish amber located in jewellers' workshops;⁸⁰ locally made disc broaches displaying Scandinavian design influences;⁸¹ and similarly Scandinavian-styled antler or bone-work artefacts, like combs, thought to have been produced as export commodities (fig. 4).⁸² These artefacts are testament to regional connections with a wider Scandinavian world and to the normalised presence of Scandinavian traders and

⁷⁹ Hall, *The Excavations at York*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 65–6; Ailsa Mainman and Nicola Rogers, *Craft, Industry and Everyday Life: Finds from Anglo-Scandinavian York* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2004), pp. 2498–518, 2587–91; Mainman and Rogers, 'Craft and Economy', 472–73; some questions remain over the attribution of jet objects to the Viking Age production. Though stratigraphic evidence places them within the contexts of Viking York, they may be residual artefacts of Roman York.

⁸¹ Hall, *The Excavations at York*, pp. 58–60; Jane F. Kershaw, *Viking Identities: Scandinavian Jewellery in England* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 133–43.

⁸² Steven P. Ashby, 'Disentangling Trade: Combs in the North and Irish Seas in the Long Viking Age', in *Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World*, ed. by James H. Barrett and Sarah Jane Gibbon (Leeds: Maney, 2016), pp. 198–218; Hall, *Viking Age Archaeology*, pp. 28–30; Mainman and Rogers, 'Craft and Economy', pp. 469–72; Sjoerd van Riel, 'Viking Age Combs: Local Products or Objects of Trade?', *Lund Archaeological Review*, 23 (2017), 163–78.

settlers in York and its environs. Indeed, material evidence for Scandinavian settlements in Northumbria is widespread, evidence according to Julian Richards and Dave Haldenby (and contrary to long-held opinion) of the displacement and replacement of English communities following Halfdan's partitioning of the region.⁸³ The society that thus emerged in northeast England in the last decades of the ninth century was one with deep cultural connections and ongoing contact to the Nordic homelands and, therefore, a place from which stories about people and events in England could spread and infuse Scandinavian cultural memory.

However, it was not only *stories* of Æthelstan and England that circulated throughout Scandinavian societies. Of specific relevance to Æthelstan's reign and to the practical co-existence of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Scandinavian England, are the numismatic finds from the York excavations. The Coppergate dig revealed an Æthelstanian iron coin die cap bearing the inscription *rex totius Britanniae* (king of all Britain) (fig. 5); two lead test strike coin imprints of York-issued Æthelstan pennies; and three silver pennies, two once more bearing Æthelstan's claim to be king of all Britain (fig. 6).⁸⁴ The importance of these finds is threefold.



Fig. 5: Æthelstan short cross type coin die (3 cm dia.) found during the Coppergate excavations
© York Archaeological Trust (Pirie, 1986)

Firstly, the city was under Æthelstan's control. The identification of a mint in York producing Æthelstanian coins supports accounts of Æthelstan's regional hegemony as attested the *Chronicle D-text*, *Historia Regum*, and their later derivatives.⁸⁵ Coins served as the most widely

⁸³ Richards and Haldenby, 'The Scale and Impact of Viking Settlement', 327–36, 345; cf. C.D. Morris, 'Aspects of Scandinavian Settlement in Northern England: A Review', *Northern History*, 20, no. 1 (1984), 1–22; Peter H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 2nd edn (London: Hodder Arnold, 1971), pp. 154–71.

⁸⁴ Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', pp. 340–41; Hall, *The Excavations at York*, pp. 61–2; E.J.E. Pirie, 'Catalogue of Post-Roman Coins Found, 1971–81', in *Post-Roman Coins from York Excavations 1971–81*, ed. by E.J.E. Pirie with M.M. Archibald and R.A. Hall (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1986), pp. 55–6. On the purposes of the lead strikes, see also Marian Archibald, 'Anglo-Saxon and Norman Lead Objects with Official Coin Types', in *Aspects of Saxo-Norman London II: Finds and Environmental Evidence*, ed. by Alan Vince (London: London and Middlesex Archaeological Society, 1991), pp. 331–6.

⁸⁵ ASC D 927; SD, ii, pp. 123–5; *G. Reg.* ii.134.

disseminated claims to kingship in the early Middle Ages and were integral to legitimising such pretensions. As Scandinavian and English kings exchanged the crowns of Northumbria and the Danelaw in the decades following Æthelstan's reign, each had regional mints issue their own coinage. In this case, the *rex totius Britanniae* inscription was an innovation that accompanied Æthelstan's annexation of Northumbria, an unsubtle piece of propaganda or self-promotion reinforcing his claims to overlordship.

Secondly, the presence of an active and royally sanctioned mint implies that Æthelstan understood the economic importance of York, its potential value to his kingdom and, therefore, the merits of maintaining peace with his Scandinavian subjects by taking a mediated approach to exercising overlordship. York had been a minting centre prior to Æthelstan's reign.⁸⁶ Allowing this activity to continue granted the city a practical independence in maintaining trade and economic activity, while also legitimating the city's political pre-eminence in the region.⁸⁷ Yet the coins produced were English, and not merely because they were inscribed with Æthelstan's pretensions.



Fig. 6: Æthelstan short cross type (1.5 g), York, Regnald (ON) moneyer. Obv. [Æðelstan Rex to(tius) Brit(anniae)], crescent surrounded by pellets; rev. [Regnald mo Eforpic]. YORYM: 2000.622 © York Museums and Gallery Trust

This raises the third point, that much of the currency of the Scandinavian territories had been minted to different weight standards to that of English territories, and Æthelstan's minting program sought to replace this native currency.⁸⁸ The subsequent 'burst of minting activity in the region', as Mark Blackburn terms it, extended to both Northumbria and the Danelaw and

⁸⁶ W.J. Andrew, 'Coins commemorating the rebuilding of York Minster A.D. 921–25,' *British Numismatic Journal*, 20 (1930), 31–2; Blunt, 'The Coinage of Athelstan', pp. 90–1; Rollason, 'Anglo-Scandinavian York,' pp. 313–14.

⁸⁷ Firth, 'Integration, Assimilation, Annexation', pp. 109–10.

⁸⁸ Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', pp. 335–6; Blunt, 'The Coinage of Athelstan', pp. 88–93; Rory Naismith, 'Prelude to Reform: Tenth-Century English Coinage in Perspective', in *Early Medieval Monetary History: Studies in Memory of Mark Blackburn*, ed. by Rory Naismith with Martin Allen and Elina Screen (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 81–2. The success of this program appears to have been limited, and Naismith identifies a persistent regionalism in East Anglian minting activity, *MEC*, pp. 201–4.

would have increased the volume of English currency coming into the hands of Scandinavian traders. Then, whether bringing their trade into new ports or returning home, these traders circulated coins with Æthelstan's name and propaganda on them. Æthelstanian coins have been found throughout the tenth-century Scandinavian world: Ireland, Orkney, the Hebrides, Norway, Denmark and Sweden (table 3).⁸⁹ These are remarkable survivals. Recycling coinage as bullion to create local currency or new coin designs was common practice and no doubt saw much foreign specie entering Scandinavian territories melted down. Thus, despite the geographic breadth of Æthelstanian coin finds, they offer only a glimpse of the full extent to which the English king's coins circulated beyond his territories.

Æthelstan's name was widely known throughout the tenth-century North Sea world. His victory at Brunanburh was recalled across societies separated by time and place, his coinage circulated throughout Scandinavia and its colonies, and his expanding hegemony brought him overlordship of Scandinavian communities. Yet, more than this, Æthelstan was politically active beyond England's borders in a manner unusual of early medieval English kings, and this legacy left a mark in the histories and chronicles of Francia and the continent. His familial connections through marriage to both the East and West Frankish royal families have already been noted, as has his fostering of Louis and Alain, respectively heirs to the West Frankish and Breton crowns.⁹⁰ Continental sources including Flodoard and Richer of Reims—the latter placing Louis in Æthelstan's court in York in 936—attest Æthelstan's centrality to Louis and Alain's campaigns to reclaim their lordships.⁹¹ Æthelstan's name also appears in the *Res gestae Saxonicae* of Widukund of Corvey and the *Gesta Ottonis* of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim in connection to his sister's marriage to the Frankish prince and future Emperor, Otto the Great.⁹² This is not to mention the Scandinavian tradition that Æthelstan fostered Hákon, heir to the Norwegian throne, a tradition that manifests in, among other texts, Theodoric's *Historia Regum Norwagiensium*, Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, and *Egils saga*.⁹³

⁸⁹ C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Athelstan', pp. 52–3; Mark Blackburn and Kenneth Jonsson, 'The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman Element of North European Coin Finds', in *Viking-Age Coinage in the Northern Lands*, ed. by M.A.S. Blackburn and D.M. Metcalf, 2 vols (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1981), i, pp. 201–51; Andrew R. Woods, 'Monetary Activity in Viking Age Ireland: The Evidence of the Single Finds', in *Early Medieval Monetary History*, pp. 314–15.

⁹⁰ Chapter 1, pp. 39–40.

⁹¹ Flodoard, *Annales* 936, 939; *La Chronique de Nantes* 27–29; Richer, *Historiae* ii.2–3.

⁹² Hrotsvitha, *Gesta Ottonis*, ll. 79–124, in *Hrotsvit Opera Omnia*, ed. Walter Bershin (München and Leipzig: KG Saur Verlag, 2001), pp. 278–80; Widukind, *Res gestae Saxonicae*, i.37, in *Die Sachsen Geschichte des Widukind von Korvei*, ed. by H-E. Lohmann and Paul Hersch, *MGH Scriptores Germ.* (Hanover: Hansche, 1935), p. 54.

⁹³ *Egils saga* 61; Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, pp. 144–6, 150–3; Theodericus Monarchus, *Historia* 4.

Table 3: Selected Æthelstan coin finds from Viking Age hoards in regions of Scandinavian hegemony (after Blunt, 1974; Blackburn and Jonsson, 1981)

Findspot	Checklist number †	Year of Discovery	Hoard Size*	Number of coins	Approx. deposit date
Ireland					
Glasnevin, co. Dublin	110	1838	x	2	927
co. Kildare	114	1840	x	2	935
co. Dublin	117	1883	xx	13	935
Durrow, co. Offaly	122	1850	x	8	940
Glendalough, co. Wick	124	1822	xx	32	942
co. Tipperary	125	1843	x	9	942
Rathbarry, co. Cork	127	1799	x	2	945
Mungret, co. Lim.	135	1840	x	3	953
Killyon Manor, co. Meath	138	1876	xx	27	958
Ballitore, co. Kildare	142	1837	xx	4	965
Scotland and Islands					
Skye, Hebrides	116	1890	xx	57	940
Skaill, Orkney	129	1858	xx	1	950
Douglas, Man	165	1894	xxx	6	975
Islay, Hebrides	168	1850	xx	2	975
Iona, Hebrides	180	1950	xxx	9	986
Quendale, Shetland	192	1830	xx	1	1000
Scandinavia					
Möðruvellir, Iceland		1839	x	1	after 924
Lagmansby, Åland		1914	x	1	after 924
Stengade, Denmark		1827	x	1	940
Terslev, Denmark		1911	xxxx	3	944
Jynde vad, Denmark		1863	xxx	1	954
Rønvik, Norway		1919	xx	1	955
Gerum, Gotland		1943	xxxx	1	991
Villie, Skåne		1876	xxx	1	1009

†Per Checklist of Coin Hoards from the British Isles, c.450–1180, Fitzwilliam Museum.

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/dept/coins/projects/hoards/index.list.html>

*Hoard size per Dolley (1966) and revisions (Hall, 1973/74; Blunt, 1974; Blackburn and Pagan, 1986; Checklist of Coin Hoards): x = <20 coins; xx = 20–119 coins; xxx = 120–1,199 coins; xxxx = > 1,200 coins

Indeed, it is small wonder that Æthelstan's reign persisted in Icelandic cultural memory into the Age of Saga Writing, granted the extensive evidence of his kingship in the literary and material cultures of northern Europe. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether *Egils saga's* portrayal of England harks back to authentic oral traditions recalling Æthelstan's reign, or whether his subsequent reputation simply provided a suitable narrative backdrop for Egill's performance of heroic deeds. Nothing more than a famous name and a famous battle onto which Egill's life became grafted through centuries of Icelandic storytelling. Certainly,

any reliable historical detail within the cultural memory of England, of the battle at *Vínheiðr*, and of Egill's adventures as codified in the *Egils saga* text—written some three centuries after *Æthelstan's* reign—has become obscured. Nonetheless, the evidence of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the early tenth century, particularly in Northumbria and the Danelaw, is overwhelming. Historical detail may be obscured by the narrative, but the historical setting is plausible. The political unrest that resulted in the Battle of Brunanburh, that accompanied *Æthelstan's* pretensions to overlordship, created a historical context in which Icelandic mercenaries may indeed have sought military service with an English king.

3.3 CULTURAL CONTACT IN THE REIGN OF ÆTHELRED (978–1016)

While Northumbria and the Danelaw were the most distinctly Scandinavian regions of tenth- and eleventh-century England, Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact was not restricted to the northeast. Saga authors were well-aware of this fact. It is in London that Egill finds *Æthelstan* on his second visit to England, and in London some seventy years later that Gunnlaugr finds *Æthelred* in residence.⁹⁴ Indeed, of all three case-studies, only Egill's mercenary service in *Æthelstan's* army in 937 can be hypothesised to have occurred in the Anglo-Scandinavian north, and he too later finds the English king in London. As *Æthelstan's* heirs had reinforced West Saxon overlordship over the former Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the latter half of the tenth century, the south had increasingly become the primary locus for an English political life that included peoples of Scandinavian origin. The descendants of Scandinavian settlers had continued to integrate within English communities, thereby becoming an element within England's wider social, economic, and political structures. Scandinavian names begin to appear in charter witness lists and as moneyers on currency; artefacts of Scandinavian design begin to appear in southern cities and communities.⁹⁵ All the while, peoples of external Scandinavian societies continued to trade with English communities, settle in English communities and, particularly in the decades either side of the millennium, raid English communities. All of which raises questions around the degree of cultural familiarity and

⁹⁴ *Egils saga* 64; *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

⁹⁵ See for example: S 926, S 943, S 952, S 955; Signe Horn Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style: A Phase of 11th Century Scandinavian Art* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1980), pp. 63–5; Veronica J. Smart, 'Moneyers of the Late Anglo-Saxon Coinage, 973–1016,' *Commentationes de nummis saeculorum IX–XI in Suecia repertis*, 2 (1968): 250–5.

synthesis between the English, Anglo-Scandinavian, and Scandinavian, and the extent to which this may have facilitated the exchange of ideas and stories.

Considering the degree of Scandinavian activity in England during the Viking Age, it is unsurprising that scholars have turned attention to how English and Norse speakers communicated. Broadly speaking, there are two possibilities: either the languages were mutually intelligible, or communication was via bilingualism, whether a person's own or through interpreters. The theory of mutual intelligibility, as championed by Townend, rests in some part on Gunnlaugr's introduction to Æthelred's court.⁹⁶ Certainly the saga author does not recount any difficulty in communication between the two. Moreover, it seems that thirteenth-century Icelanders were aware of the Scandinavian cultural and linguistic makeup of tenth-century Northumbria, as Snorri Sturluson indicates:

Norðimbraland er kallat fimmtungr Englands. [Eiríkr blóðøx] hafði atsetu í Jórvík, þar sem menn segja, at fyrr hafi setit Loðbrókarsynir. Norðimbraland var mest byggt Norðmönnum, síðan er Loðbrókarsynir unnu landit. Herjuðu Danir ok Norðmenn optliga þangat, síðan er vald landsins hafði undan þeim gengit. Mörg heiti landsins eru þar gefin á norrœnu tungu, Grímsboer ok Hauksfljót ok mörg önnur.⁹⁷

(Northumbria is called a fifth part of England. [Eiríkr blóðøx] took residence in York, where it is said the sons of Loðbrók had once resided. Northumbria was primarily settled by Norwegians after the sons of Loðbrók conquered the region. Danes and Norwegians often raided there after control of the area had been taken away from them. Many placenames there come from the Norse language: *Grímsboer* and *Hauksfljót* and many others.)

It is a summary that demonstrates knowledge of Scandinavian settlement in northern England and of a subsequent loss of authority to the English kings, a development which is explicitly linked to Æthelstan in a parallel passage of *Egils saga*.⁹⁸ Perhaps, in certain traditions within Icelandic cultural memory, this knowledge of Scandinavian settlement came to be uncritically applied to all England. Gunnlaugr attends Æthelred's court in London, a city whose brief

⁹⁶ Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 152–4; Chapter 1, pp. 31–3.

⁹⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, pp. 152–3.

⁹⁸ *Egils saga* 51; Townend, *Language and History*, p. 159.

period under Norse control had ended around 110 years before the *skáld's* arrival. Suggesting a rather simpler explanation in his reading of *Gunnlaugs saga*, Moulton asserts that Old English and Old Norse were as intelligible to one another as different dialects of one language are today.⁹⁹ Yet, it must be considered that every example of direct Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the *Íslendingasögur*, *Gunnlaugs saga* included, occurs *in England*. It seems far likelier that, if Norse speakers and English speakers were indeed able to converse, this derived from simple necessity driven by the coexistence of both language communities within England. Anglo-Saxon London and Anglo-Scandinavian East Anglia, for example, were neighbours. Trade alone, if nothing else, would have necessitated developing means of communication. This, Townend suggests, would have led to both language communities being 'adequately intelligible to one another', and leads to his assessment that 'Viking Age England would thus be a bilingual society dominantly made up of monolingual speakers of two different languages'.¹⁰⁰ Or, in short, that in England, Old English and Old Norse were to some degree mutually intelligible.

While mutual intelligibility is an interesting and plausible theory, none of the literary episodes used to support the hypothesis are irrefutable. Indeed, most can just as easily be cited in support of the argument that inter-cultural communication rested on the presence of bilingual individuals within English societies. The centrality of *Gunnlaugs saga* within this debate comes by virtue of the authorial voice stating 'Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku' (The tongue of England was then the same as that in Norway and Denmark).¹⁰¹ It is a unique interpolation. Carl Phelpstead argues that the *Gunnlaugs saga* author was aware that it was implausible for Æthelred to have understood skaldic verse and sees this as an attempt to explain away a fallacy.¹⁰² It is literary artifice designed to brush over the concerns of any reader who may query how Gunnlaugr and Æthelred could converse. Certainly the text is in error if 'tongue' is understood as synonymous with 'language'. Old English and Old Norse were not the same language. Nor does it follow that a corrective narrative would imply mutual intelligibility more so than the presence of bilingual

⁹⁹ Moulton, 'Mutual Intelligibility', p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Townend, 'Viking Age England as a Bilingual Society', p. 90; Matthew Townend, 'Contacts and Conflicts: Latin, Norse, and French', in *The Oxford History of English*, ed. by Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 70.

¹⁰¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁰² Carl Phelpstead, *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), p. 106.

individuals in the English court. Nonetheless, interactions like that of *Gunnlaugs saga* make no mention of intermediary translators, and the question must be whether saga authors would interrupt such dramatic vignettes in order to provide the logistical particulars of inter-cultural communication. In the case of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the author seems to actively avoid such detail. Yet it remains an interesting feature of the Gunnlaugr-Æthelred passages that he felt this statement a necessary inclusion. There are approximately thirty accounts that mention or are set in England across sixteen *Íslendingasögur*, variously identifying trading, settlement or mercenary activity. Aside from *Gunnlaugs saga*, none acknowledges the matter of language.

However, support for *Gunnlaugs saga's* position on the relationship between English and Norse can be found in the twelfth-century Icelandic text known as the *First Grammatical Treatise*. The grammarian advocates for the adoption of the Latin alphabet for Old Norse-Icelandic, following the example of the English as, 'alls vér erum einnar tungu, þó at gǫrzk hafi mjök önnur tveggja eð nokkut báðar (we are of the same tongue, though much has changed in one or the other or a little in both).¹⁰³ He is suggesting that Old English and Old Norse indeed derived from a common language, but that the languages evolved and diverged in their geographical and cultural separation over time, as languages do. It is a sophisticated observation, but not one that identifies when he perceived the English and Norse tongues to have been one, nor when they began to diverge. *Gunnlaugs saga* points to the Norman Conquest as a catalyst for change, but it is unlikely the grammarian is referring to the effects that the introduction of Norman French had on English. That would indicate change in one language, not potential change in both.

Rather, it seems the grammarian is speaking of longer-term processes of language evolution. Townend suggests that, prior to Germanic-speaking people migrating to England through the fifth century, 'speakers of the antecedents of both Norse and English' were grouped within a 'North-West Germanic continuum', sharing periods of language development.¹⁰⁴ The languages were, he contests, so closely linked as to have little dialectal distinction. Those distinctions developed after the migration, but did not introduce so much variation as to exclude mutual intelligibility by the early Viking Age.¹⁰⁵ By this theory, the

¹⁰³ *The First Grammatical Treatise*, ed. and trans. by Einar Haugen, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 12–13.

¹⁰⁴ Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 23–41 (at pp. 25, 41).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, especially p. 41.

grammarians and the *Gunnlaugs saga* author drew upon very old cultural memory indeed, the mutual origins of English and Norse seemingly embedded in the Icelandic storehouse of experience. However, it is worth recalling that the settlement of Northumbria also resided in Icelandic cultural memory. In areas of sustained Anglo-Scandinavian contact, regional dialects of Old English and Old Norse developed lexical and grammatical innovations that eased communication between the language groups.¹⁰⁶ Knowledge of this regional bilingualism would almost certainly have travelled back to the Scandinavian homelands, given their sustained contact with northeast England throughout the Viking Age. It may then be knowledge of this phenomenon, albeit simplified and once more uncritically applied to all England, that underlies *Gunnlaugs saga's* assertion that English and Norse were the same language.

The presumption of mutual intelligibility extends to *Egils saga*, the only other *Íslendingasögur* to feature detailed interaction and direct discourse between an Icelander and an English king. There, Egill, Þorolfr, and Æthelstan converse regarding strategy prior to the second day of battle while, at the subsequent victory feast, Egill delivers three stanzas of skaldic verse which Æthelstan seemingly understands and rewards.¹⁰⁷ The delivery of Egill's verse, as Gunnlaugr's, suggests a social context very much attuned to that of Scandinavian societies. Both Egill and Gunnlaugr deliver their verses in a formal court setting, both Æthelstan and Æthelred recognise the Old Norse compositions, acknowledge their quality, and provide the *skáld* appropriate award.¹⁰⁸ It seems unlikely that an understanding of the complexity of skaldic verse, of its cultural signifiers and required responses, would naturally stem from any linguistic compatibilities between Old English and Old Norse. It is possible that Old English and Old Norse traditions of praise poetry shared a sort of formulaic intelligibility, as suggested by kennings common to both poetic corpora. Yet this too seems dubious. In form, the few poems that comprise the extant corpus of Old English praise poetry — the *Battle of Brunanburh*, for example — little resemble Old Norse skaldic verse. Rather,

¹⁰⁶ Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 150–8; Townend, 'Contacts and Conflicts', pp. 61–85; Anthony Warner, 'English–Norse Contact, Simplification, and Sociolinguistic Typology', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 118, no. 2 (2017), 317–404

¹⁰⁷ *Egils saga* 54–55

¹⁰⁸ *Egils saga* 55 (st. 19–22), notably, stanzas 21–22 are composed for Æthelstan as a praise *drápa*, and the reward given here is specifically tied to the verse; *Gunnlaugs saga* 7 (st.3).

the *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* authors imply the English court had a direct cultural familiarity with Scandinavian language and custom.

English familiarity with Scandinavian cultural norms may be a logical authorial presumption, given Norse settlement in England and known diplomatic exchanges between English and Scandinavian rulers; however, it is necessary to sound a note of caution. The *Íslendingasögur* cannot, in isolation, prove the extent and manner of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact and synthesis. What they demonstrate is the thirteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory of such and, though the *Íslendingasögur* may purport to recall history, as embodiments of these anachronistic perceptions, their narrative form cannot be overlooked. While the logistics of inter-cultural communication may be of interest to this discussion, the interpretive and translative practices of the English court are hardly likely to have caught the imaginations of generations of Icelandic storytellers. Affirmation of the depicted cultural familiarity and synthesis must be sought from outside of the saga corpus.

As for the theory of Old English-Old Norse mutual intelligibility, at least as it pertains to the English and Insular Scandinavians, it is something of a two-edged sword. It can suggest cultural interconnectedness, with the neighbouring societies of the North Sea benefiting from ancestral links that allowed the maintenance of a degree of shared language and culture. However, it can also be understood as minimising the subsequent effects of cultural exchange, social integration, and Anglo-Scandinavian multiculturalism that accompanied Norse settlement. Viking Age England may have developed into a bilingual society, but it was hardly a bipartite society. This returns us to the point that Scandinavians were present and integrated *throughout* England.

This relates once more to settlement archaeology, though conflict archaeology must also be considered in Æthelred's reign. Æthelred's thirty-eight-year kingship provides a longer period in which to locate archaeological artefacts than that of Æthelstan. Nonetheless, the inscriptions on numismatic finds remain the most easily attributable artefacts from the period. Here, rather than seeking the coins of English kings in areas of Scandinavian settlement, the presence of Scandinavian moneyers in predominantly English areas draws attention. Veronica Smart identifies over one-hundred moneyers in London during Æthelred's reign, of whom six have Scandinavian names: Askell, Kari, Grímr, Osgut, Þioðólfr

and Tóki.¹⁰⁹ Of these, only Askeil and Tóki (fig. 7) are known from more than one coin, a fact that Pamela Nightingale has pointed to as an indicator of insignificant Scandinavian influence on the city.¹¹⁰ Nor is the demographic composition of the London moneyers much changed even after Knútr's conquest in 1016.¹¹¹ Yet, even if Scandinavian influence on the city was minimal, the presence of any men of Scandinavian origin in the important and highly regulated occupation of moneying suggests integration within society. Elsewhere in England throughout Æthelred's reign, the numismatic evidence points to expected demographics. Minting centres in Northumbria and the Danelaw boast large numbers of Scandinavian-named moneyers alongside near-equal numbers of men with Old English derived names.¹¹² In the south and the west, Scandinavian moneyers become scarcer the further the mint from the English–Danish hinterland. Thus, Smart identifies only eight moneyers with Old Norse names among the forty-two minting centres active in Wessex throughout Æthelred's reign.¹¹³

Coins are not, however, the only indicator of Scandinavian presence in southern England. 'The presence of Scandinavian-style dress items,' Jane Kershaw argues, 'is often a secure indicator of Scandinavian cultural influence.'¹¹⁴ Her chapter in *The Danes in Wessex*, focusing on the period c.850–c.950, surveys such artefacts found in southern England, alongside Scandinavian-style 'bullion' ornaments and weights.¹¹⁵ From brooches and clasps to arm-rings and lead weights, a significant corpus of such objects from Wessex and Dorset have been uncovered though, as Kershaw highlights, not so many as to indicate local settlement or fabrication.¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, the circumstances of how these came to be in place must remain obscure, whether legacies of viking activity in the south, lost personal items of travellers from the north, or artefacts representing a *de facto* currency or system of trade. Such artefacts are, naturally, more common in the Danelaw and Northumbria where their density and design does identify regional settlement and local artisanship.¹¹⁷ While the majority of such finds are difficult to identify as distinct to the period of Æthelred's reign, they do

¹⁰⁹ Smart, 'Moneyers, 973–1016', pp. 250–5.

¹¹⁰ Pamela Nightingale, 'The Origin of the Court of Husting and Danish Influence on London's Development into a Capital City', *English Historical Review*, 102, no. 404 (1987), 560.

¹¹¹ Smart, 'Moneyers, 1017–1042', pp. 273–9; *MEC*, pp. 269–70.

¹¹² Smart, 'Moneyers, 973–1016', pp. 227–49.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 255–70.

¹¹⁴ Jane Kershaw, 'Scandinavian-style Metalwork from Southern England', in *Danes in Wessex*, p. 88.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–98.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92; Hall, *The Excavations at York*, pp. 58–60; Thomas, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Metalwork', pp. 242–52.

demonstrate the cultural milieu in which the young king took the throne: networks of cultural exchange existed between Anglo-Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon regions. Networks that, theoretically, had become more normalised in the decades leading to Æthelred's reign, as areas of Scandinavian settlement were more firmly brought under the English crown.



Fig. 7: Æthelred helmet type (2 cm dia.), London, Tóki (ON) moneyer. Obv. [Æðelræd Rex Anglo(rum)]; rev. [Tolca mlo Londen], double long cross (omega term.), lozenge (trefoil term.) NARC-256904 © Northamptonshire Country Council

Material indicators of Scandinavian integration throughout England in the reigns of both Æthelred and Knútr may also be found in stone sculpture. In considering this, it is worth noting that the core features used here to define cultural memory—communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible—are not limited to oral or written literature. Indeed, by this definition, cultural memory just as easily, or perhaps more easily, finds expression in the archaeological record. The relative permanency, ease of interpretation, and underlying memorialising intent that characterise fabricated artefacts like coins and sculpture make them ideal agents for the transmission of cultural memory. The corpus of Viking Age stone sculpture is immense and, as Phil Sidebottom argues, cannot simply be categorised as Scandinavian or English or Anglo-Scandinavian in style, but are characteristically representative of more granular social groups.¹¹⁸ While these stone monuments, like other artefacts of Scandinavian settlement in England, do have a concentration in Northumbria and the Danelaw, examples of Scandinavian-influenced stonework designs have been found in the south, often associated with Christian burial sites.¹¹⁹ These grave markers are of especial

¹¹⁸ Phil Sidebottom, 'Viking Age Stone Monuments and Social Identity in Derbyshire', in *Cultures in Contact*, pp. 221–31.

¹¹⁹ Dawn M. Hadley, *The Vikings in England: Settlement, Society and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 215–23; David Stocker, 'Monuments and Merchants: Irregularities in the distribution of Stone Sculpture in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire in the Tenth Century', in *Cultures in Contact*, pp. 179–86.

interest, particularly those that date to the reigns of Æthelred and Knútr, for what they may reveal of the synthesis of Scandinavian and English cultural practice.

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Fig. 8: London St Paul's 1 (47 cm x 57 cm x 10 cm) © Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, University of Durham: D. Tweddle

The grave marker known as London St Paul's 1 (fig. 8) is a case in point. The decorative element of the marker is composed in what is known as 'Ringerike style', a phase of Scandinavian art dating to the late-tenth and early-eleventh centuries. The artefact is identified as being of Scandinavian cultural origin by its Old Norse runic inscription: 'Ginna let laggia sten þensi ok Toki' (Ginna and Toki had this stone laid).¹²⁰ As Martin Biddle identifies in the entry for the marker in the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, the currency of the style in Scandinavia at the turn of the millennium suggests the object to have been made by a Scandinavian artisan in London, rather than by a descendent of earlier settlers.¹²¹ Examples of locally developed Anglo-Scandinavian decoration—such as London All Hallows 2, which features an Old English inscription with design elements introduced by early tenth-century Scandinavian settlers—tend to demonstrate greater stylistic hybridisation.¹²²

Yet, it does not follow that those who commissioned the St Paul's grave marker were themselves native Scandinavians. Dominic Tweddle identifies the object as either a head or footstone, noting that the design was intended to have a buried, undecorated portion (no

¹²⁰ SS London (St Paul's Cathedral) 01.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, cf. R.I. Page, *Runes: Reading the Past* (London: British Museum, 1987), pp. 53–4 who suggests it to be 'Danish inspired.'

See also Fuglesang, *Some Aspects of the Ringerike Style*, pp. 63–4.

¹²² SS London (All Hallows by the Tower) 03.

longer intact). This marks the sculpture as distinct from its Scandinavian counterparts, which usually took the form of box tombs or sarcophagi.¹²³ The altered composition of the monument suggests adaptation to English burial practices: in form suiting churchyard burial, in style reflecting the cultural origins of those interred. Nor is this the only example from south-east England. London City 1 a-b, London All Hallows 3, Rochester 2 and Rochester 3 are all identified as Ringerike style grave markers or slabs. The similarity of style in decoration and form, alongside the relative scarcity of such objects and their limited geographical distribution has led Tweddle to conclude that these all derive from a single local workshop.¹²⁴ If so, these may have been entrepreneurial Scandinavian artisans catering to the cultural nostalgia of an Anglo-Scandinavian clientele resident in southern England. The *Íslendingasögur* attest to ongoing trade and settlement throughout the Viking Age, and it is not inconceivable that the Ringerike art form entered the English cultural milieu in this wise. More likely, however, the Ringerike style of southern England dates to Knútr's reign and reflects an influx of new Scandinavian settlers from 1016. In either case, the Ringerike grave markers demonstrate the presence of Scandinavian settlers in southern England and, in their design concessions to local funereal practice, suggest these settlers were acculturating to English society.

Of course, not all Scandinavian visitors to English shores were seeking integration, and it is left to revisit the more violent interactions of Æthelred's reign. The increased viking activity of the years 980–1016 not only saw the return of the Scandinavian raiders, but the presence of Scandinavian mercenaries within and without Æthelred's military infrastructure. The mass graves at Dorset and at Oxford may preserve evidence of both viking and mercenary. The Ridgeway Hill site in Dorset lies close to Weymouth in a coastal region known from the *Chronicle* to have been repeatedly pillaged by vikings in the 980s.¹²⁵ All the interred individuals at Ridgeway Hill have been identified as young Scandinavian males, and radiocarbon dating places the inhumation in the range of 970–1020 (table 4).¹²⁶ These factors, considered alongside the fact that all were decapitated and most bear non-defensive peri-

¹²³ SS London (St Paul's Cathedral) 01, cf. David M. Wilson and Ole Klindt-Jensen, *Viking Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 135.

¹²⁴ SS London (St Paul's Cathedral) 01; SS London (City) 01; SS Rochester Cathedral 03. The scarcity of such objects may in part be explained by the common practice of recycling stonework as building material; both Rochester fragments and SS London (All Hallows by the Tower) 03 were located integrated within the later medieval church structures.

¹²⁵ ASC C 981, 982; C-F 988

¹²⁶ Boyle, 'Death on the Dorset Ridgeway', pp. 113–14; Loe, 'Given to the Ground', pp. 42–3.

mortem wounds, have encouraged the burial's identification as of a captured and executed viking band.¹²⁷

Table 4: Calibrated ¹⁴C dates (Dorset) (Loe et al, 2014)

Skeleton ID	Lab. ID	¹⁴ C BP	Calibration (95.4% certainty)	Weighted calibration (93% certainty)
3698	GU-19115	1055±40	890–1030	970–1025
3763	GU-20633	1090±30	970–1025	970–1025
3804	GU-20632	1055±30	985–1020	970–1025

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Fig. 9: Ridgeway Hill, Dorset mass burial. Site plan and excavation © Oxford Archaeology (Boyle, 2016)

However, the lack of evidence for defensive injuries among the individuals inhumed at Ridgeway Hill has also led to the consideration that the site may be associated with the St Brice's Day massacre in 1002. The *Chronicle* records the event as follows:

7 on þam geare se cyng het ofslean ealle þa deniscan men þe on Angelcynne wæron;
 ðis wæs gedon on Britius mæssedæg, forðam þam cyninge wæs gecyð þæt hi woldan
 hine besyrwan æt his life 7 siððan ealle his witan 7 habban siþþan þis rice.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Boyle, 'Death on the Dorset Ridgeway', p. 114; Loe, 'Given to the Ground', pp. 72–3, 105–27.

¹²⁸ ASC C–E 1002.

(And in that year the king ordered all the Danish men in England be slain (this was done on St Brice's Day), for the king was told that they would betray him and then deprive all his councillors of life, and then possess this realm.)

Despite the rhetoric here, Scandinavian settlers' history of integration and acculturation in England should be borne in mind. The integrated nature of Viking Age Scandinavian communities in England, alongside the lack of textual or archaeological evidence for Æthelred's order being carried out in those areas of most intensive settlement, have led historians to conclude the massacre had limited scope.¹²⁹ Roach argues that the Ridgeway Hill burials most plausibly result from an order that intended Danish mercenaries as its target, not all men of Danish descent. The hilltop position overlooking a vulnerable coastline would have been a logical position for Æthelred to place a mercenary force, while the lack of defensive wounds suggests a group caught unawares.¹³⁰ As the only other documentary record of the event implies, the Danes were taken off guard on St Brice's Day:

Ipsi quique in praefata urbe morabantur Dani mortem euadere nitentes, hoc Christi sacrarium fractis per uim ualuis et pessulis, intrantes asylum sibi propugnaculumque contra urbanos suburbanosque inibi fieri decreuerunt; sed cum populus omnis insequens, necessitate compulsus, eos eiicere niteretur nec ualeret, igne tabulis iniecto, hanc aecclesiam, ut liquet, cum munimentis ac libris, combusserunt.¹³¹

(The Danes living in that town [Oxford], seeking to evade death, entered this sanctuary of Christ, breaking the doors and bolts by force. They sought to take asylum and defend themselves there against the people of town and suburbs. Yet when all pursuing the people could not cast them out, compelled by necessity they set fire to the boards and they burnt this church, it seems, with its ornaments and books.)

This, the account of the destruction of the Abbey of St Frideswide in Oxford in the townspeople's zeal to enact Æthelred's order, has struck a number of commentators as being linked to the Oxford St John's College mass burial.¹³² Archaeological evidence points to a Danish community existing in Oxford around 1002 and, being outside the Northumbrian and

¹²⁹ Chapter 1, p. 43–4.

¹³⁰ Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 197–8.

¹³¹ S 909.

¹³² Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', pp. 83–98; Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 198–9; Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 233–5.

Danelaw communities, it has been suggested these may have been remnant mercenary forces.¹³³ If these were targeted on St Brice's Day, it would accord with the identification of the individuals in the Oxford inhumation as young Scandinavian men who, again, show few signs of defensive wounds.¹³⁴ The charring noted on certain remains gives extra weight to this theory and to the account of the quoted charter. It is, thus, plausible that the Oxford burials provide evidence for a wave of violence directed against secondary Scandinavian settlers in Æthelred's reign. This is the conclusion reached by the Oxford site excavators.¹³⁵

Table 5: Calibrated ¹⁴C dates (Oxford) (Wallis, 2014)

Skeleton ID	Lab. ID*	¹⁴ C BP	δ ¹³ C	δ ¹³ N	Calibration (95.4% certainty)
SK1772	OxA-237970	1111±24	-19.60	12.60	889–987
SK1783	OxA-237971	1129±24	-19.40	11.70	830–987
SK1876	KIA37664	1095±30	-19.35	11.36	890–1020
SK1978	KIA37165	978±26	-19.25	10.60	990–1060 (45.6%)
SK1992	OxA-237972	1097±23	-19.80	13.00	890–995
SK2057	KIA37666	1073±26	-19.58	10.72	890–1020

*Lab. ID per ¹⁴C results (Kiel or Oxford), all isotope data from Oxford

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Fig. 10: St John's College, Oxford mass burial. Site plan and excavation
© Thames Valley Archaeological Services (Wallis, 2014)

¹³³ John Blair, *Anglo-Saxon Oxfordshire* (Stroud: Sutton, 1997), pp. 167–70; Keynes, 'The Massacre', 39–40; Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 194–5.

¹³⁴ Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', pp. 84, 93–5; Roach, *Æthelred*, pp. 198–9; Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 233–5.

¹³⁵ Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 151–7, 233–5.

It is, however, a conclusion due some scepticism, and Pollard, Ditchfield and Piva sound a note of caution in their commentaries on the skeletal radiocarbon dates.¹³⁶ They highlight that many of the bones tested date too early to be associated with Æthelred's reign and that, though isotope analysis points to a marine diet that may distort the ¹⁴C dates, the marine offset required to bring these into line with Æthelred's kingship is 'improbably high ... by historical standards'.¹³⁷ However, complicating interpretations of the site, radiocarbon testing of certain other samples has provided ¹⁴C date ranges that comfortably allow for an interment date of 1002 (table 5). These discrepancies are of note because the archaeology of the site leaves no doubt that all remains were interred simultaneously. The solution proposed by the site excavators is that variations in ¹⁴C dates may be attributable to the varied marine diet of individuals.¹³⁸ In this case, a hypothesised association of the Oxford St John's burial with the events of St Brice's Day 1002 would remain plausible. However, the site cannot be tied to Æthelred's reign with absolute certainty; the dating anomalies remain largely unresolved, and further investigation is required. From the evidence of the calibrated ¹⁴C dates, the conclusion of Pollard et al., that these are the remains of a Scandinavian mercenary band captured and executed decades before the St Brice's Day massacre, is compelling.¹³⁹

Importantly, there is no tradition of the St Brice's Day massacre in Old Norse-Icelandic texts. This silence makes sense if the event is understood as one targeting Scandinavian mercenaries or vikings. If contemporary Scandinavian societies perceived *viking* as a military activity, perceived service to the English king as fundamentally military in nature, then such were the vicissitudes of war. This is on display at Dorset Ridgeway, Oxford St John's, and Repton, and such Scandinavian military activity was an element underlying Icelandic cultural memory of Saga Age England.

Neither viking nor mercenary were accidental visitors to English shores. Partaking in viking raids or serving in the armies of the English king represented potentially lucrative employment for itinerant Scandinavian warriors. Æthelred's practice of paying tribute to vikings bands to cease raiding has been noted, and Scandinavian mercenaries among his

¹³⁶ Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', pp. 84–5, 90–3; Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 151–6, the commentary on skeletal radiocarbon dates in the Wallis archaeological reports are authored by Pollard, Ditchfield and Diva.

¹³⁷ Wallis, *The Oxford Henge*, pp. 152–4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 151–7.

¹³⁹ Pollard, 'Sprouting Like Cockles', p. 98.

forces would also have received English currency for their service.¹⁴⁰ For this reason, the largest volume of extant Æthelredian specie has been found in Scandinavian hoards.¹⁴¹ As noted with the dissemination of Æthelstan's coinage beyond his borders, this no doubt went some way to perpetuating Æthelred's name within Scandinavian cultural memory. Moreover, this wealth filtering back to Scandinavia may have been the source of positive traditions of Æthelred's kingship as found in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Not only does the saga author term Æthelred *góðr hofðingi* (a good king), but Gunnlaugr's own verse, or at least the refrain preserved in the text, is a remarkable panegyric emphasising the king's generosity:

Herr sésk allr við þrva	All the host stands in awe of the generous
Englands sem goð þengil;	prince of England as of God;
ætt lýtr grams og gumna	the race of the war-swift king
gunnbráðs Aðalráði.	and all the race of men bow to Æthelred. ¹⁴²

Æthelred's negative reputation, as popularly conceived, is one born of posthumously composed English sources with full knowledge of the military failures of the reign. There is little evidence of this reputation in Scandinavian sources, and it impossible to know what stories returned to Scandinavia with raiders, mercenaries, and traders and their wealth of English coins. Within that context, it is entirely plausible that Æthelred came to be understood as a good and generous king, the type of lord that a young *skáld* would indeed seek out in order to offer his verse and his sword in hope of reward.

3.4 CULTURAL CONTACT IN THE REIGN OF KNÚTR (1016–35)

Anglo-Scandinavian cultural connections only deepened in Knútr's reign. Though Knútr is noted for conforming to the mould of a Christian English king, at the time it is hypothesised Bjørn attended his court, his position must have felt tenuous. The internal chronology of *Bjarnar saga* indicates that Bjørn must have visited early in Knútr's reign. It is a plausible setting for, at this early stage of his kingship, Knútr may have welcomed the support of a

¹⁴⁰ Chapter 1, pp. 42–3.

¹⁴¹ Rory Naismith, 'The Coinage of Æthelred II: A New Evaluation', *English Studies*, 97, no. 2 (2016), 123–4; Blackburn and Jonsson, 'Anglo-Saxon Coin Finds', pp. 201–51.

¹⁴² *Gunnlaugs saga* 7 (st. 3). Verse translation drawn from *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 15.

visiting Scandinavian warrior. His right to the throne of England was held by conquest alone (despite any claims to inheritance through his father Sveinn), and Knútr's desperation to establish additional support and legitimacy is witnessed in the *Chronicle's* 1017 entry:

Her on þissum geare feng Cnut kyning to eallon Angelcynnes ryce 7 hit todælde on feower, him sylfan Westsexan 7 Þurkylle Eastenglan 7 Eadrice Myrcan 7 Irke Norðhymbran ... 7 Cnut cyning aflymde ut Eadwig æpeling 7 eft hine het oslean. 7 þa toforan Kalendas Agusti het se cynigc fetian him þæs cyniges lafe Æþelrædes him to wife Ricardes dohtor.¹⁴³

(In this year King Knútr succeeded to the whole English realm and divided it into four, Wessex for himself, East Anglia for Porkell, Mercia for Eadric and Northumbria for Eiríkr ... and King Knútr exiled Eadwig *ætheling* and then had him killed. And further, before 1 August, the King ordered to be fetched as his wife the widow of King Æthelred, the daughter of Richard [Emma].)

The passage demonstrates three strategies Knútr took to place his kingship on firmer footing. He sought to leverage the legitimacy of an already-consecrated queen of the English by marrying Æthelred's widow, Emma. He sought to neutralise the threat posed by Æthelred's last surviving legitimate son from his first marriage, Eadwig. He invested regional authority in his allies in the conquest: Porkell *inn hávi*, Eiríkr Hákonarson, and Eadric Streona. Their support of his kingship had already been demonstrated and, no doubt, they also expected reward for their fidelity. While this arrangement may have been short lived, Porkell and Eiríkr provide evidence for the importing of a Scandinavian elite. Here may be the clientele for high-status Ringerike style funereal objects. The presence of a Danish nobility or royal retinue in England from early in Knútr's reign is further suggested by his diploma witness lists. These feature a significant number of Scandinavian names alongside those of English nobles and elites, most not previously seen on the administrative documents of Æthelred's reign.¹⁴⁴

However, the historical context of Knútr's conquest does not need revisiting here.¹⁴⁵ In contrast to Egill and Gunnlaugr, Bjørn's appearance at the English court is short. Little detail

¹⁴³ ASC C–E 1017; see also *JW* 1017.

¹⁴⁴ See for example: S 956, S 959, S 960, S 962, S 964; Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁴⁵ See chapter 1, pp. 46–9.

is given of his royal audience, the narrative portrays little direct interaction between *skáld* and king, no dialogue and no verse. It is enough to note that the chronology of *Bjarnar saga* places Björn in Knútr's English court around years 1016–18, when the young king was pursuing strategies designed to shore up his support, and that this is a plausible setting in which a Nordic warrior may have entered royal service.

The intent of this chapter has been to explore Anglo-Scandinavian interaction within England in the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr and, thereby, the avenues by which a king's name or reputation may have been transmitted into Icelandic cultural memory. Thus, while the remaining years of Knútr's reign may not seem especially relevant to the *Bjarnar saga* narrative, they are nonetheless integral to how he was perceived by later Icelanders. In this case, however, there is less need to hypothesise cultural contact between English and Scandinavian by recourse to the material evidence of settlement and trade. Anglo-Scandinavian interaction is explicit in the reign of Knútr: a Danish prince who took the thrones of England, Denmark, and Norway. Knútr was a direct participant in Scandinavia's political history and widely attested as such.

Yet *Íslendingasögur* narratives only occasionally stray into the eleventh century and, when they do, it is rarer still that they stray into realms where Knútr held sway. Nonetheless, Björn is not the only Scandinavian voyager recalled in the corpus as having joined the king's retinue in England. *Grettis saga* records a man named Gísli Þorsteinsson boasting of his exploits raiding in the Anglo-Celtic Isles with Knútr—perhaps intended to imply his participation in Knútr's conquest.¹⁴⁶ In the final chapter of one redaction of *Ljósvetninga saga*, in what can only be described as a narrative and chronological *non sequitur*, a man named Oddi Grímsson visits Knútr's court, engaging the king in dialogue to beg for, and indeed haggle over, his generosity. This is something of a curiosity. Oddi is a minor character to be treating with the king, the location of Knútr's court—whether Denmark or England—is not identified, and the narrative chronology places the event in the year 1066 or later, some thirty years after Knútr's death.¹⁴⁷ A reference to Knútr in relation to his English conquest is also found in *Gunnlaugs saga*, though the narrative purports to display the opposing side. Here, on

¹⁴⁶ *Grettis saga* 59.

¹⁴⁷ *Ljósvetninga saga* 31, ed. by Björn Sigfússon, *ÍF X* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1940), pp. 103–4; *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga Saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga*, trans. by Theodore Andersson and William Ian Miller (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 78, 244 (n. 212). On the Knútr's gift giving in *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, see chapter 5, p. 191.

a second visit to Æthelred's court, Gunnlaugr is compelled to abide a time to aid the English king lest Knútr arrive with his invading army.¹⁴⁸ This latter narrative is remarkable for both its display of historical knowledge, and its muddling the chronology of it. The saga author is aware of Æthelred and Knútr's contest for the English crown, but believes Knútr to have already held the Danish kingship when he sought that of England. Seemingly there was a tradition in thirteenth-century Scandinavia that Knútr inherited the Danish throne directly from his father Sveinn, this chronology also underlying *Knýtlinga saga*, which was composed around the same time as *Gunnlaugs saga*.¹⁴⁹ Yet England was Knútr's first kingship and it was from his English base, using English wealth and military support, that Knútr expanded his hegemony, as implied in his own words in a letter to his English subjects of 1019/20:

Nu ne wandode ic na minum sceattum, þa hwile þe eow unfrið on handa stod; nu ic mid Godes fultume þæt totwæmde mid minum scattum. Þa cydde man me, þæt us mara hearm to fundode, þonne us wel licode; ond þa for ic me sylf mid þam mannum þe me mid foron into Denmearcon, þe eow mæst hearm of com; ond þæt hæbbe mid Godes fultume forene forfangen, þæt eow næfre heonon forð þanon nan unfrið to ne cymð, þa hwile þe ge me rihtlice healdað ond min lif byð.¹⁵⁰

(Now I did not spare my money as long as hostility stood at hand to you; now with God's help I have put an end to it with my money. But I was then warned that greater danger was approaching us than we liked at all; then I went myself with the men who accompanied me to Denmark, from where the greatest harm had come to you, and with God's support took measures so that nevermore shall danger reach you from there, so long as you support me rightly and my life lasts.)

This is largely propaganda. Knútr's brother and King of Denmark, Haraldr II, had died in 1018, and Knútr's expedition in 1019/20 was in aid of pressing his case as heir to the Danish crown.¹⁵¹ The letter, addressed to his archbishops, bishops, earls and people was, through its vernacular composition, intended to reach the widest possible audience as its contents were

¹⁴⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10

¹⁴⁹ *Knýtlinga saga* 8.

¹⁵⁰ *Knútr's Letter to the English (1019/20)*, in Liebermann, i, p. 273.

¹⁵¹ ASC A-E 1019 notes Knútr's return to Denmark over the winter of 1019.

preached from England's pulpits.¹⁵² The quoted passage is a justification of his campaign of territorial expansion at the cost of English wealth and men, portraying it as proactive defence, as personal sacrifice, and as serving the interests of his English subjects. It is also of note that Þorkell alone among the addressees is named, suggesting the former viking served in the capacity of regent in Knútr's absence. In turn, the twelfth-century English chronicler Henry of Huntingdon recounts that among Knútr's retinue and, indeed, one of the heroes of the campaign, was one Godwin, to become Earl Godwin of Wessex on his return.¹⁵³ No matter the veracity of this tale, it is apparent that English cultural memory recalled English involvement in Knútr's Scandinavian campaigns. For its part, the historical record demonstrates both the presence of Scandinavian elites in positions of authority in England, and Knútr's personal presence and active campaigning throughout his Anglo-Scandinavian hegemony. In this context, the absence of Knútr and his English kingdom from the *Íslendingasögur* tradition would perhaps be more remarkable than its presence.

Record of Knútr's correspondence is not limited to his letter of 1019/20. Snorri Sturluson recounts that Knútr, here identified as King of the English, sent emissaries to the Norwegian King Óláfr II around 1024–26 with a letter asserting his overlordship.¹⁵⁴ This was not met with a positive response. In 1027, Knútr again wrote to his English subjects, following a visit to Rome, in another letter designed to curate his image.¹⁵⁵ Here he identifies his next destination as Denmark before a planned return to England in 1028. More importantly, however, he terms himself as 'rex totius Anglie et Denemarcie et Norreganorum et partis Suanorum' (King of all England and Denmark and Norway and part of Sweden). This reflects the same pretensions to overlordship as his letter to Óláfr though, notably, Knútr is not usually considered to have taken the Norwegian crown prior to 1028. In that year, according to the *Chronicle*, Knútr sailed to Norway with fifty ships and overthrew Óláfr. Theodoric Monachus

¹⁵² Matthew Firth, 'The Politics of Hegemony and the 'Empires' of Anglo-Saxon England', *Ceræ*, 5 (2018), 50–1; M.K. Lawson, *Cnut: England's Viking King, 1016–1035*, 3rd edn (London: The History Press, 2011), pp. 65–6; Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 28–31.

¹⁵³ *HH* vi.15, cf. *G. Reg.* ii.181.6 which places Godwin's heroism in overseas campaigning in events of 1025.

¹⁵⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, p. 223; Jonas Wellendorf, 'Letters from kings: Epistolary Communication in the Kings' Sagas (Until c. 1150)', in *Moving Words in the Middle Ages: Tracing Literacies, Texts, and Verbal Communities*, ed. by Amy C. Mulligan and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), p. 117.

¹⁵⁵ *Knútr's Letter to the English (1027)*, in Liebermann, i, pp. 276–7; this letter is preserved in *G. Reg.* ii.183 and *JW* 1031.

and *Knýtlinga saga* both record that he first sought to govern through Hákon, Eiríkr's son, and later through a regency of his first consort Ælfgifu and their eldest son Sveinn.¹⁵⁶

This is important as it follows that Norwegian societies had direct links to Knútr in a way they did not have with earlier English kings. In truth, as Bolton suggests, Knútr's authority over Norway must at best have been nominal.¹⁵⁷ Yet it remains that, no matter how briefly, Knútr had been personally present in Norway and asserted direct overlordship through agents of his own choosing. There must have been communicative memory, direct experience of Knútr's kingship, transmitted in the oral traditions of the region and on into cultural memory. This can similarly be hypothesised of Denmark where Knútr was often in residence.¹⁵⁸ Scandinavian narratives of Knútr's kingship, therefore, unlike those of Æthelstan and Æthelred, did not necessarily derive through Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact. While English and Scandinavian sources demonstrate an awareness of Knútr's political activities outside their own cultural sphere, each Anglo-Scandinavian culture had its own traditions of his rule.

The most evident manifestation of these traditions in the Scandinavian context are the contemporary poems composed for Knútr or about events of his reign. Indeed, Townend identifies Knútr's court as 'the focal point for skaldic composition and patronage in the Norse-speaking world'.¹⁵⁹ While a number of *skáld* served the Danish king throughout his reign, the three aforementioned poems are most notable for their temporal proximity to Knútr's early reign: *Liðsmannaflokkur*, *Eiríksdrápa*, and *Knútsdrápa*.¹⁶⁰ The former, a view from the trenches as it were, seems to express 'rank-and-file jubilation at Knútr's [English] conquest', in the words of Poole, and was likely composed contemporaneously with events for a Danish audience.¹⁶¹ *Eiríksdrápa*, attributed to the *Bjarnar saga* antagonist, Þórðr Kolbeinsson, is intended to praise Eiríkr Hákonarson as a hero of the conquest. Óttarr svarti's *Knútsdrápa* is, like *Eiríksdrápa*, a

¹⁵⁶ ASC D–E 1028; *Knýtlinga saga* 17; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 21. See also, Timothy Bolton, 'Ælfgifu of Northampton: Cnut the Great's Other Woman', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 51 (2007), 263–5.

¹⁵⁷ Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 289–90.

¹⁵⁸ The *Chronicle*, William of Malmesbury, Snorri Sturluson, and Saxo Grammaticus all also recall a campaign out of Denmark in 1025 which saw Knútr confront a coalition of Swedish and Norwegian forces—the so-called Battle of the Holy River. While the outcome of the conflict differs in the texts, all relate the presence of English troops in Knútr's army. ASC E 1025; *G. Reg.* ii.181.6; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 273–9; *G. Dan.* x.13.

¹⁵⁹ Townend, 'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', p. 145.

¹⁶⁰ Chapter 1, pp. 22, 47. See also Townend, 'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', pp. 151–62; Bolton, *The Empire of Cnut*, pp. 290–1; Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', p. 271. Both Bolton and Townend further discuss other compositions that derived from Knútr's court.

¹⁶¹ Poole, 'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', p. 286; Townend, 'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', p. 151.

formalised paean composed by a *skáld* and chiefly concerned with the conquest of England, though focused on Knútr. These three poems represent an Old Norse tradition memorialising Knútr's English kingship, a tradition that is contemporary in its origins, is inherently mnemonic, and is laudatory. In this form it passed into the corpus of thirteenth-century *konungasögur*, both informing the narratives of texts such as *Knýtlinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, and being quoted by them in an appeal to authority and authenticity.

Yet, the narrative of Knútr's successful kingship is not limited to texts that quote the various *drápur* and verse traditions that surround it. Saxo's prose *Gesta Danorum*, in eulogising the king some 150 years after his passing, laments a man 'quo nemo nostrorum regum, tametsi plura alii uictoriis illustrauerint, splendidior fuit' (whom none of our kings surpassed in brilliance, even though there was greater glory in their victories).¹⁶² No less laudatory is the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, which declares that at Knútr's death, 'quinque regnorum, scilicet Danomarchiae, Angliae, Britanniae, Scotiae, Noruegae uendicato dominio, imperator extitit' (he was emperor of five kingdoms, that is, he claimed dominion of Denmark, England, Wales, Ireland and Norway).¹⁶³ It is a remarkable claim to territorial hegemony and, while the panegyric nature of the *Encomium* makes it a problematic historical source, it is not alone in remarking the extent of Knútr's rule. The Anglo-Norman historians William of Malmesbury, John of Worcester, Henry of Huntingdon, and Geffrei Gaimar — writing in the first half of the twelfth century — all detail Knútr's reign and the breadth of his territorial claims throughout the Insular world and Scandinavia.¹⁶⁴ Clearly Knútr's name was well-known throughout the northern world and left a strong impression on Anglo-Scandinavian cultural memory. This surely stems from the fact that, compared to Æthelstan or Æthelred, a far greater number of cultures had direct knowledge and experience of Knútr's reign. The works of the *skáld*, the tales of Danish soldiers in England or English soldiers in Denmark, the simple presence of the king, these all represent points at which Knútr's reputation could enter regional communicative memory, passing into cultural memory traditions.

Of course, for later English and Scandinavians peoples, there was a material reminder of Knútr's kingship to keep his name alive in cultural memory and, granted the emphasis

¹⁶² *G. Dan.* x.20.3; Firth, 'The Politics of Hegemony', p. 51.

¹⁶³ *Encomium* 2.19.

¹⁶⁴ Geffrei Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, ll. 4683–4694; *G. Reg.* ii.181.1; HH vi.17; JW 1028–1029, 1031. See also Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.lxiii; *G. Dan.* x.20.3; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, p. 223.

placed on numismatics in the reigns of Æthelstan and Æthelred, a brief survey of Knútr's English coins seems in order. Despite any influx of Scandinavian settlers, Knútr's reign saw a decrease in the number of Scandinavian-named moneyers in London (fig. 11).¹⁶⁵ This is perhaps not entirely surprising. London had resisted Knútr's conquest more vehemently and more successfully than any other English territory, and the king and the city subsequently had a wary relationship, at least in the early years of his reign.¹⁶⁶ Outside of London, the demographics of minting seems little changed from the time of Æthelred: Scandinavian-named moneyers are mainly to be found Northumbria and the Danelaw (in perhaps slightly fewer numbers), and become scarcer deeper into Wessex.¹⁶⁷ There is little evidence that Knútr sought to bring Danish settlers in to fulfil the roles of everyday administration and there remain, for example, no moneyers of Scandinavian origin in the royal centre of Winchester where Knútr was in frequent residence throughout his reign.¹⁶⁸



Fig. 11: Cnut pointed helmet type (1.12 g), London, Ásleikr (ON) moneyer. Obv. [Cnu] t Rex An(glorum)]; rev. [Aslac on Lvdn(en)], short voided cross, pelleted annulets. 1950,0303.34 © The Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 12: Cnut short cross type (1.11 g), Rochester, Godwine (OE) moneyer. Obv. [Cnu] t Recx], bust with sceptre; rev. [Godpine on Rofej]. KENT-E9DD4A © Kent County Council

¹⁶⁵ Smart, 'Moneyers, 1017–1042', pp. 273–9.

¹⁶⁶ Matthew Firth, 'London Under Danish Rule: Cnut's Politics and Policies as a Demonstration of Power', *Eras*, 18 (2016), 1–20; Nicole Marafioti, *The King's Body: Burial and Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), pp. 61–124.

¹⁶⁷ Smart, 'Moneyers, 1017–1042', pp. 241–303.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 290–2.

In terms of distribution through the Anglo-Scandinavian world, while found in less quantity than coins of Æthelred, Knútr's English specie has been located in significant volumes in Norway, Denmark, Finland, various regions around the Baltic Sea, and even in Iceland.¹⁶⁹ Knútr used English currency to pay his Scandinavian mercenaries; English ports continued to trade with Scandinavian merchants. No doubt enough of Knútr's English coinage circulated throughout the Anglo-Scandinavian world to regularly prompt cultural memory of the king.

The circulation of currency may have kept the name of a king alive, yet *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* demonstrate that there were often stories attached to these names. Æthelstan's victory at Brunanburh, his employment of Scandinavian mercenaries, his generosity to them, are all recalled in *Egils saga*. Æthelred's conflict with Knútr, his need for and support of Scandinavian warriors, his court's familiarity with Nordic culture, are recounted in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Knútr's reign over the English and use of Scandinavian warriors and mercenaries is remembered in *Bjarnar saga*. While fictionalised detail may permeate each account, they are also sufficiently imbued with historical knowledge of the English political milieu as to render the *skáld's* royal audiences plausible. The movement and migration that characterised the Viking Age not only provide a historical setting for these narratives, but facilitated the exchange of experience, knowledge, and ideas. Ongoing Anglo-Scandinavian cultural interaction and exchange is in clear evidence in England's medieval historiography and archaeology. In this way were Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr's legacies adopted into, and perpetuated within, Scandinavian cultural memory, developing into the characters of the *Íslendingasögur* kings.

¹⁶⁹ Blackburn and Jonsson, 'Anglo-Saxon Coin Finds', pp. 217–49; MEC, pp. 253–60.

ICELAND AND THE WRITING OF THE SAGAS

Knowledge of England in the *Íslendingasögur* derived—directly or indirectly—from intercultural contact that occurred in England. However, the English cultural milieu held limited influence over the region’s portrayal in the sagas. These are not, after all, English memories of such exchanges, but Icelandic ones. Even accepting for a moment that the episodes of Anglo-Icelandic interaction in *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* are historical events, their simplest transmission history is one in which an Icelander’s eyewitness testimony was retold over two centuries before being committed to text. In that process, these stories assimilated, or were augmented by, subsequent experience: the arrival of English specie or artefacts, the travels of later decades, the accounts of other historical texts, developments in the Scandinavian political and cultural environment. Moreover, in the extant *Íslendingasögur* corpus, all this experience is codified through Icelandic storytelling conventions. Irrespective of how accurate accounts of events or portrayals of Viking Age England may be, these are narratives that, in every respect, embody an Icelandic worldview. This chapter focuses on that worldview, specifically, those other two cultural contexts critical to this study: Iceland in the Saga Age and Iceland in the Age of Saga Writing.

The narrative and authorial contexts of the *Íslendingasögur* are critical to the examination of their historicity, as both shape the stories and depictions of England within them. It is, of course, important to recall that the cultural memory preserved in their pages is that of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Iceland, the Age of Saga Writing rather than the Saga Age. Returning briefly to those definitional aspects of cultural memory, the *Íslendingasögur* embody a communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible narrative mode. Their communal nature is displayed in their intertextualities and adaptations to regional variance; their trans-generational nature is evident in the temporal divide between narrative setting and authorship; and tangibility simply identifies their preservation in a mediated form. It is, however, the retrospective nature of the texts that is of most interest here.

It is central to the literary mode of the *Íslendingasögur* that they present themselves as histories of Saga Age Icelanders. Their intent, as with all historical writing, is to meaningfully

represent the past for the author's present. This brings to mind Lachmann's statement that 'writing is both an act of memory and a new interpretation, by which every new text is etched into memory space.'¹ That memory space, in Lachmann's perception, is literature: the intertextual and interrelated texts of a given culture—textual corpora that, like the *Íslendingasögur*, share narrative structures, or styles, or motifs. Such conventions in the *Íslendingasögur* manifest both explicit and implicit intertextuality and were, in the case of the former, deliberately employed by saga authors and surely recognised by saga audiences.

It is to commonalities of form and content across saga texts that this chapter first turns, with a particular interest in their designations as generic markers. The relative merits of the traditional 'genres' used in saga scholarship is a matter of ongoing discussion and requires some attention. However, more important than the genres themselves, which can indeed prove limiting, are the taxonomic identifiers scholars use to distinguish them. These can aid in the identification of societal values across texts, of cultural expectations of the literature and its subsets and, therefore, of narrative intent. These shape the composition of the *Íslendingasögur* and their attendant depictions of Saga Age Iceland, the era in which Egill, Gunnlaugr and Björn lived. This chapter, therefore, also examines those portrayals of ninth- and tenth-century Iceland; not the history of early Iceland *per se*, but rather that history which the sagas seek to present, and its sources, influences, and aims. Those aims are intimately tied to authorial intent, and so this chapter will close with an examination of Iceland's political and intellectual milieu in the Age of Saga Writing. For, of the three historical contexts that underly this thesis, it is that of thirteenth-century Iceland that most influences the *Íslendingasögur*, and those portrayals of England and its kings found in the *skáldasögur*.

4.1 THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR* CORPUS

The forty-some texts categorised as *Íslendingasögur* represent only a small portion of Old Norse-Icelandic literature that survives from the Age of Saga Writing. They are distinguished from the rest of that corpus through two classification levels—generic designations that are rarely contemporary with authorship. A third taxonomic layer is used to identify

¹ Lachmann, 'Mnemonic and Intertextual', p. 301.

Íslendingasögur sub-genres, such as the *skáldasögur*. As analytical tools, such designations require careful consideration. Genre can at once be central to literary analysis, and limit it. Increasing attention has been paid problems of saga genre throughout the twenty-first century, though traditional taxonomies continue to hold sway.

The first and broadest of these taxonomies identifies the form of the literature. In the case of prose compositions, this is primarily as saga or *þátr*. Sagas are usually thought of as lengthier compositions than *þættir* (pl.), which lack such narrative scope or complexity and are most often found embedded *within* saga texts, usually *konungasögur*.² One such *þátr*, for example, provides the digressive tale in *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* that attests to Björn's travels. However, length alone does not distinguish *þættir* from sagas—*Þorsteins saga hvíta*, for example, is shorter than a number of *þættir*. Various thematically derived systems for the identification of *þættir* have been proposed, as have various corresponding subsets of the tales so designated.³ Yet the fact that *þættir* rarely occur independently of a host saga and thus, to be so identified, must be artificially removed from their literary context, has increasingly led to scholars questioning the identification of *þátr* as a literary mode distinct from saga.⁴ In his examination of the *Íslendingaþættir*, Ármann Jakobsson convincingly demonstrates that *þátr* as a genre has its origins in the early twentieth century, born of a desire to identify stories of Saga Age Icelanders that are told outside of the *Íslendingasögur*.⁵

The presence of Icelandic settings or Icelandic characters often sits alongside length as the most prominent taxonomic feature of the *þættir*, no matter any sub-generic classification.⁶ Ármann attributes this to the legacy of the nationalistic editorial principals that informed early *þættir* scholarship, suggesting that other potential *þættir* in the *konungasögur* have been passed over simply because they lack an Icelandic protagonist.⁷ In literary context, *þættir* are best understood as idiosyncratic narrative interpolations characteristic of the *konungasögur*, and an

² Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), pp. 36, 133–4.

³ See for example, Joseph Harris, 'Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 44 (1972), 6–20; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Joseph Harris, 'Short Prose Narrative (*þátr*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, pp. 463–4, 468–74.

⁴ See for example, Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story', *JEGP*, 112, no. 3 (2013), 257–91; Rowe and Harris, 'Short Prose Narrative (*þátr*)', pp. 462–78.

⁵ Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Medieval Icelandic Short Story', pp. 260–72.

⁶ See for example Rowe and Harris, 'Short Prose Narrative (*þátr*)', pp. 468–74, whose taxonomic schema identifies the prominence of Icelanders and the conventions of the so-called *Íslendingaþættir* in all but one category of *þátr*.

⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Medieval Icelandic Short Story', pp. 270–1.

integral element in defining *those* texts as an independent generic corpus.⁸ However, as literary critic Fredric Jameson argues, genres once defined do not ‘die out’, but become codified within literary history.⁹ *Þáttir* as a category of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is still widely recognised, and *þættir* appear as independent texts grouped thematically alongside *Íslendingasögur* in many seminal critical editions. The benefit of this, if used with circumspection, is that it allows for the ready identification of similar traditions across generic categorisations that might otherwise obscure them.

That which is more conventionally thought of as ‘genre’ in saga scholarship, is determined by the second classification level. Critics identify seven to nine primary saga subsets, determined by internal chronology and thematic concerns.¹⁰ The most prominent among these are the *Íslendingasögur*, the *konungasögur*, the *fornaldarsögur*, the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas), and the *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas). It is thematic criteria that, for example, distinguishes *Íslendingasögur* from *konungasögur*—the former focus on prominent Icelandic families, the latter on the kings of Scandinavia. In turn, chronological criteria distinguish *Íslendingasögur* from *samtíðarsögur*, which recall Saga Age Iceland and the Iceland of the Age of Saga Writing respectively. In recent decades, however, scholarship has increasingly rejected the idea of saga genre as a rigid taxonomic construct. As Massimiliano Bampi states, saga genre represents ‘a retrospective and external attempt at establishing order within a body of works composed long ago’.¹¹ It is an attempt that, in the opinions of such critics as Clunies Ross and Philip Lavender, is doomed to meet with limited success, as individual sagas inevitably display characteristics of more than one sub-group.¹² Medieval authors were not working within our taxonomies. While the intertextuality of the saga corpus

⁸ Cf. Clunies Ross, who characterises *þáttir* as an ‘indigenous medieval Icelandic literary genre that is distinct from the saga’, appearing ‘alongside’, rather than as an element of, the *konungasögur*, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 36, 133.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 106–7.

¹⁰ See for example, Massimiliano Bampi, ‘Genre’, in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 4–5; Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 31–6; Kurt Schier, *Sagaliteratur* (Stuttgart: Sammlung Metzler, 1970), pp. 5–6.

¹¹ Bampi, ‘Genre’, p. 5.

¹² Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 28; Philip Lavender, ‘The Secret Pre-history of the *Fornaldarsögur*’, *JEGP*, 114, no. 4 (2015), 527. Here Lavender himself is drawing on Ralph O’Connor’s contribution to Judy Quinn and others, ‘Interrogating Genre in the *Fornaldarsögur*: Round-Table Discussion’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 2 (2006), 291–3. On the matter of saga hybridity, see also Bampi, ‘Genre’, pp. 6–9; Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 70; Sif Rikhardsdóttir, ‘Hybridity’, in *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, ed. by Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington and Sif Rikhardsdóttir (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2020), pp. 31–46.

suggests that medieval authors and audiences were conscious of narrative conventions, there is little evidence that they perceived these as generic markers.¹³

Nonetheless, among these primary genres, *Íslendingasögur* has proved one of the least controversial.¹⁴ This can be attributed to the comparatively concrete criterion that texts must feature the Settlement families of Iceland and their descendants. In his case study of *Vatnsdæla saga*, Russell Poole itemises twenty-one common features of ‘sagas that have Icelanders as their principal personages’.¹⁵ Many of these commonalities—regional focus, grievance and vengeance, manifestations of a sense of history, embedded verses, references to other sagas—are recognisable features of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*.¹⁶ That Poole is able to identify so many parallels suggests that generic identifications are not without justification. Even so, he eschews the term *Íslendingasögur*, following Clunies Ross’ suggestion that ‘saga is the only generic signifier of this literature’, the subgroups of which ‘are fuzzy categories’.¹⁷ Yet ‘fuzzy categories’ and blurred genre boundaries need not be problematic if the theoretical premise of hybridity—the intentional or incidental reformulation, blending, and blurring of such boundaries—is accepted. No doubt the saga classification system, if adhered to rigidly and uncritically, runs the risk of obscuring variation among saga texts by presupposing generic narrative frameworks, yet it remains a useful analytical tool. As Bampi and Sif Rikhardsdottir state in the introduction to *Old Norse Literary Genre*, ‘defining the relevant genre of a literary work is indeed the starting point of any critical work’.¹⁸ *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* have been defined as belonging to both the *Íslendingasögur* and its *skáldasögur* sub-genre from the outset of this thesis. Such collective categorisation, notwithstanding its potentially reductive nature, is invested in the identification of commonly held cultural concerns and cultural memories.

Hybridity only increases among the sub-generic categories of *Íslendingasögur*, which include the *skáldasögur* as identified by the third taxonomic layer. It may be recalled that Whaley identifies nine elements common to the *skáld*’s character arc—generic markers of the

¹³ Sif Rikhardsdottir, ‘Hybridity’, p. 35.

¹⁴ Though debate continues around the authorial date-based classification system often used *within* the *Íslendingasögur*: classical and post-classical. For recent commentary, see Ármann Jakobsson and Yoav Tirosh, ‘The “Decline of Realism” and inefficacious Old Norse literary genres and sub-genres,’ *Scandia*, 3 (2020), 102–38.

¹⁵ Russell Poole, ‘*Íslendingasögur* – A Case Study: *Vatnsdæla saga*’, in *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, pp. 271–5.

¹⁶ Poole, ‘*Íslendingasögur*’, pp. 271–5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 275; Margaret Clunies Ross, in Judy Quinn and others, ‘Interrogating Genre’, p. 278.

¹⁸ Massimiliano Bampi and Sif Rikhardsdottir, ‘Introduction’, in *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, p. 1.

skáldasögur.¹⁹ Yet *Bjarnar saga*'s transgressions of *skáldasögur* narrative conventions, for example—some of them at least—have already been noted.²⁰ The prevalence of intertextuality within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus—manifest, explicit or implicit—is such that any individual generic identifier may be characteristic of more than one sub-set of *Íslendingasögur*, and any individual saga may display characteristics of numerous such categories. It is this to which Clunies Ross refers in stating of the *skáldasögur*:

Though it is convenient to refer to the skald sagas as a sub-set of a larger generic group, the sagas of Icelanders, the distinction is not clear-cut. While there is a small core of sagas that are universally accepted as belonging to the sub-set, there are other sagas that may be considered outliers, in the sense that they share some characteristics of the core group but have other features that are not represented there.²¹

Here is yet another 'fuzzy' category. Clunies Ross identifies *Bjarnar saga* as one of the 'core' or canonical *skáldasögur*, as does Whaley, despite the apparent inversion of the *skáld*'s traditional narrative role, with the protagonist's poetic credentials paling alongside those of his rival. In contrast, *Egils saga* is numbered among the 'outliers'. Clunies Ross points to a number of features that set the saga apart from the canon, which typically comprises *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* alongside *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*. Firstly, she points to the saga's 'anti-royal and anti-Norwegian stance', which she posits sits in opposition to the core *skáldasögur*, 'where Norwegian kings appear as the special friends and Christian patrons of the poets'.²² Yet friendship with kings is not a trope of the *skáldasögur* to the degree it could be considered to take on taxonomic weight. In fact, Ármann Jakobsson identifies *Egils saga*'s anti-kingship sentiment as setting it apart from the *Íslendingasögur* corpus as a whole, not merely the *skáldasögur*.²³ However, as discussed in chapter 6, the composition of *Gunnlaugs saga*'s travel passages also portray a degree of 'anti-royal and anti-Norwegian' sentiment.²⁴ The Norwegian earl of Lade and the Swedish king both serve as antagonists to the *skáld*'s protagonist, the

¹⁹ Whaley, 'Introduction', pp. 20–1.

²⁰ Chapter 1, p. 12.

²¹ Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre', p. 25; it is of note that Clunies Ross' position on genre classification appears to have changed from this time (2001), when she identifies the *Íslendingasögur* as a generic group, and 2006 when, as per the quote at (p. 130, n. 17), she expresses the opinion that no genre more granular than 'saga' can be confidently identified.

²² Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre', p. 37.

²³ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Pretenders', pp. 50–2.

²⁴ Chapter 6, pp. 213–20; see also Firth, 'Æthelred II the Unready', pp. 1–14.

Norse King of Dublin is portrayed as comically naïve; Æthelred alone has a wholly positive characterisation. Nonetheless, the *Gunnlaugs saga*'s status as a *skáldasaga* remains secure.

The second matter Clunies Ross raises in distinguishing Egill from his *skáld* counterparts is romance. It is true that *Egils saga* provides little sense that romance is a core theme. There is some perfunctory nod to the trope as found in other *skáldasögur* when Egill composes verses expressing longing for his brother's widow Ásgerðr, an episode that, in this particular, parallels those of *Kormáks saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* in which their shared verse is located.²⁵ However, in those texts, as well as in *Bjarnar saga*, the romance narrative is the driving force behind the underlying conflict, even if it is dealt with unevenly across the saga's length. Kormákr, Björn, and Gunnlaugr are all denied marriage to the women they love, whether through the objections of family or the machinations of a rival. Egill has no such trouble. He has no love rival; there are no objections from Ásgerðr's family. Egill's longing lasts, at most, for the autumn, his rapid pivot from longing to engagement to marriage seemingly included in the saga to enable the author's inclusion of two stanzas of love poetry he held to be of Egill's composition.

The perfunctory nature of the *Íslendingasögur* romance tradition shown in *Egils saga* may have passed notice in a shorter saga. That seems the case for *Hallfreðar saga* which, though identified as one of the core *skáldasögur*, can scarcely be taken to have a strong romance theme or, at least, to bring a deft hand to its exposition. In this case the family of the *skáld*'s love interest, Kolfinna, is happy with the match, but Hallfreðr himself is simply uninterested in marriage, if not sex. His insulting behaviour ultimately serves to turn his own family against him, and Hallfreðr's own father both blesses Kolfinna's marriage to another suitor and orders Hallfreðr to depart Iceland.²⁶ Upon his return, Hallfreðr again sets out to sleep with Kolfinna, unperturbed by her marriage. Kolfinna is apparently willing, yet as they lie in bed, Hallfreðr speaks insult verses against Kolfinna's husband, so offending her that she rejects him.²⁷ This is a near inversion of usual *Íslendingasögur* romance tropes. There is consent for Hallfreðr's marriage to Kolfinna from every party involved, yet the *skáld* himself is the author of his rejection. As a result, there is little narrative conflict tied to the saga's romance aspects; the

²⁵ *Egils saga* 56; cf. *Gunnlaugs saga* 11; *Kormáks saga* 3. See also chapter 2, pp. 68–71.

²⁶ *Hallfreðar saga* 4.

²⁷ *Hallfreðar saga* 9.

saga author is primarily concerned to relate Hallfreðr's conversion, and to laud the proselytising Norwegian King Óláfr I Tryggvason (995–1000). There is little here to suggest *Hallfreðar saga* to be more 'typical' of a perceived *skáldasögur* 'sub-genre' than *Egils saga*.

In truth, the core-outlier model has little to offer methodologically. It necessitates a dogmatic approach to the identification of saga sub-genres, grading individual texts against a fabricated rubric of typicality, such as that suggested by Whaley.²⁸ It is one thing to identify common elements and intertextual relations across saga texts, but quite another to suggest that an ideal or typical generic model can be identified from these.²⁹ Medieval Icelanders no doubt recognised their literature's conventions ('even if only implicitly', as Sif Rikhardsdottir argues);³⁰ however, any preconception of a generic ideal or norm or canon is at best hypothetical, at worst merely arbitrary, and always anachronistic. In this case, the term *skáldasögur* is best perceived as identifying a set of like motifs and narrative structures, rather than as ascribing them with taxonomic weight and thereby identifying a corpus. The most self-evident of these are the explicit biographical focus, the centrality of a known *skáld* to the narrative, and the journeying abroad to participate in foreign courts. This then encompasses all the 'core' texts and the 'outliers' alongside a number of others usually placed within alternative sub-categories. Again, it is important to recognise the hybridity of *Íslendingasögur* sub-groups; the corpus is fundamentally intertextual, and commonly held cultural concerns and cultural memories manifest across any such delineations.

However, there is still some value to defining genres of saga literature. To identify generic markers, those intertextual motifs and structures, is also to identify those things a society valued and privileged, disdained and feared. In Sif's words, genre is 'at the very least a useful guide to identifying and discussing texts' narrative purposes and functionalities'.³¹ O'Connor also puts it well, though sounding a greater note of caution in his statement that:

²⁸ Whaley, 'Introduction', pp. 20–1.

²⁹ O'Connor, in Judy Quinn and others, 'Interrogating Genre', pp. 291–3.

³⁰ Sif Rikhardsdottir, 'Hybridity', p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The old categories are indeed useful, but only insofar as we continue to interrogate them, rather than merely accepting them as integral and natural parts of the cultural landscape they claim to represent.³²

The true value of generic designation is not to be found in the tidy categorisation of texts, but in the taxonomies used to identify them. A focus on generic markers as opposed to the genres they delimit better enables the discernment of intertextuality—traditions, cultural memory, narrative conventions—that exist despite and across generic categorisations. Thus, *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* each contains characteristic *skáldasögur* motifs, lack or adapt others, and display features attributed to different sub-genres. This neither precludes their categorisation as *skáldasögur*, nor limits them to that designation. *Gunnlaugs saga*, for example, adheres to the *skáldasögur* biographical mode and feuding motifs. Yet the closest parallel to Gunnlaugr's duel with the *berserkr* at Æthelred's court is found in *Svarfdæla saga*, which has few *skáldasögur* generic markers and has never been categorised as such.³³ On a different taxonomic level, however, both are *Íslendingasögur*. This *can* indeed be a useful generic designation for the analysis of medieval Icelandic self-perception and cultural memory. For the one readily identifiable criterion foundational to all texts that form the *Íslendingasögur* genre, is their overt interest in the peoples, politics, and social order of early medieval Iceland.

4.2 ICELAND IN THE SAGA AGE

Scandinavian settlers arrived in Iceland around the year 870. This is the date recorded in Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, where the year is identified as the same in which the East Anglian King Edmund the Martyr was killed. Ari indicates he had access to a 'saga' or hagiography of Edmund, comparatively early evidence of contact between English and Icelandic literary cultures.³⁴ *Landnámabók*, which gathers some hundreds of stories of settlers and their families, provides a settlement date of 874.³⁵ Both texts, in the manner of the *Íslendingasögur*, purport to be histories but contain much that can be considered of dubious historicity. Nonetheless, it is

³² O'Connor, in Judy Quinn and others, 'Interrogating Genre', pp. 293.

³³ *Svarfdæla saga* 8–9, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, *ÍF IX* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1956), pp. 145–7.

³⁴ *Íslendingabók 1*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, *ÍF I* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1938), pp. 4–5; for the dating of *Íslendingabók*, see *Íslendingabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, pp. xvii–xx; *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga*, ed. and trans. by Siân Grønlie (London: VSNR, 2006), pp. ix, xiii–xiv.

³⁵ *Landnámabók S8, H8*.

curious that, in a paper published in 2000, geoscience researchers termed *Landnámabók* 'near-mythical', granted that their tephrochronological data supports Ari's dating.³⁶ Studies of the so-called Landnám tephra sequence—twin layers of erupted volcanic debris—have dated it to 871 ± 2 , coinciding and overlapping with the earliest archaeological evidence of human settlement.³⁷ This fact can provide some confidence in the *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* accounts of settlement, and establishes the *terminus post quem* for Icelandic settlement.

Íslendingabók states that by 930 the island was fully settled, once again using the death of St Edmund as a chronological referent, alongside that of Haraldr *inn hárfagri* c.932.³⁸ This is also the traditional date given for the initial establishment of structured governance and legal codes. This era, 870–930, is usually termed the Settlement period, and serves as the historical or pseudo-historical basis upon which most *Íslendingasögur* narratives are based. These represent the first decades of the Saga Age. Before considering saga representations of the Settlement period, however, the conflicting periodisations of the sagas, of Icelandic history, and of English history need clarification.

The primary period designations in this thesis have been, and will continue to be, the Saga Age and the Age of Saga Writing. The first of these, the period with which the *Íslendingasögur* concern themselves, runs from the Norse settlement of Iceland c.870 through to the mid-eleventh century. Saga Age Iceland and Viking Age England should be understood as inhabiting roughly the same time-period, both Scandinavian settlement and Scandinavian raiding throughout the North Atlantic deriving from the same peripatetic impulses. As the Heathen Army raided throughout England, so too did the first generations of Norwegian settlers make their homes on hitherto near-unpopulated Iceland. In turn, as Knútr began to resolve England's viking problems, so too was the Saga Age winding down, with the setting of *Bjarnar saga* being among the latest found in the *Íslendingasögur*. The second period, the Age of Saga Writing, for the purposes of this study encompasses the century c.1220–c.1320, when

³⁶ Andrew J. Dugmore and others, 'Tephrochronology, Environmental Change and the Norse Settlement of Iceland', *Environmental Archaeology*, 5, no. 1 (2000), 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–34; Magnús Á. Sigurgeirsson and others, 'Dating of the Viking Age Landnám Tephra Sequence in Lake Mývatn Sediment, North Iceland', *Journal of the North Atlantic*, 21 (2013), 1–11. It is of note that Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson argue that such studies suffer from confirmation bias, seeking out correlation with medieval sources. Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past: A Historiography of the Settlement of Iceland', in *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*, ed. by James H. Barrett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 157–8.

³⁸ *Íslendingabók* 3.

the bulk of the *Íslendingasögur* were put to text. Overlapping both of these is the Commonwealth era, beginning in 930 and ending in 1262. Its beginning and end are less nebulous than the other designations; 930 is the year in which tradition holds the *alþingi* (general assembly) was established, 1262 the year in which Norwegian rule was imposed through the agreement known as the Old Covenant. However, it is an unsatisfactory periodisation for the study of the *Íslendingasögur*. Spanning three centuries, the definitional aspect of the Commonwealth era is the nature of governance. This provides a false sense of continuity. The Icelanders in which the sagas are set and are written—the politics, the religion, the intellectual culture, the balances of power—are quite distinct from one another.

Table 6: Overlapping periodisations (789–1320) (M. Firth)

Europe	Iceland (History)	Iceland (Sagas)	England
Viking Age (c. 789–c. 1060)	Settlement Period (c. 870–930)	Saga Age (c. 870–c. 1050)	"Anglo-Saxon" England
	Commonwealth Period (930–1262)		
		Age of Saga Writing (c. 1220–c. 1320)	1066

While the historical context of the Settlement period may be foundational to the *Íslendingasögur*, it is not given narrative space in every text. *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, for example, are primarily set in the decades following the millennium and there is a degree to which they assume audience knowledge of the Icelandic past. For texts with late settings such as these, the usual convention is to provide an opening genealogy linking the earliest active players within the focal narrative to their Settlement era ancestors. The opening

passages of *Gunnlaugs saga* are a case in point, linking the families of both Gunnlaugr and his love interest, Helga, to the settler families of the late ninth century.³⁹ *Bjarnar saga* presumably once had a similar genealogy though the opening chapters of that text are no longer extant. The surrogate material, drawn from the *páttr* in *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*, predictably centres King Óláfr II, beginning with the statement, ‘Nú skal segja nokkut af þeim íslenskum mǫnnum, sem uppi váru um daga Óláfs konungs Haraldssonar ok hans urðu heimuligir vinir’ (Now let us say something of the Icelandic men who lived in the days of King Olaf Haraldsson, and became his close friends).⁴⁰ Certain kinship relations for Björn and Þórðr can be gleaned from the text, but the best attestations of their connections to Settlement families are found in external sources such as *Landnámabók*.⁴¹ Of the three focus texts, only *Egils saga* provides an extensive Settlement period prologue. Granted it is often held to be an early saga—a relative term considering the Age of Saga Writing lasts a mere century or so—and that it holds status as a critical darling of the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, the influence *Egils saga* has held—for better or worse—over the idea that such prologues are canonical should not be underestimated.⁴² Yet the Settlement narrative of *Egils saga* is informative in its own right as an origin narrative that foregrounds tension between kingship and independence.

It is perhaps unfair to characterise the Settlement era passages of *Egils saga* as merely a ‘prologue’. The saga author paid significant attention to the composition of the narrative and clearly deemed the background of the family to be foundational to Egill’s own story and worthy of extensive coverage. Egill himself does not appear in the text until chapter thirty-one. The saga opens in Norway, as do most sagas that foreground their narratives in the Settlement period.⁴³ The story focuses on the fortunes of Egill’s grandfather Kveld-Úlfr, father Skalla-Grímr and uncle Þórólfr during the early years of Haraldr *inn hárfagri*’s reign in the late ninth century. While Egill’s direct ancestors see little allure to siding with Haraldr in his

³⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 1, 4.

⁴⁰ *Bjarnar saga* 1. The manuscripts of *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*—specifically the *Bajarbók* version of that text which alone preserves the *páttr* in question—used by Nordal and Guðni Jónsson are AM 71 fol. (an early eighteenth-century transcript of a non-extant late medieval copy), and AM 488 4to (a mediated seventeenth-century version of *Bjarnar saga* to which the *páttr* has been appended at ff. 1^v–11^v). *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. xcvi–xcvii, 111 (n. 1). Most commentators also identify AM 73 a fol. As a faithful copy of *Bajarbók*, in which the *páttr* is located at ff. 80^v–83^v. See chapter 5, pp. 168–70.

⁴¹ *Landnámabók* H45, S57, H51, S63, S107, H135, S166.

⁴² For commentary on the dating *Egils saga*, see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, 1180–1280* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 110–1; Callow, ‘Dating and Origins’, pp. 15–33; Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family sagas’, p. 116. For laudatory commentary on the text’s qualities, see for example: Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 98, 217–8, 265–70.

⁴³ See for example: *Eyrbyggja saga* 1–3; *Grettis saga* 1–4; *Laxdæla saga* 1–4; *Vatnsdæla saga* 1–9.

campaign to absorb Norway's regional kingships under his own rule, and are little reluctant to tell the King so directly, uncle Þórólfr sees opportunity in the rise of Haraldr.⁴⁴ Against Kveld-Úlfr's advice, Þórólfr seeks service in Haraldr's court and, for a time, does prosper. Þórólfr is to be found at Haraldr's side at the Battle of Hafrsfjörðr, the battle often credited as the moment in which Haraldr secured Norwegian overlordship.⁴⁵ Þórólfr is wounded at the battle, as is his kinsman Bárðr who subsequently dies, bequeathing his lands and goods to Þórólfr from his deathbed.⁴⁶ Herein lies the nexus of Þórólfr's fortune and misfortunes and the impetus behind his family's emigration to Iceland.

Haraldr's rise to power is treated with scepticism across several *Íslendingasögur*. *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, for example, opens with the words:

Á dögum Haralds hins hárfagra byggðist mest Ísland, því at menn þoldu eigi ánauð hans ok ofríki, einkanliga þeir, sem váru stórrar ættar ok mikillar lundar, en áttu góða kosti ok vildu þeir heldr flýja eignir sínar en þola ágang ok ójafnað.⁴⁷

(Iceland was mostly settled in the days of Haraldr *inn hárfagri*, for people could not tolerate his persecution and tyranny, especially those who belonged to great families with considerable lands and good prospects. They preferred to flee without their possessions rather than remain and endure oppression and injustice.)

This is borne out in the conclusion to Þórólfr's story, though *Egils saga* also purports to provide a glimpse of a king jealous of his power and thereby easily led to paranoia. Þórólfr is initially rewarded for his service at Hafrsfjörðr, gaining not only Bárðr's lands with Haraldr's blessing but being given additional lands and rights, including authority to collect the king's tribute in Finnmark. Þórólfr rapidly becomes a wealthy man surrounded by a large and loyal retinue, at which point in the narrative two forces which oppose this development coalesce. These are the Hildiríðarsynir, brothers who press a claim to a portion of Bárðr's inheritance, and King Haraldr, who begins to see Þórólfr's influence and wealth in the north as marking out an

⁴⁴ *Egils saga* 6, 8–10.

⁴⁵ See for example: *Egils saga* 9; Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, pp. 115–7; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'The Norse Community', in *The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World, c. 1100-c. 1400*, ed. by Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Tapir Academic Press, 2010), pp. 59–60.

⁴⁶ *Egils saga* 9.

⁴⁷ *Harðar saga* 1. For similar assessments of Haraldr's reign in *Íslendingasögur* texts, see for example: *Eyrbyggja saga* 1; *Grettis saga* 2; *Laxdæla saga* 2; *Víglundar saga* 1, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, *ÍF XIV*, p. 63 (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1959), (though the opening chapter of this text is notable for seeking to balance praise and criticism).

opposing court.⁴⁸ Granted Haraldr's temperament in the saga, it is not difficult for the Hildiríðarsynir to convince Haraldr that Þórólfr's posturing is not only deliberately oppositional, but enabled by his misappropriation of the Finnmörk tributes. *Landnámabók* neatly summarises the inevitable fallout of this intrigue and its aftermath:

Haraldr konungur hárfagri lét drepa Þórólfr norðr í Áløst á Sandnesi af rógi Hildiríðarsona; það vildi Haraldr konungr eigi boeta. Þá bjöggu þeir Grímr ok Kveld-Úlfr kaupskip og ætluðu til Íslands, því at þeir höfðu þar spurt til Ingólfs vinar síns. Þeir lágu til hafs í Sólundum. Þar tóku þeir knorr þann, er Haraldr konungr lét taka fyrir Þórólfi, þá er menn hans váru nýkomnir af Englandi, ok drápu þar Hallvarð harðfara ok Sigtrygg snarfara, er því höfðu valdit. Þar drápu þeir og sonu Guttorms Sigurðarsonar hjartar, bræðrunga konungs, ok alla skipshöfn þeira nema tvá menn, er þeir létu segja konungi tíðendin. Þeir bjöggu hvárttveggja skipit til Íslands ok þrjá tigu mana á hváru.⁴⁹

(King Haraldr *inn hárfagri* had Þórólfr put to death in the north at Álöst in Sandness because of the slander of the Hildiríðarsynir; King Haraldr would pay no compensation. Then [Skalla]-Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr prepared a merchant ship intending to go to Iceland as they had heard their friend Ingólfr was there. They lay at sea off Sólund and there took the ship King Haraldr himself had taken from Þórólfr's men just after they had returned from England. There they killed Hallvarð *harðfari* [hard-sailing] and Sigtrygg *snarfari* [fast-sailing], who had been in charge [of that expedition]. They also killed the sons of Guttormr Sigurðsson *hjarta* [heart], the king's kinsmen, and all their men bar two who they had tell the King of events. After this [Skalla-Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr] prepared both ships with thirty men apiece for the journey to Iceland.)

It is impressive vengeance for a murdered son and brother, and it is of note that this, a more-or-less faithful summary of chapters ten through twenty-seven of *Egils saga*, is found externally attested. *Landnámabók*, the version cited being that attributed to Sturla Þórðarson, ostensibly completed around 1275, was composed after *Egils saga*. This is a clear example of

⁴⁸ *Egils saga* 11.

⁴⁹ *Landnámabók* S 29.

manifest intertextuality, the details of the account a direct borrowing from *Egils saga* (which itself likely borrowed and expanded upon a parallel narrative from an earlier, non-extant redaction of *Landnámabók*).⁵⁰ While it could be suggested that both texts draw independently from an oral repository of cultural memory, there are a number of reasons this is unlikely. Firstly, direct contact between the texts is suggested by the accuracy of the *Landnámabók* account of Skalla-Grímr and Kveld-Úlfr's vengeance (and subsequent settlement) to that recorded in *Egils saga*. If two independent redactors codify an oral text, even presuming both were present at the same telling of the tale, it is to be expected that their interpretations and emphases would produce variant narratives. The reinterpetive nature of narrative transmission is foundational to theories of cultural memory. Yet here, nearly every moment of the *Landnámabók* account of the conflict between King Haraldr and Egill's ancestors correlates to a passage of the *Egils saga* version of events.⁵¹ Granted that *Sturlubók Landnámabók* is the later of the texts, this suggests that Sturla Þórðarson had a written version of *Egils saga* at his side, not dissimilar to that which has survived the centuries.

Secondly, the hard and fast-sailing brothers do not exist outside this episode in *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók*.⁵² That they are tasked with the confiscation of Þórólfr's ship suggests they are trusted by Haraldr and hold some status in his court. Yet record of them does not attach to cultural memory of Haraldr's reign elsewhere attested. Rather, they are exclusively associated with cultural memory of Egill's family's emigration to Iceland, with the apparent conceit of the matching sobriquets *harðfari* and *snarfari* suggesting the brothers to have literary origins. Admittedly, these origins may derive from the interpretive interventions of oral redactors as opposed to those of the textual redactors of *Egils saga* or earlier versions of *Landnámabók*. Either method of narrative transmission would demonstrate this story as one localised within and specific to Icelandic cultural memory. Yet such editorialisations, preserved solely in these two texts as they are, point to a more direct intertextuality.

⁵⁰ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past', pp. 144, 149; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Naming the Landscape in the *Landnám* Narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*', *Saga Book*, 36 (2012), 83–4; Judith Jesch, 'Geography and Travel', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 121–2; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Landnámabók and its *Sturlubók* Version', in *Sturla Þórðarson: Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*, ed. by Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 52–3.

⁵¹ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past', p. 149.

⁵² *Egils saga* 18–19, 21–22, 26; *Landnámabók* S 29, the story is also briefly recalled in H 303 and S 344.

Lastly, the probability that Sturla was related to the author of *Egils saga* must be considered. No *Íslendingasögur* can be attributed to a named author with certainty. However, there is a broad consensus (if not unchallenged) that Snorri Sturluson was the *Egils saga* author.⁵³ The authorship of *Egils saga* is given further consideration below, but in essence, textual critics have long recognised similarity in style, vocabulary, and content between texts more firmly attributed to Snorri—such as those that comprise *Heimskringla*—and *Egils saga*.⁵⁴ The noted parallel passages describing the Norse settlement of Northumbria in *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*, serve as an example.⁵⁵ Such manifest intertextuality must be explained. The two texts clearly share a direct link: a common author, or a common source, or through one text borrowing from the other. Granted the temporal proximity of their authorship and the surely limited dissemination of the texts so shortly after their composition, attributing both to Snorri's authorship is—rightly or wrongly—the simplest explanation for this contact. Returning then to Sturla, he was Snorri's nephew and political ally. More than this, Sturla proved himself throughout his life to be heir to Snorri's literary endeavours. With this considered, it is possible that Sturla had access to, or perhaps possession of, Snorri's library and works to draw upon for his own writings.⁵⁶ Thus, if *Egils saga* can indeed be attributed to Snorri's authorship, the links between it and *Landnámabók* become explicit, a duology preserving and creating memory of the Settlement era, entrenching received traditions around Haraldr's kingship. Even if Snorri's authorship is rejected, though the source of these intertextual links becomes less clear, this conclusion is not significantly weakened. Sturla had access to *Egils saga* or its progenitor for the settlement passages.

Intellectual culture in the Age of Saga Writing, however, is a topic for later discussion; it remains here to conclude the story of Kveld-Úlfr and his sons, and to provide some insight into the history of Saga Age Iceland, particularly as presented within the *Íslendingasögur*.

⁵³ See for example, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, *Egil's Saga* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 6–7; Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. by Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), pp. 234–7.

⁵⁴ For stylometric analyses, see for example Ralph West, 'Snorri Sturluson and *Egils saga*: statistics of style', *Scandinavian Studies*, 52, no. 2 (1980), 163–93; Haukur Þorgeirsson, 'How similar are *Heimskringla* and *Egils saga*? An application of Burrows' delta to Icelandic texts', *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 48, 1 (2018), 1–18. For content analysis, see Margaret Cormack, '*Egils saga*, *Heimskringla*, and the Daughter of Eiríkr blóðøx', *alvissmál*, 10 (2001), 61–8. See also, Vésteinn Ólason, 'Er Snorri höfundur *Egils sögu*?', *Skirnir*, 142 (1968), 48–67.

⁵⁵ *Egils saga* 51, cf. Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, pp. 152–3. Chapter 3, pp. 104–05.

⁵⁶ *Íslendinga saga* 79; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 143–4.

While there is variance among *Íslendingasögur* origin narratives, the tale of Skalla-Grímr's coming to Iceland adheres to a number of typical features. The Norwegian protagonists set out for Iceland with a retinue including followers and family members. They first attend the settlement of a known friend, in this case Ingólfr, using it as a base from which to explore, to name local landmarks, and to identify the ideal location for their own settlement. Once identified, the land is claimed and divided among the settlers, with the primary protagonist, here Skalla-Grímr, taking on the role of regional *goði*.⁵⁷ Also reasonably common among the tropes of Settlement is the idea that such events are to some degree attributable to the guiding hand of fate or to the divine intervention of pagan gods. This usually takes the form of some sacred object—often *þndvegissúlur* (high seat pillars)—being thrown overboard and drifting to shore, a marker for the migrating Norwegians of where they are to settle.⁵⁸ Where *Egils saga* does vary is that said object is the coffin in which Kveld-Úlfr's body was placed for burial at sea, having died during the crossing. As the ship he had commanded explored Borgarfjörðr, his men came across the coffin and buried Kveld-Úlfr's remains. Upon joining his father's shipmates with his own companions, Skalla-Grímr surveyed the site and, finding it a good place for a settlement, named it Borg and established a farmstead on the site (map 7).⁵⁹ Skalla-Grímr in fact took possession of the entire Mýrar region (a claim numerous scholars have remarked as extraordinary in its extent), thereby establishing the Mýrar *goðorð*.⁶⁰

While the political importance of the Mýrar *goðorð* through the Saga Age has been called into question, it seems that connections to the *Mýramenn* were prized and preserved in cultural memory (particularly in connection to Egill Skalla-Grímsson).⁶¹ Egill's descendants take prominent roles within *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, and those connections are often made explicit. Gunnlaugr's betrothed, Helga *in fagra* (the Fair), was Egill's granddaughter and, in establishing that connection in the saga's first chapter, the author states that the *Mýramenn* are the descendants of Egill (minimising Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr as

⁵⁷ As examples that follow this narrative pattern, see *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* 2–4, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ÍF XIII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1991), pp. 103–9; *Eyrbyggja saga* 4; *Flóamanna saga* 4, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, ÍF XIII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1991), pp. 236–7; *Laxdæla saga* 2–4; *Vatnsdæla saga* 12–15.

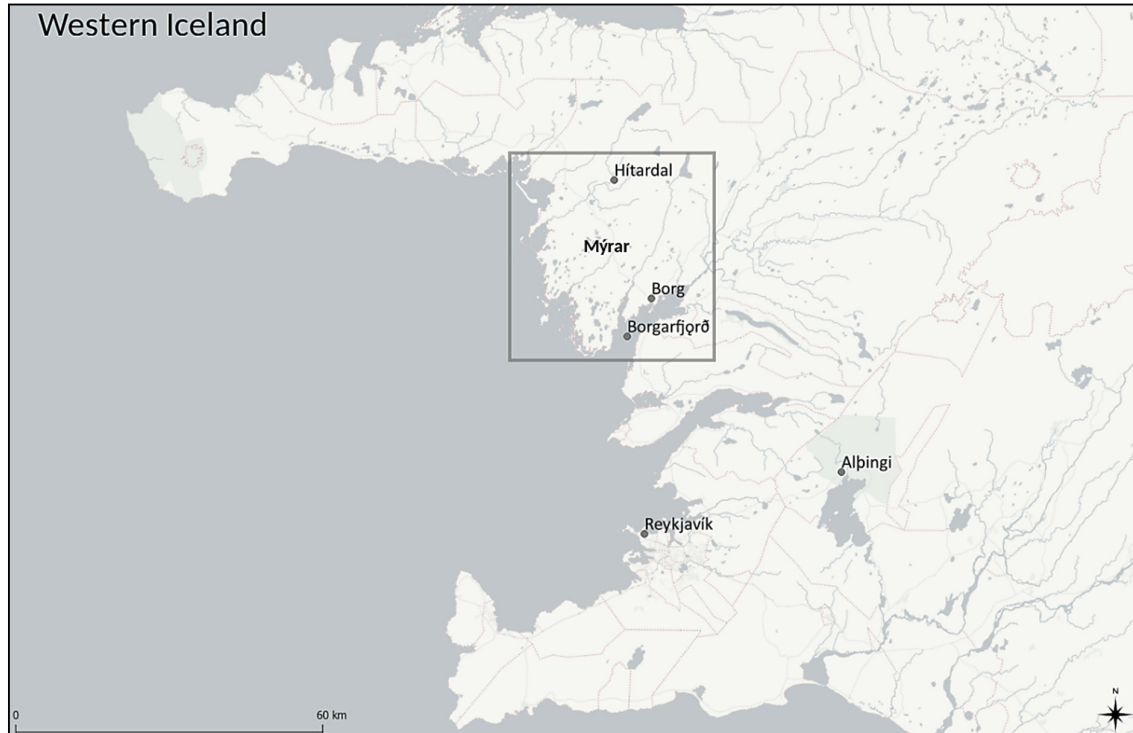
⁵⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga* 4; *Flóamanna saga* 4; *Laxdæla saga* 3.

⁵⁹ *Egils saga* 27–28; *Landnámabók* S 29–30.

⁶⁰ Barraclough, 'Naming the Landscape', pp. 83–4; David Stevens, 'The Problem of Ánabrekka in Skalla-Grímr's Land Claim', *Saga Book*, 25 (2011), 27.

⁶¹ Stevens, 'The Problem of Ánabrekka', 32–7.

patriarchs).⁶² Björn in turn was Egill's great-grandnephew, a genealogy that was presumably included in the saga's lost opening chapters, but nonetheless is recounted in both *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók* (the latter again drawing on the former or its progenitor).⁶³



Map 7: The Mýrar region of western Iceland where Skalla-Grimr and his descendants settled (M. Firth)

On which topic, both Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson claimed kinship to the Mýrar settlers via direct lineage through Snorri's mother's family.⁶⁴ In fact, in its introductory passages *Gunnlaugs saga* numbers Snorri alongside Egill and Björn as the most accomplished and famous of the *Mýramenn*.⁶⁵ For Snorri and Sturla and the Sturlungar family more broadly, interest in the settlement and fortunes of the *Mýramenn* then takes on personal and political aspects. It is this that likely informs the unusual agency attributed to Kveld-Úlfr. By attributing the origins of the settlement at Borg—which Snorri inherited in 1202—to the intervention of the dead patriarch, as opposed to the interventions of gods or fate, the

⁶² *Gunnlaugs saga* 1.

⁶³ *Egils saga* 57; *Landnámabók* S 57, H 51. The parallel wording of the entry in the early-fourteenth-century *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók* implies its reliance on *Sturlubók*, though it is also possible that all three texts draw from the earlier, non-extant version of *Landnámabók*, see Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, pp. 161–3; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, 'Landnámabók and its *Sturlubók* Version', pp. 48–51.

⁶⁴ Tulinus, *The Matter of the North*, p. 235.

⁶⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 1. For further discussion of the 'Borg theory of poetic talent', see Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, 2 vols (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), i, pp. 173–82.

Mýramenn are portrayed as controlling their own legacy. The political capital in claiming the inheritance of the *Mýramenn* likewise underlies the prominence of the Kveld-Úlfr-Skalla-Grímr Settlement narrative in *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók*.

While the Settlement era provides important context for the sagas of Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn, in the traditional chronology of medieval Icelandic history, the three *skáld* lived in the Commonwealth era, or rather, the early Commonwealth era, remembering that that period spans over three centuries, 930–1262. This shift in periodisation is defined by a shift in governance, specifically the investment of authority in laws and assemblies and regional *goðar*. It is a period on which the saga writers of the late Commonwealth era, in the thirteenth century, look back with some nostalgia. This shapes *Íslendingasögur* depictions of the century in which Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn lived.

Gunnlaugs saga and *Bjarnar saga*, as noted, lack extensive Settlement era prologues. Both sagas rapidly bring their narrative chronology to the childhoods of the protagonists, whose births must date to the last decades of the tenth century. In contrast, even setting aside the *Mýrar* origin narrative, the internal chronology of *Egils saga* dates the *skáld*'s earliest travels to the Settlement era; Egill would have been in his twenties when the *alþingi* was established. As an institution, the *alþingi* is ubiquitous to the *Íslendingasögur* and symbolic of tenth-century Iceland's unique governmental system which had neither a king, nor a king's proxy, nor accepted the suzerainty of either. In practice, the *alþingi* served as a legislative assembly and court of arbitration in the absence of executive office. However, by 965, it was just one of several such assemblies (if the preeminent), with each of Iceland's Quarters hosting regional courts in a complex, if ordered, political and legal structure. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has recently questioned the extent to which this operated as intended or in practice, concluding that legal culture had regional variations 'formed and shaped by chieftains [*goðar*]', of whom there were thirty-nine across Iceland in the late tenth-century.⁶⁶ William Ian Miller and Jesse Byock, among others, have covered Saga Age Iceland's governmental and legal apparatus in some depth.⁶⁷ The legal paradigms and behavioural norms that grew out of this system and its law

⁶⁶ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Chieftains and the Legal Culture in Iceland c. 1100–1260,' in *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration*, ed. by Roland Scheel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 39–56 (especially pp. 52–3).

⁶⁷ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 170–84; William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 16–26. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Chieftains and the Legal Culture,' pp. 41–3.

codes underlie the *Íslendingasögur*, even where law is not an explicit interest of a text. Saga authors can portray the law as a tool serving a perceived justice, or as a tool serving the powerful in the cynical pursuit of their own ends.⁶⁸ The attitude toward the law of any given text provides much insight into authorial intent. Legal judgements resulting in outlawry—either full (lifetime exile) or lesser (three years' exile)—are often the catalyst for Icelanders' overseas journeys, but this is not the case for Egill, Gunnlaugr or Björn. Their voyages, at least those that bring them into the English orbit, are of their own making.

There is similarity to the descriptions of Egill, Gunnlaugr and Björn's initial departures from Iceland. This is one of the shared *skáldasögur* motifs and intimately connected to the heroic aspects of the *skáld's* character: a *skáld* grasps the opportunity to go abroad and prove himself outside of Iceland. There are, naturally, certain variants within the motif's frameworks—Hallfreðr is ordered to depart by his father, Kormákr leaves in the midst of a feud of his own making—however, Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn all seek to depart voluntarily in hopes of augmenting their reputations.⁶⁹ Egill seeks passage on his brother Þorolf's boat, Þorolf by this time already a favourite of the then-Norwegian King Eiríkr *blóðøx*. Egill is only twelve or thirteen, though the saga states that 'fáir váru menn svá stórir ok at afli búnir' (few adult men were as large and powerful).⁷⁰ The prodigious Egill had proved himself to be a problematic character from as young an age as three and, also at that time, an adept in the art of skaldic verse.⁷¹ This is another trope, though not one associated with the *skáldasögur*. Two of the most prominent heroes to show similar promise (and recalcitrance) at such a young age are Grettir *inn sterki* (the strong) and Finnbogi *inn rammi* (the mighty), the former an outlaw, the latter a regional hero.⁷² It is a trope that recalls the pseudo-historical nature of the *Íslendingasögur*, and speaks to their setting in an imagined heroic age.

More conscious of Egill's troublesome nature than of his remarkable prowess, Þorolf initially declines to take his brother with him to Norway. This is prescient. Egill does force

⁶⁸ Prominent examples of cynical attitudes to the law in the *Íslendingasögur* include the portrayal of the legal case brought against Oddr Ófeigsson and its subsequent collapse in *Bandamanna saga*, and of Njáll's manipulation and deliberate impeding of existing legal frameworks in the (anachronistic) creation of the fifth court in *Njáls saga*. *Bandamanna saga* 5–10, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, *ÍF* VII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1936), pp. 316–57; *Brennu-Njáls saga* 97, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *ÍF* XII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1954), pp. 240–8.

⁶⁹ *Hallfreðar saga* 3; *Kormáks saga* 17.

⁷⁰ *Egils saga* 40–41.

⁷¹ *Egils saga* 31.

⁷² *Finnboga saga* 4–8, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, *ÍF* XIV (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1959), pp. 257–67; *Grettis saga* 14–16.

Porolfr's hand, sabotaging his ship and promising to continue to hinder Porolfr's passage from Iceland unless he takes Egill with him. However, Egill's actions in Norway set him in opposition to Eiríkr, resulting in his exile and Porolfr's fall from the king's favour. This turn of events was foreshadowed by Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr's own departure from Norway and animosity toward Eiríkr's father, King Haraldr. Indeed, when Eiríkr first sought to bring Porolfr into his company, Haraldr cautioned him against keeping company with the son of Skalla-Grímr:

“En ekki vil ek,” kvað hann, “at hann komi á minn fund; en gera máttu, Eiríkr, hann svá kæran þér sem þú vill eða fleiri þá frændr, en vera mun annat hvárt at þeir munu þér verða mjúkari en mér hafa þeir vorðit eða þú munt flessar böenar iðrask ok svá þess, ef þú lætr þá lengi með þér vera.”⁷³

(“I do not wish though,” [Haraldr] said, “for him to come me. But you, Eiríkr can hold him as dear as you want, or any of his kinsmen. Either they will be gentler with you than they have been with me, or you will repent of what you ask of me, especially if you allow them to stay with you long.”)

Though *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga* lack this sort of foregrounding for the fortunes of its protagonists, it is still to Norway that Gunnlaugr and Björn first head upon departing Iceland. Björn is said to have sought passage on a Norwegian trading vessel. He is supported in this by his father and foster-father who supply him material resources for the journey and arrange his betrothal to Oddný Þorkelsdóttir.⁷⁴ This, a three-year betrothal period allowing the *skáld* to go abroad and attain wealth and reputation, is another *skáldasögur* motif (as is the *skáld*'s near-inevitable failure to return in that time). Gunnlaugr's departure from Iceland is likewise accompanied by such a three-year arrangement with Helga and he, like Björn, is supported in his endeavours by his father, who buys him a half-share in an Icelandic trading vessel.⁷⁵ On arriving in Norway, Gunnlaugr faces barriers to integration in the Norwegian court. Proving himself Egill's ill-tempered equal, Gunnlaugr finds himself outlawed by Earl Eiríkr

⁷³ *Egils saga* 36.

⁷⁴ *Bjarnar saga* 2.

⁷⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6.

Hákonarson, his life only spared through the intervention of Skúli Þorsteinsson, an Icelandic *hirðmaðr* and Gunnlaugr's *fóstbróðir* (foster brother).

In contrast to both Egill and Gunnlaugr, Björn finds welcome in the Norwegian court. This is assured by a letter of introduction he bears for Earl Eiríkr from his kinsman and foster-father, the self-same Skúli of *Gunnlaugs saga*.⁷⁶ Some suggestion has been made that *Gunnlaugs saga* may in fact have borrowed Skúli and his royal intercessions from *Bjarnar saga*, which is often considered to be the earlier text.⁷⁷ However, as Theodore M. Andersson argues, Skúli's appearances in both texts are scarcely similar enough to provide evidence of direct borrowing.⁷⁸ The *Bjarnar saga* episode is, for example, set some years after the events *Gunnlaugs saga*, following Skúli's return to Iceland. Further, as a variant on the narrative framework of the peripatetic *skáld*, Björn's friendly welcome to the Norwegian court is drawn from *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*, which is a *konungasögur*. As such, though the episode is based on *Bjarnar saga*, it is reframed to respond to a different worldview (or a different patron) to that of the *Íslendingasögur*. Yet the intertextuality here remains of note. Knowledge and memory of Skúli's service at Eiríkr's court is preserved in all three texts, his career also briefly recalled in the closing words of *Egils saga*, Skúli being Egill's grandson.⁷⁹ Skúli was a *skáld*, his name recorded in *Skáldatal* as either serving Eiríkr or his half-brother Sveinn in that capacity.⁸⁰ Like other *skáld*, memory of his career was aided by the mnemonic properties of extant verse attributed to his authorship. Snorri records five verses ostensibly of Skúli's composition in *Skáldskaparmál*,⁸¹ the bulk composed in relation to Battle of Svǫlðr (1000) which resulted in the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason and Eiríkr and Sveinn's rise to Norwegian lordship. It is in this context that Skúli also appears in the *Heimskringla Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and its related texts, fighting alongside Eiríkr at Svǫlðr and composing verse commemorating the event.⁸²

⁷⁶ *Bjarnar saga* 2.

⁷⁷ Björn M. Olsen, *Om Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu. En kritisk undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: Høst, 1911), pp. 32–4.

⁷⁸ Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr and Helga the Fair', in *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland: Essays in Honor of Marianne Kalinke*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf and Johanna Denzin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Egils saga* 89.

⁸⁰ *Skáldatal*, pp. 110–1. This version, based on Uppsala universitetsbibliotek DG 11 4to ff. 23^r–25^r (at 24^r), places Skúli in the court of Earl Sveinn, brother of Eiríkr. The late seventeenth-century copy of the *Kringla Skáldatal* contained in AM 761 a 4to ff. 11^r–17^r (at 15^v) (the original being non-extant) records Skúli's service as being to Eiríkr, reflecting the dominant cultural memory which, as per other sources like *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, locate Skúli at Eiríkr's court as opposed to Sveinn's.

⁸¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál* st. 135, 144, 187, 338, 343.

⁸² Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, p. 358, cf. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson (Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard, 1961), ii, p. 264.

Snorri was clearly aware of Skúli's legacy and, granted Skúli and Björn were both *Mýramenn* and, therefore, Snorri's ancestors, it is tempting to ascribe the *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* preface to *Bjarnar saga* to his authorship. However, the relationship between *Óláfs saga* and *Bjarnar saga* is rather more complex. Though *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* can be ascribed to Snorri's authorship this, the *Bæjarbók* version of it, is an expanded fourteenth-century adaptation of that text with numerous interpolations. The *Bjarnar þáttr* likely enters *Óláfs saga* at this phase of revision, a summary of Björn's life drawn from *Bjarnar saga* itself.⁸³ For its problematic and incomplete transmission history, it remains that *Bjarnar saga*, like *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, is conscious of the historical and literary space it inhabits.

This shared world which serves as the setting for the *Íslendingasögur* is readily identified in the manifest intertextuality displayed across all three texts. Enumerating Egill's descendants (including Skúli), *Egils saga* declares it was Helga *in fagra*, 'er þeir deildu um Skáld-Hrafn og Gunnlaugr ormstunga' (over whom Hrafn the *skáld* and Gunnlaugr *ormstunga* fought).⁸⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* connects the vessel in which Gunnlaugr departs Iceland with events of *Laxdæla saga*, and references events of *Egils saga* in the betrothal negotiations between Gunnlaugr and Helga's father.⁸⁵ In turn, *Bjarnar saga* (or its *Óláfs saga* redaction) references a verse composition by Þórðr Kolbeinsson, known as *Belgskakadrápa*, written in praise of Eiríkr.⁸⁶ The explicit intertextuality is just as telling: shared characters like Skúli; shared historical contexts like Eiríkr's court; shared motifs like those of the *skáldasögur*. These both exemplify the historical pretensions of the *Íslendingasögur* and the perceptions of the Saga Age they embody. The Saga Age is at once a historical period, an intertextual literary construct, and an imagined world of Icelandic heroes. This cultural memory, these reinterpretations of the Icelandic past, underpin all *Íslendingasögur*.

Returning then to Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's departures from Iceland, the question must be, what of historical value can be extracted from these vignettes? What can such motifs tell us of Saga Age Iceland? There are three points to be made that align with key elements of the trope of the *skáld's* passage: his voluntary departure from Iceland, the presence of

⁸³ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, pp. xlvi–xlvii.

⁸⁴ *Egils saga* 81.

⁸⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 5.

⁸⁶ *Bjarnar saga* 3.

Norwegian travellers and traders in Iceland, and the preference for travel to Norway and desire for audience with its ruler.

Firstly, there is an apparent ideal that fame and fortune must be sought outside Icelandic civilisation. In many ways, foreign lands are depicted as dangerous, unruly or fantastic in comparison; Björn does not fight his dragon in Iceland.⁸⁷ The *Íslendingasögur* rarely give the impression that departure from Icelandic society is a desirable thing, a point that is underlined by Icelandic legal texts. The primary punitive measure legislated in the *Grágás* legal compendium was outlawry. This could be full outlawry, permanent exile either on the peripheries of Icelandic society or, more commonly, overseas. Or this could be lesser outlawry, ostracism for a period of three years, a period and idea that aligns with the *skáldasögur* motif of a three-year period of journeying.⁸⁸ Both punishments suggest a sort of Icelandic exceptionalism: inclusion in Icelandic society was a privilege that could be revoked. However, it is also true that plenty of evidence emerges throughout the corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, both administrative and literary, that Saga Age Icelanders participated in overseas trade and in *viking*. This is, after all, the career path of all three *skáld*. Later Icelanders may have sought to idealise the society embodied by ninth- and tenth-century Icelandic legal and governmental structures, yet it remains that it was a remote and primarily agrarian society, and resources and wealth often had to be imported.⁸⁹ *Skáldatal* demonstrates that service as a court poet was one way to achieve such wealth. It is this reality into which the *skáld*'s journeying fits, while it is the literary alterity ascribed to the outside world that provides the *skáld* opportunities to demonstrate his heroism. Invariably, the *skáld* returns to Iceland with their wealth and augmented reputation, an axiom represented not only in the adventures of the *skáldasögur* protagonists, but in the careers of men like Skúli, Þórðr, and Snorri.

Secondly, Saga Age Iceland was not isolated from the rest of Scandinavia, at least not entirely. The need for imported goods such as timber ensured this. The evidence is that visitors to the island were primarily Norwegian traders who made the journey during spring or

⁸⁷ Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 8–9; William H. Norman, *Barbarians in the Sagas of Icelanders* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 22.

⁸⁸ For a summary of the function of outlawry, see Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 231–2; Faulkes, *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, pp. xix–xx. See also, Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, 'Inside Outlawry in *Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar* and *Gísla Saga Súrssonar*: Landscape in the Outlaw Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82, no. 4 (2010), 366–8.

⁸⁹ Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 263–8. As examples of Icelanders returning with wealth and resources, see *Bandamanna saga* 1–2; *Egils saga* 68; *Hrafnkels saga Freygoða* 8, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, *ÍF XI* (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1950), pp. 125–6; *Laxdæla saga* 74, 77; *Vatnsdæla saga* 16.

summer and who, if arriving late in the season, would overwinter with local families.⁹⁰ The *Grágás* legal provisions for the safety of foreigners in Iceland also imply Swedes and Danes were common enough on Icelandic shores.⁹¹ There is little evidence of any general antagonism toward other Scandinavians and any conflict, whether in Iceland or elsewhere, tends to be a direct response to specific circumstances. It is not, therefore, uncommon to find Icelanders taking passage on Norwegian ships, as Björn does.⁹² This all speaks to Iceland's integration within the wider Scandinavian world. However, the tyranny of distance is worth noting. That same weather that could force Norwegians to overwinter in Iceland also cut the island's communication links. Even taking the weather out of consideration, the island's remoteness ensured delayed chains of communication. The central conflict of *Bjarnar saga* hinges on this, with Björn's rival able to capitalise on a lack of news to spread rumours of Björn's death, and thereby arrange his own marriage to Björn's betrothed.⁹³ In turn, delays in England, a lack of news in Iceland, a travel route to Iceland from England via Norway, and a journey late in the season, all conspire to ensure Gunnlaugr does not return to Iceland in time to claim Helga's hand. In another example of the manifest intertextuality characteristic of *Gunnlaugs saga*, it is Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld* who delivers this news to Gunnlaugr, also offering him passage to Iceland from Norway.⁹⁴ In contrast, any intertextuality implied by portrayals of inter-Norse interaction and of the logistical barriers associated with travel to and from Iceland is surely implicit. Both the island's cultural connections to Scandinavia and its remoteness from it were simple realities for Icelanders throughout the length of the Middle Ages.

Lastly, this sort of contact and familiarity, alongside the relative ease of passage (map 1), made Norway the most common destination for Icelanders heading abroad, whether as a destination or a first stopping point in their journey. It is curious that so many Icelanders are apparently given access to the rulers in Norway, a motif which most probably reflects the sort of characters who resided in cultural memory over three centuries. There are few sagas dedicated to trading exploits. As seen from the distinction between Egill and Gunnlaugr's introductions to the Norwegian court and that of Björn, different sagas bring different attitudes

⁹⁰ See for example, *Bjarnar saga* 2; *Egils saga* 39; *Eyrbyggja saga* 18; *Finnboga saga* 10; *Gunnlaugs saga* 2.

⁹¹ See for example, clause K 87 in *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), p. 160 (hereafter cited as *Grágás* with clause numbering).

⁹² *Bjarnar saga* 2. See also, for example, *Grettis saga* 37.

⁹³ *Bjarnar saga* 4–5.

⁹⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

to regnal authority. Thus, for example, Haraldr *inn hárfagri* is poorly served in *Egils saga*, but portrayed as a strong king and able ally in *Vatnsdæla saga*;⁹⁵ Óláfr Tryggvason is at once credited as being Iceland's evangeliser, a faithful lord, and a violently coercive proselytiser;⁹⁶ Earl Eiríkr is Gunnlaugr's enemy, and Björn's ally. Overarching archetypes of saga rulership are not easy to locate, nor is there necessarily value in seeking to do so. What is clear, though, is that the sagas seek to ascribe Icelandic heroes with unique agency and autonomy when confronted by such authority. As a motif, it is aspirational and ideological. This is because *Íslendingasögur* attitudes to kings, Norwegian authority, and Icelanders' agency in the courts of northern Europe, do not so much reflect the experience of Saga Age Icelanders as they do the experience of Icelanders in the Age of Saga Writing.

4.3 ICELAND IN THE AGE OF SAGA WRITING

In Iceland, as was often the case in northern Europe, literacy accompanied Christianisation. The likelihood is that most saga authors were clerics, though their identities can only be hypothesised. This may seem strange in the light of the ostensibly 'secular' nature of many *Íslendingasögur* narratives; however, if the nature of Icelandic clericalism is taken into account, this does make sense. In the non-urbanised Icelandic landscape, regional churches had close connections to chieftains, some of whom, in the century prior to the Age of Saga Writing, also served as priests.⁹⁷ Moreover, Iceland's early churches were private institutions established in customary power centres, their authority closely aligned to, and at times subordinated within, Iceland's traditional familial power structures.⁹⁸ It is probable that this extended to the literary endeavours of such institutions and, as Sørensen suggests, that both the commissioning and ownership of literary texts became a marker of prestige in Icelandic society.⁹⁹

The first clerical training centre in Iceland, according to *Íslendingabók* and *Hungrvaka*, was established in the mid-eleventh century by the first Skálholt bishop, the Westphalian-

⁹⁵ *Egils saga* 14–22, cf. *Vatnsdæla saga* 8–10.

⁹⁶ *Íslendingabók* 7, cf. *Hallfreðar saga* 5–6.

⁹⁷ Bandlien, 'Situating Knowledge', 137–8; Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), p. 20.

⁹⁸ Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Heaven Is a Place on Earth: Church and Sacred Space in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82, no. 1 (2010), 7–9.

⁹⁹ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'Social institutions and belief systems', in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, pp. 26.

trained Ísleifr Gizurarson. Here he accepted and taught the sons of elite families.¹⁰⁰ Over subsequent decades, other regional centres of learning were established both within ecclesiastical institutions and within chieftains' households (map 4).¹⁰¹ Embodying the blurred line between secular and ecclesiastical authority, Ísleifr himself was of the chieftain class, a landholder with connections to the Settlement generation. In turn, Ísleifr's son, Gizurr, inherited both his father's lands and his bishopric.¹⁰² Another of Ísleifr's sons, Teitr, was a priest and teacher associated with the school at Hallr Þórarinsson's farm in Haukadalsr. Teitr is intimately connected with Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*. In the prologue to *Heimskringla*, Snorri tells of Ari's education at Haukadalsr during Teitr's time, while Ari himself credits a significant portion of *Íslendingabók* to Teitr's own knowledge and recollections.¹⁰³ Ari also indicates he wrote *Íslendingabók* for the bishops of Skálholt and Hólar of his own time, and that he perceived it to be a work of history, himself a historian.¹⁰⁴ Once again, both bishops—Þorlákr and Ketill—were of the chieftain's class, and Ari makes their connections to Settlement era ancestors explicit in a genealogical coda to the main text.¹⁰⁵ Iceland's ecclesiastical hierarchy, no less than the secular hierarchy with which it was entwined, was invested in the legitimation of historical lineages, authority, and land holding. Ari is simply the earliest known author in Iceland's medieval tradition of history writing, and *Íslendingabók* foreshadows the historical mode of the *Íslendingasögur* as it emerged in the following century.

For all the scholarly declarations of scepticism and exhortations to caution in using the *Íslendingasögur* as sources of history—scepticism that Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson argue is just as due *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*—those texts that have survived the centuries have been widely used to shape our knowledge of the Icelandic past.¹⁰⁶ As such, saga critics and historians have long recognised the centrality of the Age of Saga Writing to how Saga Age Iceland is perceived.¹⁰⁷ The saga authors belonged to Iceland's thirteenth-

¹⁰⁰ *Hungroaka* 2; *Íslendingabók* 10.

¹⁰¹ Nordal, *Tools of Literacy*, pp. 19–22; Sørensen, 'Social institutions', pp. 25–6.

¹⁰² *Hungroaka* 2, 4; *Íslendingabók* 10; *Landnámabók* S 41, S 385, H 29, H 338.

¹⁰³ *Íslendingabók* 1, 7–9; Snorri Sturluson, *Prologue*, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVI, pp. 5–7.

¹⁰⁴ *Íslendingabók* Pr.

¹⁰⁵ *Íslendingabók* 10.

¹⁰⁶ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past', pp. 139–61.

¹⁰⁷ See for example, Bandlien, 'Situated Knowledge', 137–74; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 'Historical Writing and the Political Situation in Iceland, 1100–1400', in *Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countries, Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Memory*, ed. by Anne Eriksen and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2009), 59–78; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, 115–33; Thomas, R. George, 'The Sturlung Age as an Age of Saga Writing', *Germanic Review*, 25, no. 1 (1950), 50–66; Tulinus, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 44–69.

century political and intellectual landscape, and this informed how they mediated and interpreted cultural memory of the Saga Age. They imbued the *Íslendingasögur* with their own perspectives on the institutions of the Anglo-Scandinavian world (or those of their patrons and audiences), and so shaped the stories of Iceland's past to a thirteenth-century worldview. However, it is not the intent here to replicate or summarise the extensive body of scholarship surrounding the cultural context of the writing of the sagas. Rather, it is to give some overview of those attitudes that underly or inform the *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* narratives—especially those that relate to kingship—and their origins.

It is the nostalgic narrative mode of the *Íslendingasögur* that draws attention here, a literary aesthetic linked to shifting cultural circumstance. Thirteenth-century Icelanders were remote from the ideals of collective self-governance they seemingly so prized of the Saga Age. As a historical designation, the Commonwealth period may carry through to 1262 and the capitulation to Norwegian rule but, in truth, that ostensibly autonomous and communal rule scarcely existed at any point in the thirteenth century. Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson, quite apart from their roles as two of medieval Iceland's preeminent named historians, were also members of hereditary oligarchies which, through the early thirteenth century, acquired and consolidated *goðorð*, creating regional power blocs antithetical to the concepts underlying the governmental apparatus of the early Commonwealth era. Moreover, elements within these factions were aligned with foreign powers, Snorri included at various stages of his career, and actively sought union with the Norwegian crown.¹⁰⁸ This then informs the rhetoric used of kingship—positive or negative—in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The influence of the political environment of the Age of Saga Writing on cultural memory of Saga Age Iceland is best demonstrated through exemplars taken from the three focus sagas. In this case, it is useful to consider Norwegian kingship—reserving focused discussion of English kingship for later chapters—as *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* each bring a different perspective to the institution. Their portrayals of kingship reflect societal anxieties that underlay cultural memory of the Viking Age in the *Íslendingasögur*, primarily around autonomy, personal and collective agency, and the exercise of authority.

¹⁰⁸ For Snorri's political biography, see Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), pp. 239–46. See also Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 237–9; Hans Jacob Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages*, trans. by Alan Crozier (Turnhout: Brill, 2008), pp. 229–31.

These anxieties are not linked to a text's date of authorship alone—though that is critical context—but also to its regional focus, and its protagonists' perceived connections to Iceland's leading thirteenth-century families. The varying attitudes toward kingship observed in *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* reflect these influences, and demonstrate the mediatory nature of the texts.

Egils saga is, perhaps, a difficult example to begin with, especially if Snorri Sturluson's authorship is accepted. The attitude toward Norwegian kingship preserved in *Egils saga* is seemingly antithetical to that attested in *Heimskringla*, Snorri's collection of *konungasögur*.¹⁰⁹ In this case, explaining the saga's portrayals of Norwegian kingship and of Icelandic autonomy is not only a matter of considering events at the time of *Egils saga*'s presumed authorship, but the personal experience of its author. Fortunately, as one of Iceland's major early thirteenth-century political figures, Snorri's experiences are far from divorced from political events on the island, and his own relationships with Norwegian kingship and Icelandic government are illuminating. Indeed, many of Snorri's own actions, alongside those of his fellow Sturlungar kinsmen—whether Snorri's political allies or opponents—set the backdrop for the Age of Saga Writing.

Egils saga is usually dated to the 1220s, certainly earlier than *Gunnlaugs saga*, and likely earlier than *Bjarnar saga*, though debate still swirls around whether *Bjarnar saga* is an early or late text.¹¹⁰ The 1220s mark the start of yet another periodical designation—one not used in this study—the Sturlungar Age. This period ends along with the Commonwealth in 1262 with Iceland's acceptance of Norwegian suzerainty. The Sturlungar Age is named for Snorri's clan which was, for the most part, the pre-eminent Icelandic family of the period. It is, however, something of a misleading name; the Sturlungar were not the only powerful Icelandic family playing politics at home and abroad. Two works attributed to Sturla Þórðarson—*Íslendingasaga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*—recount no less than eight instances in which Icelandic *goðar* from various families, serving as *hirðmenn* to the Norwegian king, returned to

¹⁰⁹ See for example, Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, pp. 134–5, 141; Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Pretenders', pp. 50–1; Cormack, 'Egils saga, Heimskringla', pp. 61–2.

¹¹⁰ Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, pp. 140–1; Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Var Snorri Sturluson upphafsmaður Íslendingasagna', *Andvari* 32 (1990), 85–105; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 116.

Iceland as his agents.¹¹¹ The King of Norway through this entire period was Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63), and it was through these men and their influence on Iceland’s existing governmental structures, that he sought to extend Norwegian hegemony over the island. The earliest known *goði* to serve Hákon in this capacity was Snorri, who was resident in the Norwegian court from 1218 to 1220 and who, on his departure, committed to bringing Iceland under the king’s control.¹¹² In this, he was entirely unsuccessful.

Table 7: Dating of the *Íslendingasögur* mentioned in this thesis (per ÍF, after Vésteinn Ólason, 2004, pp. 114–5)

Title	Dates
<i>Bandamanna saga</i>	c. 1250
<i>Bárðar saga</i>	1350–1380
<i>Bjarnar saga</i>	1215–1230
<i>Egils saga</i>	1220–1230
<i>Eiríks saga rauða</i>	1200–1230
<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i>	c. 1220
<i>Finnboga saga</i>	1300–1350
<i>Flóamanna saga</i>	1290–1330
<i>Fóstbræðra saga</i>	c. 1200
<i>Gísla saga</i>	c. 1250
<i>Grettis saga</i>	1310–1320
<i>Gull-Þóris saga</i>	1300–1350
<i>Gunnlaugs saga</i>	1270–1280
<i>Hallfreðar saga</i>	c. 1220
<i>Harðar saga</i>	1350–1400
<i>Hávarðar saga</i>	1300–1350
<i>Hrafnkels saga</i>	1250–1300
<i>Kormáks saga</i>	1200–1220
<i>Laxdæla saga</i>	1230–1260
<i>Ljósvetninga saga</i>	1230–1250
<i>Njáls saga</i>	1275–1285
<i>Svarfdæla saga</i>	1350–1400
<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i>	1270–1280
<i>Víglundar saga</i>	c. 1400

The period from 1220 until Snorri’s return to Norway in 1237 was one fraught with political conflict in Iceland. As Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson identifies, King Hákon’s desire for overlordship was really a late (if prominent) addition to Iceland’s political frictions at the time. The political

¹¹¹ *Íslendinga saga* 38, 92, 139, 164, 191–2, 195; Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, pp. 229–30. For Sturla’s authorship of *Íslendingasaga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, see Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, ‘The Works of Sturla Þórðarson’, in *Sturla Þórðarson: Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*, pp. 8–19.

¹¹² *Íslendinga saga* 38; Bagge, *Society and Politics*, pp. 12–13; Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence*, p. 232.

landscape at the turn of the thirteenth century was characterised by internal conflict driven both by *goðar* seeking increased hegemony, and by the Icelandic Church's desire for increased autonomy and agency.¹¹³ The intrusion of the Norwegian King, through his Icelandic *hirðmenn*, was simply an intensifier introducing a new layer of factionalism and providing compliant *goðar* additional tools of political leverage. The processes whereby powerful families consolidated Iceland's thirty-nine *goðorð* into discrete geographically delineated territories under a *stórgoði*—a sort of regional overlord—had been ongoing from the late twelfth century. As such, the outbreak of violence that characterised the 1220s and 30s must be understood as existing on a continuum of political conflict. It is this atmosphere of ongoing political crisis that underlies the cultural anxieties expressed in the *Íslendingasögur* and informed a nostalgic narrative mode that idolised a past when Iceland's political and legal institutions were held to be intact.

In this regard, as interesting as Snorri's authorship may be, it need not be integral to the representations of kingship found in *Egils saga*. As Patricia Boulhosa cautions in her study of medieval Icelanders' relations with the kings of Norway, it is important to recognise that Snorri's authorship of both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* can be contested. She further argues that a 'biographical analysis' that ties each text's attitude toward kingship to the various stages of Snorri's career is overly simple and prone to circular reasoning: thematic parallels to Snorri's career both identify and are identified by his authorship.¹¹⁴ To explain the distrust of Norwegian kingship in *Egils saga* by reference to Snorri's career, logic may suggest an authorship date of 1239–41, following Snorri's return from his second trip to Norway.¹¹⁵ By staying with Earl Skúli Bárðarson on this trip, a rival claimant to the Norwegian throne, Snorri involved himself in Norwegian internal politics and earned Hákon's distrust. When political tensions in Iceland broke again into open conflict culminating in the Battle of Örlygsstaðir in

¹¹³ Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, p. 239.

¹¹⁴ Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, pp. 5–21, 30–1.

¹¹⁵ On this comparatively late dating of the saga, see Melissa A. Berman, 'Egils Saga and Heimskringla', *Scandinavian Studies*, 54, no. 1 (1982), 21–50; 'Egils saga og konungasögur', in *Sjötiú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benedikts syni, 20. júlí 1977*, ed. by Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson, 3 vols (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1977), ii, pp. 449–72; Tulinius, *The Enigma of Egill*, pp. 261–2. It is worth noting that Jónas changed his position on the dating of *Egils saga* later in his career, stating in a 1990 article, *þá skulum vér ekki halda fast í þá hugmynd að [Snorri] hafi endilega ritað Eglu rétt fyrir dauða sinn* [Let us not hold tight to the idea that Snorri must have written *Egils saga* just before his death (1241)], and also that ... *hefur Egilssaga verið sett saman um eða laust fyrir 1230* [... *Egils saga* must have been compiled around, or available prior, to the year 1230], Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Var Snorri Sturluson upphafsmaður Íslendingasagna', p. 104. Though it is of further note that as late as 2007, in the fourth edition of *Eddas and Sagas*, Jónas maintained the late dating of the saga as a viable hypothesis: Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 269–70.

August 1238—a defeat for the Sturlungar—Snorri sought permission to return home, which was refused by Hákon. Ignoring the king's order and breaking any pretence of maintaining *hirðmaðr* status, Snorri departed Norway anyway.¹¹⁶ Thus, according to a biographical reading of *Egils saga*, this is the most likely time for Snorri to have written *Egils saga*, with its vitriolic treatment of not just Haraldr *inn hárfagri*, but also his sons Eiríkr *blóðøx* and, to a lesser extent, Hákon *Aðalsteinsfóstri*. This would also place the authorship of *Egils saga* as occurring after *Heimskringla* which, by this reasoning, would have been written while Snorri and Hákon remained on good terms.

Heimskringla can be somewhat uncontroversially dated to the years 1220–30, even if Snorri's authorship of all the sagas that comprise its length has become less readily accepted in recent decades.¹¹⁷ However, there is also consensus, based on comparative textual evidence of both style and content, that *Egils saga* must predate *Heimskringla*.¹¹⁸ Andersson suggests connecting *Egils saga*'s authorship and negative portrayals of Norwegian kingship to the fraught nature of Norwegian–Icelandic relations in the years 1215–20, stemming from trade tensions between Norwegian merchants and the Haukdælir and Oddaverjar clans of southwestern Iceland.¹¹⁹ In truth, there is no reason that Snorri could not have authored both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* in line with the traditional dating of 1215–30—with the former preceding the latter—if their depictions of Norwegian kings are understood in relation to a wider Norwegian–Icelandic political landscape and untethered from Snorri's career. The different attitude to Norwegian kingship in each text can simply be attributed to an awareness of audience. *Heimskringla* was composed for a Norwegian patron, *Egils saga* for an Icelandic patron or audience. As Melissa Berman notes, despite their evident connections in source material or authorship (or both) '*Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* often seem to overlap without intersecting'.¹²⁰ Accepting this premise, Snorri's authorship notwithstanding, suggests that there was indeed a latent hostility to Norwegian kingship in early thirteenth-century Iceland;

¹¹⁶ *Sturlunga saga* 138–9, 143.

¹¹⁷ See for example Berger, Alan J. '*Heimskringla* and the Compilations', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 114 (1999), 5–15; Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway*, pp. 7–21; Cormack, '*Egils saga, Heimskringla*', pp. 66–7.

¹¹⁸ For summary discussion of the relations between *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, see Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Politics of Snorri Sturluson', *JEGP*, 93, no. 1 (1994), 55–78; Cormack, '*Egils saga, Heimskringla*', pp. 61–8. See also Berman, '*Egils Saga* and *Heimskringla*', pp. 21–50, who sides with Jónas for a late date, though also lays out the case for an early dating at p. 23.

¹¹⁹ Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, pp. 119–20, 140–1 goes into more detail on the nature of the 'trade war' than his earlier article, 'The Politics of Snorri Sturluson', pp. 56–7, 77–8, though Andersson's argument remains largely the same. See also Diana Whaley, *Heimskringla: An Introduction*, pp. 28, 33.

¹²⁰ Berman, '*Egils Saga* and *Heimskringla*', p. 21.

a cultural anxiety centred in those south-western *stórgoðorð* most directly in conflict with Norway. Here, surely, a story of a local family, of regional heroes, who faced and bested the Kings of Norway must have held appeal.

While *Egils saga's* interest in the *Mýramenn* ancestors of the Sturlungar is often pointed to as evidence for Snorri's authorship of the text, all *Íslendingasögur* have some degree of regional focus. Both *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* also maintain an interest in the Mýra region and the *Mýramenn* and their descendants. This is especially true of *Bjarnar saga*, which spends a greater portion of its narrative in Iceland than either *Egils saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*. While this aesthetic is, at least in part, an effect of the abridged *Bjarnar þáttur* that replaces the lost travel episodes, it remains that, unlike most other *skáld* of the *skáldasögur*, upon his return to Iceland, Björn never again sets out adventuring. His life, intrigues, feuds, and ultimate death at Þórðr's hands revolve around the farm communities of Hítardal (map 5). The regionalism of such narratives once again intimates an awareness of audience. The unusually tight focus of the *Bjarnar saga* narrative on a remote valley in the north of Mýra implies an intended audience or patron there. Moreover, it suggests a narrative that draws extensively on locally transmitted cultural memory, the author's licence for invention limited by the region's own traditions and storehouse of experience, its mnemonic aspects not only invested in skaldic verse, but in landscape features and place names. Thus, for example, Grettir Ásmundarson's intrusion into *Bjarnar saga* is connected to the landscape and a ravine near Björn's farm known as *Grettisbæli* (Grettir's den), a location that served a mnemonic function recalling Grettir's presence in the region generations after his death.¹²¹ In short, the narrow regional focus is suggestive of a text inspired by, and intended to cater to, local interests, though, more could be said of authorial intent were the saga's opening genealogy intact.

Despite *Bjarnar saga's* degradation and parochialism, the extant text nonetheless opens in the company of kings, first Knútr as King of England, and then Óláfr II, King of Norway. The presence of the latter explains Björn's later inclusion in *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* as Björn is portrayed as a *hirðmaðr* of the Norwegian king in his own saga. Here *Bjarnar saga* distinguishes itself from *Egils saga*; Egill never performs in this capacity for the Kings of

¹²¹ *Bjarnar saga* 19; *Grettis saga* 58; Chapter 2, pp. 66–8. *Grettisbæli* is identified as a location of interest within a number of nineteenth-century travel diaries, for example, Frederick Metcalfe, *The Oxonian in Iceland* (London: Longman, 1861), p. 307, and William Morris, *A Journal of Travel in Iceland, 1871* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), p. 149.

Norway, and those of his kin who do inevitably come to regret it. Despite the laconic prose that characterises even those travel passages that are authentic to *Bjarnar saga*, the overall impression given of Óláfr is a positive one, though Bjørn in the first instance must negotiate the king's displeasure. Chance brings Bjørn and Þórðr face to face at Brenneyjar, an archipelago just within Norwegian territorial waters (map 8). Presented with the opportunity for vengeance, Bjørn corners Þórðr on an island, forces a confession from him, and seizes all his valuables. Among the information Þórðr imparts, however, is that he had recently attended Óláfr's court and was under the king's protection.¹²² With this knowledge, and conscious of the precarious situation in which his actions have placed him, Bjørn seeks an audience with Óláfr to explain himself. Though angry with Bjørn, Óláfr listens to the case against Þórðr and judges it to have merit. Yet, not neglectful of his obligations to Þórðr, Óláfr gifts him a valuable cargo of wood on his departure, while Bjørn remains in the king's company for two years, promised his friendship and ongoing protection in his feud.¹²³ Óláfr is, therefore, portrayed as a good lord and even-handed in his dealings with Icelanders.

Óláfr's depictions in the *Íslendingasögur* are tied to his reputation in the Age of Saga Writing. Lindow identifies at least two biographies of Óláfr that predate Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* alongside two histories that likewise give Óláfr's life and career significant attention.¹²⁴ This does not include *Passio Olavi*, a saint's life of the king dating to 1175 and representative of a late twelfth-century ecclesiastical tradition of Óláfr's life in which Theodoric Monachus also participated.¹²⁵ Though, as Haki Antonsson states, 'sources relating to the emergence of the cult of King Óláfr II of Norway are in decidedly short supply', it is thought that his veneration began very shortly after his death in 1030.¹²⁶ Certainly, Adam of Bremen characterises Óláfr's cult as fully formed and his feast as widely observed by the 1070s.¹²⁷ This means that, no matter when *Bjarnar saga* is dated within the Age of Saga Writing, the tradition of his sainthood was well established by the time of its writing. While Óláfr's Christianity and role as a proselyting king are not overt in *Bjarnar saga*, his depiction as a just

¹²² *Bjarnar saga* 7.

¹²³ *Bjarnar saga* 8.

¹²⁴ John Lindow, 'St Olaf and the Skalds', in *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives, and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Thomas A. DuBois (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), 115–7.

¹²⁵ Sverre Bagge, 'Warrior, King, and Saint: The Medieval Histories about St. Óláfr Haraldsson', *JEGP*, 109, no. 3 (2010), 281–3.

¹²⁶ Haki Antonsson, 'The Cult of St Óláfr in the Eleventh Century and Kievan Rus', *Middelalderforum*, 1–2 (2003), 143.

¹²⁷ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.lxi.

arbiter could be considered to follow Solomonic archetypes of good kingship. That the saga author recognised Óláfr's sainthood, however, is made most explicit in the hagiographical coda that closes the Óláfr passages of the text. Here Björn finds himself to have accidental possession of the king's garter, upon which Óláfr gifts it to him. Björn, the saga author tells us, wore this garter for his whole life and was buried with it in death, where it remained uncorrupted over centuries, even as Björn's body rotted away.¹²⁸

As a canonised king, Óláfr II is something of an exception among *Íslendingasögur* kings, and certainly alone in that position within the *skáldasögur*. His predecessor, Óláfr Tryggvason, is at times treated as having something akin to hagiographical agency. He appears in a dream vision to announce his own death in *Hallfreðar saga* for example, yet a cult for that proselytising Óláfr never gained the traction that it did for his namesake.¹²⁹ However, for the varied reputations of kings in the *Íslendingasögur*, it remains that most texts lack an overt hostility to kingship. In the limited depictions of *Bjarnar saga*, Óláfr, Knútr and Valdimarr I of Garðaríki (980–1015)¹³⁰ are all characterised as good lords who reward Björn for his heroism. Ármann argues that this is not unusual for pre-1262 *Íslendingasögur*, noting that amicable relations with a king more often than not are portrayed as beneficial to Icelanders, irrespective of that king's personal qualities.¹³¹ Certainly this is the case for Björn, and the rudimentary style of the narrative has long recommended it to critics to be an early saga.¹³² In his turn, Andersson too identifies 1262 as demarcating a thematic divide, arguing that sagas composed prior to the Old Covenant have a certain 'vein of antimonarchism', while those written after Iceland's acceptance of Norwegian rule focus on critique of Iceland's former legislative and executive governance as 'easily corrupted by greed and connivance'.¹³³ The nostalgic narrative mode of the *Íslendingasögur* is as much commentary on the corruption of Iceland's political institutions as it is on the loss of Icelandic autonomy. By 1262, Icelanders must have been exhausted from fifty years of internecine political, legal and military conflict, and with Norwegian overlordship came the promise of peace. Considering *Bjarnar saga's* positive

¹²⁸ *Bjarnar saga* 8.

¹²⁹ *Hallfreðar saga* 10.

¹³⁰ Per the saga's timeline, this must be the historical Vladimir I the Great, ruler Novgorod and Kievan Rus', territories collectively called Garðaríki in the sagas.

¹³¹ Ármann Jakobsson, 'Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117 (2002), 156–7.

¹³² Finlay, 'Interpretation or over-Interpretation?', pp. 86–7.

¹³³ Andersson, 'The King of Iceland', pp. 932–3.

representations of kingship and granular examinations of local politics, it is not then unreasonable to suggest a post-1262 date for its authorship (though stylistically an earlier date is more likely).

Of the three focus texts, only *Gunnlaugs saga* is thought with any certainty to date to after 1262. Momentarily setting aside how this relates to depictions of external authority and internal governance, this is most evident in the saga's manifest intertextuality. The Age of Saga Writing was already half a century old by the time the *Gunnlaugs saga* author put quill to parchment (1270 á 1280), and he clearly drew upon other texts.¹³⁴ *Laxdæla saga* is mentioned by name; Björn Hítðælakappi is identified by his sobriquet and named among the great *Mýramenn* of the past alongside Snorri Sturluson; the numerous kings and earls of the northern world that Gunnlaugr visits are all historically contemporaneous.¹³⁵ In short, *Gunnlaugs saga* is a sophisticated text, representative of a literary form that had matured in its development and had more sources to draw from. As such, it is also a text that engages with explicit and implicit intertextuality, consciously and subconsciously using motifs that had become codified in the *Íslendingasögur*. As a result, and more so than the authors of *Egils saga* or *Bjarnar saga*, the *Gunnlaugs saga* author brings nuance to depictions of lordship in the Anglo-Scandinavian world. Each ruler, each court, is used by the saga author to embody anxieties around Icelandic identity as perceived in relation to other cultures surrounding the North Sea. In the case of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson, Gunnlaugr makes two visits to his court, each with starkly different outcomes.

While Gunnlaugr's first interaction with the Norwegian earl sees the *skáld* outlawed, he later ingratiates himself with Eiríkr, by composing a *dróttkvætt* verse in his praise. This is done *in absentia*, the verse composed while overwintering in Skara in Västergötland; however, messengers of the local earl report Gunnlaugr's verse to Eiríkr, who subsequently pardons him, leading to reconciliation and a warm welcome on Gunnlaugr's return to the Norwegian court.¹³⁶ Whether intended by the author or not, there are two pertinent observations to be made here. The first relates to the processes of cultural memory and vernacular *memoria*. Gunnlaugr's verse is transmitted to Eiríkr by word of mouth, and Eiríkr in turn disseminates

¹³⁴ Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 115; *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. lx–lxi.

¹³⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 1, 5–11.

¹³⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8–10; Chapter 6, pp. 204–06.

his pardon in the same way.¹³⁷ This links back to the transmission of the legacies of English kings throughout the Anglo-Scandinavian world, carried and spread by merchants and travellers in their journeying. The saga author here is not simply portraying networks of communication as he perceived them operating in the Anglo-Scandinavian world of the Saga Age. The Age of Saga Writing remained a period of semi-literacy in Scandinavia. Writing may have increasingly become a part of the culture, but it does not follow that literacy was widespread, nor that it superseded verbal means of communication. This passage from *Gunnlaugs saga* can also be taken as demonstrative of the mnemonic aspects of skaldic verse, or the way it was perceived to have operated. Within the narrative, Gunnlaugr's verse is a locus for *memoria*, carrying with it a story of how he defended Eiríkr's reputation and mediated a peace between the followers of Eiríkr and the Earl of Västergötland. It is on the strength of this action, not merely the complementary poetry, that Gunnlaugr receives his pardon.

The second matter of note in the Gunnlaugr-Eiríkr relationship is the manner in which it stands in some way as a metaphor for the bipolar Icelandic-Norwegian relationship of the Age of Saga Writing. Indeed, Gunnlaugr's interactions with Eiríkr closely mimic the framework of Icelandic-Norwegian history in the early decades of the Age of Saga Writing. Like Gunnlaugr, Icelandic *goðar* sought the Norwegian court in pursuit of prestige and power and, like Gunnlaugr, most demonstrated themselves too self-willed in the estimation of the Norwegian ruler. The relationship becomes fraught; the ruler and his agents a looming but unresolved threat. Under that pressure, the Icelanders move to bring themselves into the ruler's friendship through a singular act of contrition, whether that be the Old Covenant or Gunnlaugr's verse. Gunnlaugr and Eiríkr's next meeting is one of mutual respect: gone is the Icelander's bravado, and the saga conveys a genuine sense of amicability in their reconciliation.¹³⁸ Whether or not the saga author intended the narrative to parallel to his recent lived history, after the infighting of the Sturlungar Age and the disproportionate impact such violence and unrest would have had on a sparse and agrarian population, the peace that came with kingship was surely a relief for most Icelanders. It is small wonder that post-1262, many

¹³⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

¹³⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

saga authors may have interested themselves more with critique of Iceland's own elites than those of Norway.

This is where the matter of historicity once more rears its head. The form, setting and authorship of *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Bjarnar saga* all mediate Icelandic cultural memory of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr. These are narratives that, in every respect, embody an Icelandic worldview. They are codified through Icelandic storytelling conventions; recall Viking Age England only as it relates to individual Icelanders; are products of a thirteenth-century intellectual milieu. Knowledge of England in the *Íslendingasögur* may have derived from intercultural contact, but English self-perception held little influence over the island's portrayal in the sagas. There is little doubt that the *Íslendingasögur* are difficult historical sources; Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson have gone so far as to suggest that 'we know almost nothing about Viking Age Iceland', an opinion that does not bode well for a study of saga historicity.¹³⁹ Yet it is also an opinion that indulges itself in cynicism. It is possible to peel back the layers of interpretation in saga text in the pursuit of authenticity and historicity, provided an awareness of how the *Íslendingasögur* have shaped cultural memory. This suggests a threefold approach to any given text or passage: internal literary analysis to identify author bias and influence stemming from the Age of Saga Writing; external, intra-corpus analysis to identify topoi and intertextual borrowing specific to *Íslendingasögur* or *skáldasögur* conventions; external, extra-corpus analysis correlating purported historical fact against the historical record of other cultures. This last is aided by the focus on representations of an external culture for, while we may perhaps 'know almost nothing about Viking Age Iceland', this is hardly true of Viking Age England. It is with this threefold analytical framework in mind that part 2 turns to detailed case study analyses of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* and their depictions of England and its kings.

¹³⁹ Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson, 'Creating a Past', pp. 157–8.

PART 2

5

MEMORIES OF TIME AND PLACE: *BJARNAR SAGA*

HÍTDÆLAKAPPA

While Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's journeys to England are all couched within the literary construct of the peripatetic *skáld*, each brings a distinct flavour to the motif. Björn's visit to England is notable for featuring a dragon, for Knútr's appearance, and for the brevity with which the episode is treated. That brevity, however, does not mean it lacks value to understanding how cultural memory is constructed in the *Íslendingasögur*. Both Knútr and the dragon situate Björn's English adventure within a wider network of cultural memory and intertextuality. In locating Björn in Knútr's court, the saga author provides the episode a historical setting. This is not unique as a locatable historical reference within the text; Björn's visits with other northern rulers serve a similar function, thus establishing a workable chronology. The idiosyncrasies of that chronology demonstrate that the travel passages of *Bjarnar saga* work within a framework of traditional Icelandic historiography. This is suggestive of the sources that were accessible to the author and point to explicit and implicit intertextual practice. This can also be said of the dragon attack, Björn's heroism, and Knútr's rewarding of it, underlying which are intertextual motifs that extend beyond the *Íslendingasögur*, into the literary cultures of other North Sea societies. The account of Björn's English adventure is informed by the literary and historiographical traditions in which it is situated. The question is whether the story can also be understood to preserve a degree of historicity, some authentic account of Anglo-Icelandic interaction.

The narrative that stands in place of *Bjarnar saga's* lost opening chapters, drawn from the *Bæjarbók* redaction of *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka*, dispenses with much material characteristic of *Íslendingasögur*. It lacks a genealogical preamble, details of familial tensions in Iceland, or any foregrounding of Björn's love for Oddný and animosity for Þórðr. By the end of the saga's second chapter, Björn is already resident in Earl Eiríkr's court in Norway. In contrast, Gunnlaugr only truly takes on the mantle of the peripatetic *skáld* in the sixth chapter

of his saga, while Egill first appears a third of the way into *Egils saga*. The narrative mode of the material drawn from *Óláfs saga* thus bring the travel passages of Björn's story immediately to the fore and lays their composition comparatively bare. This dovetails with the tone of *Bjarnar saga* where it picks up the narrative, recounting Björn's second visit to Eiríkr's court. The transition from *Óláfs saga* to *Bjarnar saga* is not demarcated by a pronounced tonal shift; a certain laconic element and uneven attention to individual episodes is displayed throughout the accounts of Björn's travels in their entirety. This reflects the intertextual relations between the two texts, and also speaks to the fundamentally literary nature of the peripatetic *skáld* motif. As a trope, it is malleable to authorial intent, while at the same time being confined by cultural memory and presuppositions of the storehouse of experience.

The literary nature of the peripatetic *skáld* motif, along with its intertextual connections, are also observed in its intersections with other *Íslendingasögur* topoi. Key among these is the three-year betrothal motif, which adds urgency to the Icelander's delays abroad, though rarely delimits the period of travel in practice. Neither Björn nor Gunnlaugr return in time to claim the hand of their betrothed; Hallfreðr and Kormákr fail to win permission for their desired marriages and are forced from Iceland's shores; Egill's marriage occurs in Norway during his travels. Only in *Víglundar saga*, a late text rarely classed among the *skáldasögur*, do the intersecting tropes of the peripatetic *skáld* and three-year betrothal coalesce in such a way that the hero returns in time to wed his betrothed.¹ *Víglundar saga*, however, has a number of unusual thematic emphases and influences that mark it out as distinct among the *Íslendingasögur*, and make Víglundr's happy marriage the preferred narrative ending.² Notably, Víglundr's three years abroad is prompted by outlawry rather than the *Wanderlust* that motivates Björn, Gunnlaugr, and Egill. The length of the exile mandated by lesser outlawry equates to the three-year betrothal motif, and the former serves a similar literary function to the latter within the *skáldasögur*. In intent, lesser outlawry may have been a circuit-breaker for feud cycles, but here it is treated as a *Bildungsroman* interlude for the *skáld*. As Marion Poilvez observes, the structure that underlies *Íslendingasögur* travel motifs is identical

¹ *Víglundar saga* 19–23.

² Marianne Kalinke, 'Víglundar saga: An Icelandic bridal-quest romance', *Skáldskaparmál*, 3 (1994), 119–43.

to that which informs accounts of lesser outlawry.³ These are opportunities for a young man to seek wealth and renown, to mature and to return to Iceland wiser and more accomplished.

While Björn's travels have their literary genesis in the three-year betrothal motif, around the time of his arrival at Knútr's court his adventuring shifts into a period of self-imposed exile. Björn's time abroad is bracketed by episodes set in Iceland, linked by his escalating feud with Þórðr. At the saga's opening the hostilities are attributed to Þórðr's haughty attitude and bullying of the younger Björn. Upon Björn's return to Iceland, the conflict centres on Oddný, though Þórðr's intervention in the betrothal should be read as a continuation of his bullying behaviour. The gap between these two elements of their feud, between Björn's departure and return to Iceland, encompasses some years. Not only does the narrative dictate that Björn fail to come home within the specified three years, but Þórðr and Oddný have eight children during Björn's travels. These then are the situational contexts for Icelandic cultural memory of Björn and Þórðr's feud: Björn's youth, and Þórðr's marriage.

However, the years that divide Björn and Þórðr's initial antagonisms and their rekindling necessitate explanation. This is where Knútr's England fits into the text, a temporal placeholder within the saga's chronology, going some way to explaining Björn's long absence from Iceland. Yet any number of settings could have served this purpose, and Björn spends significant periods elsewhere: raiding in the Baltic, wintering in Denmark, resident in Óláfr II's Norwegian court. As such, it is not necessarily clear why the narrative has Björn spending two years at Knútr's English court, no less slaying a dragon while there. Finlay suggests that 'perhaps the location, though not the event, was suggested to the author's mind by virtue of the historical fact of [Þórðr] Kolbeinsson's service as poet in England during the reign of [Knútr]'.⁴ However, the 'historical fact' of Þórðr's presence in England is less secure than Finlay implies. Marold avoids any definitive assertion of Þórðr's presence in England, while neither Judith Jesch nor Jayne Carroll find any indication within *Eiríksdrápa* of authorial

³ Marion Poilvez, 'Discipline or Punish? Travels and Outlawry as Social Structures in Medieval Iceland', in *Social Norms in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. by Jakub Morawiec, Aleksandra Jochymek and Grzegorz Bartusik (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 259–63.

⁴ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xxxiv.

presence during the events it recounts.⁵ It is also the case that, though Björn's service in Knútr's court is but a small part of the saga, this does not make it a mere authorial afterthought.

The internal chronology of *Bjarnar saga's* travel episodes is coherently constructed. All the rulers Björn visits in his journeys can work within a historical timeline. His travels, recounted in 5.2, are located within a transitional political period in the North Sea world. His first audience is at the Norwegian court of Earl Eiríkr; his last at the Norwegian court of King Óláfr. It follows that the temporal setting straddles the year 1015, in which Eiríkr relinquished his Norwegian overlordship to join Knútr's invasion of England, and in which Óláfr made his own claim on the Norwegian crown.⁶ This is paralleled by the change of ruler in England in 1016.⁷ As Björn's meeting with Eiríkr must have predated 1015, Æthelred must still have been alive when Björn left Iceland, Knútr yet to claim possession of the English kingdom.

Yet, the timeline of Björn's travels contains certain anomalies, at least as reconstructed in the Íslenzk fornrit edition of the text.⁸ This cannot be attributed solely to the splicing of the two source texts but, as argued in 5.3, derives from traditional Icelandic chronologies and thus relies on codified cultural memory. The chronology of Björn's travels seeks to strike a balance between audience knowledge, native historical tradition, *skáldasögur* convention, and the timelines of external source texts. 5.3 undertakes to expose this authorial framing, analysing the passage of time in *Bjarnar saga's* first ten chapters and thereby identifying the sources and traditions underlying the narrative. However, it cannot be ignored that Björn's appearance at Knútr's court may well be authorial invention, even if it is tailored to cultural memory of the *skáld*, of the king, of England, and of northern European politics. As such, 5.4 examines the thematic concerns of the passage: Björn's heroism; the alterity of the world beyond Iceland as exemplified by the dragon; and Knútr's characterisation as a gift-giving lord. These are

⁵ *Eiríksdrápa*, ed. by Jayne Carroll, pp. 486–9 (especially p. 489); Jesch, '*Jómsvíkinga*', 89–90; Marold, 'The Relation Between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*', p. 79.

⁶ *Fagrskinna*, pp. 173–7; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 15; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga*, pp. 58–70.

⁷ ASC C–F 1016; *Historia Norwegie* xviii, ed. by Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, trans. by Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), pp. 100–5.

⁸ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jonson, p. lxxxvii. See also Whaley, ed., *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, pp. 551–2, and Simon, '*Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*', p. 261, which echo Nordal's reading of the travel passages and timeline of events.

intertextual motifs that extend beyond the *Íslendingasögur* tradition and situate the Knútr passage of *Bjarnar saga* within an intercultural framework of memory and literature.

5.1 MANUSCRIPT CONTEXTS

Before the content of *Bjarnar saga* can be given consideration, its form and its fraught transmission history require some attention. A significant number of sagas alluded to in the extant corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature have not survived into the modern era. *Bjarnar saga* came exceptionally close to having been numbered among them. In Finlay's words, 'it may be considered remarkable that it exists at all in anything like a complete form.'⁹ While it is fortunate, particularly for a study of the narrative structure of Björn's travels, that passages from *Óláfs saga helga in sérstaka* can stand in for *Bjarnar saga's* lost opening chapters, there is no such remedy for its second lacuna. This is particularly unfortunate, as it contained significant plot details. Björn goes in one end a single man living with his father in Holm and comes out the other a married man living on his own farm at Vellir.¹⁰ These gaps in the text appear to be of medieval rather than modern origin, though compiling a coherent *Bjarnar saga* text is a puzzle, and there is nothing approaching a medieval copy of the saga in existence.

While *Bjarnar saga* has attracted limited dedicated scholarship, no doubt due to its fraught transmission history, it is less neglected than commentators tend to assert.¹¹ Few other sagas can boast four critical editions: that of R.C. Boer published in 1893; Nordal and Guðni Jónsson's *Íslensk fornrit* edition of 1938; John Le Couteur Simon's exemplary, if unpublished, doctoral thesis critical edition of 1966; and Finlay's critical English language translation published in 2000.¹² As their basis, all four rely most extensively on Arna-Magnæan

⁹ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xlvi.

¹⁰ *Bjarnar saga* 15–16.

¹¹ See for example, Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xlvi; Emily Lethbridge, "'Hvorki glansar gull á mér/né glæstir stafir í línum": A Survey of Medieval Icelandic *Íslendingasögur* Manuscripts and the Case of *Njáls saga*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 129 (2014), 68; John Le Couteur Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University College London, 1966), p. 8.

¹² *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, ed. by R.C. Boer (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1893); *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson; Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*; Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*'. Simon further identifies four other early edited editions of the text (*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10), and numerous English translations have appeared in recent decades, most by Finlay, including, *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*, trans. by Alison Finlay, in *The Complete Saga of Icelanders*, i, pp. 255–304; *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People*, trans. by Alison Finlay, in *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, pp. 151–221.

manuscript shelf-mark 551 d α 4to (hereafter 551).¹³ This is a seventeenth-century paper copy of a medieval text, and it includes the two lacunae. Finlay points to the fact that the text breaks off mid-sentence at the start of the second lacuna as evidence that the lacunae were authentic to the medieval text from which 551 was copied.¹⁴ That medieval exemplar of *Bjarnar saga* is not extant; only two vellum fragments survive. The fate of the full codex from which these came is unclear. The catalogue entry of the National and University Library of Iceland indicates that Árne Magnússon (1663–1730) acquired the fragments alone in 1707.¹⁵ Boer cast doubt on whether these came from the manuscript that served as the exemplar for 551. This, however, was refuted by Nordal, and it has since been accepted that the medieval fragments of *Bjarnar saga* and the seventeenth-century copy contained in 551 are directly linked.¹⁶ In turn, the more than forty manuscripts held in archives in Reykjavík, Copenhagen, and London that contain *Bjarnar saga* are also linked to 551, all being direct or indirect copies of that text.¹⁷

It is important to emphasise that all these texts, no less than their medieval progenitors, participate in the reinterpretation and transmission of the past: the processes of cultural memory. 551, for example, does differ in some places from its vellum exemplar such as it survives. Nordal assesses these to be scribal interventions during the copying process.¹⁸ That such exist in the mere four pages that survive from the Middle Ages implies with near-certainty that such editorialisations riddle the text of 551 and, subsequently, all modern editions. The imposition of a chapter structure, seen as early as the 1690s in the British Library manuscript of *Bjarnar saga*, likewise represents the imposition of modern convention.¹⁹ In turn, the insertion of the *Óláfs saga* passages to open the saga—passages which in themselves represent a late medieval reinterpretation of the cultural memory of Björn—subtly shifts and alters the narrative focus of *Bjarnar saga* from its outset. This is a practice which, again, can

¹³ Reykjavík AM 551 d α 4to ff. 1^r–33^v.

¹⁴ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. 63 (n. 87); see also *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ed. by Boer, pp. vii–viii.

¹⁵ AM 162 F fol. ff. 1^r–2^v (<https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM02-0162F>). See also Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 21–3.

¹⁶ *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ed. by Boer, pp. viii–xiv, cf. *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, p. xcvi, and also Marold, 'Relation Between Verses and Prose', p. 79; Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 44–6.

¹⁷ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 11–12, 19–20, 39–40, though cf. *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ed. by Boer, pp. vii. Simon's stemma of early modern manuscripts containing the full text of *Bjarnar saga* is a useful visualisation (*Ibid.*, p. 148).

¹⁸ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, p. xcvi–xcvii.

¹⁹ BL MS Add 4867 ff. 186^r–206^v.

already be observed in seventeenth-century copies of *Bjarnar saga*.²⁰ Modern editions continue to participate in the evolution of the cultural memory of Björn, both through their own editorial and translation choices, and the codification of the innovations of their early modern forebears.

Like 551, the *Bæjarbók* redaction of *Óláfs saga* that serves to fill the opening lacuna is an early modern copy. In this case, however, the fate of the original codex is better known. Only four leaves survive from AM 73 b fol., which dates to c.1400, the bulk of the codex having burned in one of Copenhagen's eighteenth-century fires (most likely that of 1795).²¹ In its place, most modern editions use the text of AM 71 fol., itself an early eighteenth-century copy of a copy of AM 73 b fol.²² Simon argues that the text known as AM 73 a fol. should take primacy as the most authentic extant copy of the *Bæjarbók Óláfs saga*, having been copied directly from the medieval manuscript.²³ And there is some variation between the text of AM 71 fol. and AM 73 a fol. However, in those passages that comprise the *Bjarnar þáttr*, this is largely limited to the imposition of chapters and modern orthography, and the Íslenzk fornrit editors' decision to use AM 71 fol. has informed subsequent scholarship.²⁴ Most importantly, the narrative is consistent between the different versions of the text and, moreover, appears to be authentic to *Bjarnar saga*.

The *Bjarnar þáttr* of *Óláfs saga* is not limited to that material lost in the *Bjarnar saga* lacuna. Rather, the two texts overlap in chapters 5–9; *Óláfs saga* essentially recounts Björn's travels in their entirety, albeit reordered or summarised or augmented in some parts.²⁵ This is useful, as comparison of the overlapping material allows for assessment of the *Bjarnar þáttr*'s faithfulness to the *Bjarnar saga* text. And what is seen in the *Bjarnar þáttr*, to borrow from Simon, is 'obviously a retelling' of Björn's journeys, more so than a copy of *Bjarnar saga*'s

²⁰ For example, AM 488 4to; BL MS Add 4867. These additions are seventeenth-century insertions, but postdate the initial copying.

²¹ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', p. 24.

²² *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, p. xcvi; *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, ed. by Boer, p. ix; Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, pp. xlvi–xlvii.

²³ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 24–8.

²⁴ AM 73 a fol. ff. 80^v–83^v. The text of AM 73 a fol. has not been transcribed outside of Simon's thesis, and the manuscript has not been digitised.

²⁵ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, pp. xlvii, 14 (n. 32); Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 19–20.

opening chapters.²⁶ The *Óláfs saga* author alters the narrative's focus in line with his subject, as exemplified in that opening line of modern editions of the saga: 'Nú skal segja nokkut af þeim íslenzkum mönnum, sem uppi váru um daga Óláfs konungs' (now let us say something of the Icelandic men who lived in the days of King Óláfr).²⁷ Yet, the broad strokes of the shared *Bjarnar þáttr* and *Bjarnar saga* material remain consistent. This provides some confidence that, for the narrative drawn from the non-extant *Bjarnar saga* chapters, the *Óláfs saga* redactor remained relatively true to his source material. Certainly, the use of the *Bjarnar þáttr* passages to open the saga text does not introduce major narrative anomaly to the story of Björn's travels.

5.2 BJÖRN'S TRAVELS

There is value at this point in providing a summary of Björn's adventures from his departure from Iceland up to his tenure in Knútr's court. This provides critical background for analysis of the literary-historical chronology and major themes that underlie the saga's depiction of Knútr and England. The narrative conventions and contexts in which *Bjarnar saga* situates Björn's arrival in England have great impact on the degree to which the episode can be understood to preserve something of the history or social contexts of tenth to eleventh-century England.

Bjarnar saga depicts Björn's passage from Iceland and his betrothal to Oddný as being arranged more-or-less simultaneously. Both are brought to fruition through the agency of Skúli Þorsteinsson. The prominence given Skúli, the facility of agreeing the terms of both arrangements, as well as the rapidity of their recounting, all derive from the stylistic and thematic concerns of *Óláfs saga*. The author is centring King Óláfr II, and thus his interest in the *Íslendingasögur* is limited to their points of contact with Óláfr's reign. Björn's journeys through Scandinavia and the Baltic are relevant to him, as they foreground the intersections between *Óláfs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, culminating in Björn's vengeance over Þórðr, the Solomonic mediation of King Óláfr, and the eventual friendship between the Icelandic *skáld*

²⁶ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 19–20. The variations between the texts are detailed in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, ed. by Boer, pp. 12–25.

²⁷ *Bjarnar saga* 1.

and the Norwegian king.²⁸ Details of Björn and Þórðr's early antagonisms in Iceland, material that would once have comprised much of the pre-travel passages, are less germane to that narrative, and the *Óláfs saga* redactor acknowledges their omission is intentional:

En því get eg eigi þeirra smágreina sem milli fóru þeirra Bjarnar ok Þórðar áður Björn kom til Skúla að þær heyra ekki til þessi sögu.²⁹

(But I do not tell of the little things that went on between Björn and Þórðr before Björn came to Skúli, for they do not belong to this saga.)

As a result, the contextualising narrative prefacing Björn's travels is given only a single chapter. From the moment Björn leaves Iceland, the narrative becomes more detailed. Björn first seeks out the Norwegian court of Earl Eiríkr where he is joined later in the summer by Þórðr. Setting aside any prior antagonisms, Björn and Þórðr each vouch for the other's qualities. This is a noted trope of the *Íslendingasögur* that reflects Icelandic anxieties around identity and autonomy: Icelanders rarely let native hostilities play out in foreign courts and often defend or certify each other's honour.³⁰ Nonetheless, this does not mean their enmity is set aside. Taking advantage of Björn's drunkenness one evening, Þórðr arranges to take Björn's token to Oddný to affirm their betrothal. Björn clearly regrets placing this trust in Þórðr once he has sobered up, and is right to do so. Upon his return to Iceland, Þórðr confirms the betrothal with the ring Björn had given him, but adds the caveat that Björn had told him, were he to die while adventuring, Þórðr was to take over the betrothal.

There is little artifice in the framing of this narrative or in what follows. Unaware of Þórðr's plans, and in accordance with the three-year betrothal motif, Björn decides to continue his adventures for, as he declares, 'eg þykist enn of lítt reynt mig hafa í framgöngu og óvíða kannað hafa góðra manna siðu' (I think I have tested myself too little in deeds, nor explored enough the ways of good men).³¹ Björn journeys to the Baltic and begins service in the retinue of Valdimarr of Garðaríki. There Björn finds Valdimarr's court in disarray, his overlordship

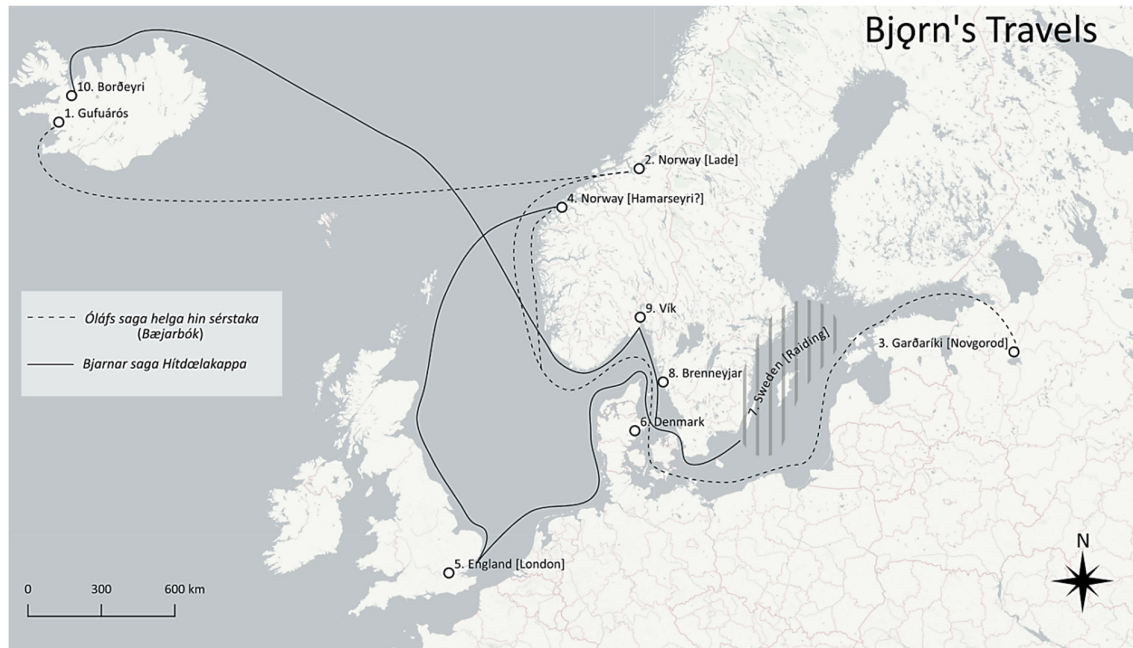
²⁸ An account of Björn's vengeance and subsequent exchange with King Óláfr is given at Chapter 4, p. 159.

²⁹ *Bjarnar saga* 1. By 'this saga' the writer intends his audience to understand he is referring to *Óláfs saga*.

³⁰ See for example, *Gunnlaugs saga* 6 (also at Eiríkr's court); *Harðar saga* 13; *Laxdæla saga* 20–1, 40. Chapter 2 pp. 57–8.

³¹ *Bjarnar saga* 3.

threatened by an accomplished kinsman and rival named Kaldimarr. In an episode reminiscent of Gunnlaugr's duel with the *berserkr* at Æthelred's court, Björn accuses Valdimarr's men of cowardice and offers to take up Kaldimarr's challenge. Kaldimarr's name is otherwise unattested in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, its similarity to the king's name suggesting it to be parody: a fabricated name for Valdimarr's familial nemesis.



Map 8: *Björn's travels in northern Europe per Bjarnar saga's chronology. Excepting Óláfr II's court at Vik, locations for royal audiences are not identified beyond country; potential sites are indicated by [] (M. Firth).*

The entire episode at the court of Garðaríki smacks of invention, designed with two narrative functions in mind.³² The first of these is the explanation of Björn's byname, Hítðælakappi (the Hítardal champion), which the saga proposes was given him at Valdimarr's court following his victory. This is something of an odd assertion, and Finlay identifies this passage as 'blatantly fictional'.³³ The problem, however, is identifying the point at which that fiction entered cultural memory of Björn Hítðælakappi. While the saga states that, 'Því var Björn síðan kappi kallaður og kenndur við hérað sitt' (thereafter, Björn was called 'champion' and named after his district) seems a straight-forward enough definition of the sobriquet's linguistic construct, its narrative context may well embody something akin to folk etymology.

³² For a full assessment of the historicity of the Garðaríki episode and potential parallel tales from the *Russian Primary Chronicle*, see Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', pp. 275–89.

³³ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xxxiv.

The regional identifier in Björn's cognomen can logically be considered a product of Icelandic cultural memory, disambiguating Iceland's various 'champions'. The necessity of this is demonstrated by Björn's namesake, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi (the Breiðvík champion), who features in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The two Björns share more than a name and byname, but also variant versions of two verses and a parallel sub-narrative ensconced within their wider biographies.³⁴ Ursula Dronke argues that the source of this intertextuality is unrecoverable, though tentatively suggests that the poetry and the narrative are at their most contextually coherent in *Eyrbyggja saga*.³⁵ In her analysis, Marold is more forthright in her assertion that the verses of *Eyrbyggja saga* have greater claim to authenticity, both in their form and their narrative context, and were initially a part of the cultural memory of Björn Breiðvíkingakappi.³⁶ However, Marold's conclusion is somewhat inconsistent. Echoing Dronke's point that the merging of the Björns' biographies likely predated the sagas as written literature, Marold closes her discussion with the caveat that the two narrative traditions may have cultivated the use of the poetry independently.³⁷ Yet Marold also ascribes the separation of the verses within *Bjarnar saga*—they are consecutive in *Eyrbyggja saga*—to authorial intervention, when this too could reflect the evolution of the oral text in its transmission. Similarly, it cannot be definitively stated that the Garðaríki episode of *Bjarnar saga* (or *Óláfs saga*) was an editorialisation of the saga author, or of an earlier redactor. Whatever approach is taken to the derivation of the common elements of the Björns' lives, such confusion exemplifies the importance of clear identifiers like Hitdælakappi and Breiðvíkingakappi within Icelandic cultural memory. This points to an Icelandic basis for Hitdælakappi, the Garðaríki origin story in this respect being, to once again quote Finlay, 'a blatantly fictional device to aggrandize the hero', no matter the point it entered Björn's legacy.³⁸

The second narrative function of the Garðaríki episode is to place Björn so far from Iceland that news of his deeds (or death) could not reach there in any timely way. This is a critical plot point. Just like Gunnlaugr, Björn emerges victorious in his duel in defence of the

³⁴ *Bjarnar saga* 12 (st. 12), 21 (st. 29), with the parallel prose narrative accompanying chapter 21; *Eyrbyggja saga* 40 (st. 27–28).

³⁵ Ursula Dronke, 'Sem jarla forðum: The Influence of *Rígsþula* on Two Saga-Episodes,' in *Speculum Norroenum*, ed. by Ursula Dronke and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 68–72.

³⁶ Marold, 'The Relation Between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*' pp. 106–16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116; Dronke, pp. 68–72.

³⁸ Finlay, *The Saga of Bjorn*, p. xxxiv.

king's honour and authority. Unlike Gunnlaugr, however, Björn is severely wounded in the fight and forced into convalescence. He stays at Valdimarr's court for the remainder of the three-year betrothal period. Though rumours of Björn's injuries do reach Iceland prior to the deadline for his return, they only make it as far as Þórðr, who bribes the traders who brought the news to declare that Björn had died in the fight. Þórðr then presses his suit for Oddný's hand and, while her family do wait until the end of the three-year agreement, the marriage is effected soon thereafter. Björn, then waiting out the winter Norway to make safe passage to Iceland and his betrothed, hears of the marriage from travellers coming the other direction. In this moment, he decides not to return to Iceland.

This is the moment when *Bjarnar saga* itself picks up the narrative. After a winter back with Eiríkr, Björn's first act in the saga proper is to travel to England and Knútr's court. It is worth emphasising that this is not an element of the betrothal trope but occurs upon the conclusion of that episode. It is, moreover, a short passage that serves primarily to account for a part of Björn's extended absence from Iceland. The saga tells that he was well-received in England and spent two seasons there as part of Knútr's retinue. It goes on to recount the dragon attack at sea, Björn's defence of the king's men, and his slaying of the beast. Immediately following this act of heroism, the saga states 'en konungr gaf Birni mikit fé ok langskip gott, ok því helt hann til Danmerkr' (the king gave Björn much money and a fine longship; and so he went to Denmark).³⁹

At this juncture, it must be recalled that the *Íslendingasögur* performed a historical function, composed in their written form to impart meaning to an audience of thirteenth-century Icelanders. This is true of Björn's dragon no less than the historically plausible setting of Knútr's English kingship. Nonetheless, *Bjarnar saga* is doing some unusual things here. Lindow points to the dragon fight as the moment in which Björn's story diverges from the typical Icelander-at-court construct.⁴⁰ It is, moreover, the point at which *Bjarnar saga* departs from the usual *skáldasögur* depictions of the peripatetic *skáld*, both in the genre-defying appearance of a dragon and in Björn's reluctance to return home. Once in Denmark, Björn uses it as a base for a three-year career *viking* in the Baltic, presumably using the ship the king

³⁹ *Bjarnar saga* 5. The passage is quoted in full in chapter 1, p. 34.

⁴⁰ Lindow, 'Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 1', p. 223.

had gifted him. The saga also takes on something of an unusual narrative structure at this point, abandoning Björn in Denmark and tracking back in time and switching focus to Iceland, to tell of Þórðr and Oddný's married life in Hítarnes. All of this—Björn's winter with Eiríkr, his service in England, his time raiding, Þórðr and Oddný's marriage—is told with remarkable brevity. This once again raises the idea that these passages are temporal placeholders within the saga's chronology. They account for Björn's actions during his extended exile from Iceland but, more importantly, they ensure that cultural memory of his interactions with the rulers of the North Sea world align with traditional Icelandic chronologies of their reigns. Soon enough, the narrative snaps back to a more typical *skáldasögur* shape as Björn enacts his revenge, enters King Óláfr's service and, finally, returns to the feuds and political intrigues of Iceland. All told, the post-betrothal digression has encompassed at least six years, and these years are central to the identification of the temporal setting of *Bjarnar saga*.

5.3 RECONSTRUCTING A CHRONOLOGY

The internal chronology of *Bjarnar saga* has elicited limited scholarly attention. The pseudo-historical timeline set out by Nordal in 1938 dates Björn's years in Knútr's court to 1011–13, a period which predates not only Knútr's English kingship, but that of his father Sveinn. Nonetheless, Nordal's reconstructed chronology has remained the standard into the twenty-first century. In Simon's assessment, '[t]here is no reason for differing from the chronology of the saga as set out by Nordal', while the 2002 Penguin volume of translated *skáldasögur* simply reproduces the chronology, albeit with the caveat that '[it] is impossible to establish any precise chronology for the sagas'.⁴¹ Whaley goes on to state that the *skáldasögur* represent 'largely fictionalized reconstructions of events written down in a society in which the precision of modern time-reckoning was unnecessary'.⁴² This characterisation of saga chronology is rather dependent on the level of detail one anticipates. If by 'precise chronology', Whaley means knowing the day, the month and the year of all the individual events recounted in a saga, then they do no doubt disappoint.

⁴¹ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Jonson, p. lxxxvii; Whaley, ed., *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, pp. 551-52; Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', p. 261.

⁴² Whaley, ed., *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, p. 550.

However, most *Íslendingasögur* narratives have coherent and measurable chronologies, so long as these are understood to work at an annual level and be tied to externally verifiable historical touchstones. This dating method is particularly evident in the *skáldasögur*, and likely shows the hands of the saga authors at work. The travels of Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn can, in each case, only happen within a narrow band of years, delimited by the reigns of those rulers whom they visit, and the events recounted during their journeys. Inevitably, a working chronology is less readily identifiable upon the hero's return to Iceland, whereupon narratives often take on a more intensely regional focus. Such chronologies are, naturally, not always entirely accurate; the permutations of cultural memory and the fallibility of the storehouse of experience ensured this. The *Íslendingasögur* are in many ways compilatory works, their authors drawing together various oral and written sources, seeking to smooth out any discrepancies between them as they did so. This to greater or lesser effect, is dependant on the author's skill and the nature of his sources. What is clear, however, is that most saga authors put quill to parchment with a conceptual chronology or timeframe in mind. For their part, the *Bjarnar saga* author and *Óláfs saga* redactor provide largely compatible chronological frameworks that present congruous historical markers consistent with, and no doubt indebted to, the *konungasögur*. In its narrative detail, the timeline is unquestionably fictionalised. The summaries of Björn's deeds between his first audience at Eiríkr's court and his arrival at Óláfr's court do not recommend themselves to historical authenticity. Yet, in constructing the broader political backdrop for the narrative, it seems the saga author was concerned to locate Björn's travels within a plausible historical setting.

The most precisely datable event in *Bjarnar saga* is found in chapter six, the second of the extant *Bjarnar saga* manuscript, when reference is made to the naval battle of Nesjar.⁴³ The Battle of Nesjar occurred on Palm Sunday (26 March) 1016. Óláfr's victory in the battle against Sveinn Hákonarson, Eiríkr's half-brother, allowed him to consolidate the authority he had claimed upon declaring himself King of Norway in 1015. In medieval Scandinavian historiography, the battle is characterised as integral to legitimising both Óláfr's reign and Norwegian independence from Danish overlordship.⁴⁴ Within *Bjarnar saga*, the reference to Nesjar is nested within a synopsis of Óláfr's rise to power which serves to introduce both the

⁴³ *Bjarnar saga* 6.

⁴⁴ *Fagrskinna*, pp. 172–7; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 60–9.

king and the political shift in Norway to the narrative. Moreover, it serves to establish Óláfr's credentials as a worthy lord, foregrounding Björn's future interactions with the Norwegian king. It is worth once more noting that the transition from *Óláfs saga* to *Bjarnar saga* is not accompanied by a pronounced tonal shift, and this extends to both texts' attitudes to Óláfr. *Bjarnar saga* is no less complimentary to the king than *Óláfs saga*. To conclude its summary of Óláfr's rise to power and victory at Nesjar, *Bjarnar saga* states 'það að margar góðar sǫgur gengu frá konungi þeim sem vert var (that many good stories were being told of this king, as he deserved), and tells that these had reached Björn's ears.⁴⁵

Óláfr's accession to and consolidation of Norwegian kingship is a third narrative stream parallel to those of Björn's raiding in the Baltic and Þórðr's settled life in Hítarnes. Of these, it is the only one to mention a datable event and thus Nesjar has been used to locate the saga events within a historical timeline.⁴⁶ Nordal, moreover, makes Nesjar pivotal to his historical chronology because of Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Nesjavisur*, a fifteen-verse composition praising Óláfr and lauding his victory in the battle, primarily preserved in the various versions of *Óláfs saga*. In the fifth stanza Sigvatr, an Icelandic *skáld* with political connections at the Norwegian royal court, identifies himself as a participant in events at Nesjar as part of Óláfr's forces.⁴⁷ As Poole indicates, 'Sigvatr's authorship is not in doubt', and so his claim to eyewitness status lends *Nesjavisur* and, by extension, the Battle of Nesjar itself, a historical authenticity unusual within the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus.⁴⁸ It purports to be codified communicative memory or, more accurately, cultural memory that can boast fewer editorial interventions. It is small wonder that, amidst the vagaries and fictions of Björn's travels, Nordal identifies Nesjar as *the* authoritatively datable event of *Bjarnar saga's* early chapters.

However, authorial intent and the saga's literary composition must be considered. It is the passage of time, the accounting for a certain number of years rather than the precise recounting of them, that is the overt concern of chapter six. It is, in fact, difficult to construct a reading of *Bjarnar saga's* chronology in which the reference to Nesjar relates to the principal narrative, or serves any purpose in grounding it within a historical framework. Neither Björn

⁴⁵ *Bjarnar saga* 6.

⁴⁶ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Jonson, pp. lxxxvi–lxxxviii.

⁴⁷ Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Nesjavisur*, in *PKS* 1.2, pp. 532–3, 556–78 (especially pp. 563–4).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 557.

nor Þórðr are participants within the battle; they do not take direct action in reference to it; and it is unclear when on their personal timelines the event was meant to have occurred. Nor are Nesjar and its victor introduced as active components of the narrative at this point. The story of Óláfr's rise to power serves rather as a scene-setting device, establishing context for the rekindling of the central conflict and Bjørn's welcome into Óláfr's court in a later chapter. Moreover, centring Nesjar as a datable event relative to the saga's narrative gives rise to certain anomalies. Þórðr and Oddný's fecundity, for example, is scarcely believable in the six-year period allowed within a chronology tied to Nesjar. More importantly, however, decoupling the narrative timeline from the battle allows for the chronology of *Bjarnar saga* to be calibrated to place Bjørn within Knútr's court on a historically plausible timeline.

First, however, it is worth considering the recognised timeline put forward by Nordal. This requires accepting for the moment that Nesjar is an event directly locatable within the overarching narrative of the saga. It is possible to create a working internal chronology of Bjørn's travels from this starting point as both the *Bjarnar þáttr* and *Bjarnar saga* provide lengths for each episode of Bjørn's adventures. Thus, it is stated at the end of Bjørn's time in Garðaríki that he had been abroad three years, that he spent two years at Knútr's court, that his time raiding lasted three years, that he spent two years with Óláfr before returning to Iceland.⁴⁹ All told, the saga indicates that Bjørn was absent from Iceland for twelve years. Working with this as his framework, Nordal proposes the following chronology of Bjørn's early travels:

1007–08	Bjørn at Eiríkr's court
1008–10	Bjørn at Valdimarr's court
1010	Þórðr marries Oddný
1010–11	Bjørn at Eiríkr's court (at sea)
1011–13	Bjørn at Knútr's court
1013–16	Bjørn goes raiding

⁴⁹ *Bjarnar saga*, 4–8.

1016–17

Björn & Þórðr at Óláfr's court ⁵⁰

The primary problem with this chronology, at least as it draws attention here, is the dating of Björn's years in Knútr's court. Knútr's English campaigns of conquest took place in 1015/16 and he was not crowned king there until early 1017. Thus, by this reckoning, the saga's internal chronology places Björn in the English court of Knútr, here unambiguously named as king, as much as six years before he claimed that title. In fact, the years 1011–13 in large part predate Knútr's entry into the historical record as a leader in his father Sveinn's invasion of England in 1013/14.⁵¹ Knútr's presence on that campaign is well attested; however, the prince's most notable characteristic in these years seems to have been his youth. Óttarr svarti's *Knútsdrápa*, for example, makes much of Knútr's age in its first stanza.

<i>Hratt lítt gamall, lýtir</i>	Seafarer, you launched ships
<i>lögreiðar, framm skeiðum;</i>	when you were of little age;
<i>fórat fylkir æri,</i>	warrior, no ruler younger than you
<i>folksveimuðr, þér heiman'.</i>	set out from home. ⁵²

Judith Jesch identifies Knútr as one of several kings associated with a literary motif of a warrior embarking upon his first voyage at age twelve.⁵³ This should not be taken literally. Óttarr gives no indication of Knútr's age, and his year of birth is unknown, though it almost certainly falls within the last decade of the ninth century, probably *c.* 995.⁵⁴ As such, Knútr was about eighteen years old, or perhaps a few years younger, at the time of his first known campaign in England, around the same age that most *skáldasögur* protagonists set out on their adventures. At the very least, he was of sufficient age in 1013 to have been given command of the Danish invasion fleet while Sveinn campaigned on land.⁵⁵ With this in mind, Knútr can scarcely be considered to have been as young (or as anomalous) as Óttarr asserts. The youthfulness he claims for the

⁵⁰ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Jonson, p. lxxxvii. Up to 1010 the chronology depends on *Óláfs saga helga*.

⁵¹ ASC C–F 1013–16.

⁵² Óttarr svarti, *Knútsdrápa* (st.1).

⁵³ Judith Jesch, 'Youth on the Prow: Three Young Kings in the Late Viking Age', in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, ed. by P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), pp. 128–30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125; Lawson, *Cnut*, p. 160; Óttarr svarti, *Knútsdrápa*, p. 769; Alexander R. Rumble, 'Introduction: Cnut in Context', in *Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, ed. by Alexander R. Rumble (London: Leicester University Press, 1994), p. 3.

⁵⁵ ASC C–F 1013.

king is hyperbole, designed to align Knútr with a cultural topos of youthful exceptionalism. *Knútsdrápa* was written for Knútr in his own lifetime, is addressed directly to Knútr, and the emphasis on the king's prowess from a young age is artifice intended to flatter.

This literary appropriation of Knútr's age would render *Knútsdrápa* irrelevant to the chronology of *Bjarnar saga*, were it not for the fact that a tradition of Knútr's youth in the years 1013/14 appears to have been preserved in cultural memory in more than one place. *Knýtlinga saga*, which embeds *Knútsdrápa* throughout its length, implies Knútr took the English throne at age thirteen, and states he was only ten when Sveinn died.⁵⁶ English sources date that event to early 1014. In turn, in its retelling of the aftermath of Sveinn's death, *Encomium* states the English rejected Knútr's claim to the crown in part 'utpote qui iuuenis erat' (because he was but a youth).⁵⁷ *Encomium* is no less invested in lauding Knútr than *Knútsdrápa* or *Knýtlinga saga*, but here the heroic connotations of his youthfulness are gone. Rather, it serves alongside several other factors to excuse Knútr's inability to force the English to accept his rule. Of course, an eighteen-year-old prince may well be considered young, and references to Knútr's youth during this campaign may recall his historical age. However, even were Knútr as old as eighteen in 1013/14, it would mean he was around fifteen in 1011, the year when, according to Nordal's chronology, Bjørn would have joined Knútr's royal retinue.

Knútr's youthfulness is not on display in *Bjarnar saga*. Bjørn arrives at the court of a man firmly enough ensconced in his kingship to hold both the wealth and agency to reward the Icelander's heroism. The anachronistic use of the sobriquet *inn ríki* (the Great), no doubt a thirteenth-century editorialisation, reinforces the author's intent for his audience to associate Bjørn's heroics with Knútr's legacy as king and conqueror. The saga thus displays some historical knowledge of Knútr's reign and a clear awareness that this extended to England. However, this knowledge was seemingly either derived from, or tailored to, a synoptic cultural memory of Knútr's life, which recalled the broad strokes of his reputation but little detail. No matter this opacity, it remains that the saga author has placed *Bjarnar saga* within the historical timeline, and that the earliest that Bjørn can be understood to have spent two years in a royal English court under Knútr is 1016–18. This chronological anomaly is

⁵⁶ *Knýtlinga saga* 8, 18.

⁵⁷ *Encomium* 2.1.

acknowledged by Nordal, though left unresolved, and the discrepancy has not attracted discussion elsewhere. He simply notes that, while Knútr was not king at this time, the passage can only be dated to 1011–13 within a timeline created in reference to Nesjar, and that, in any case, Björn's English sojourn is but a small part of the author demonstrating the passage of time.⁵⁸ However, in demonstrating the passage of time, the author is perhaps not being as exact as the accepted timeline implies; that is to say, he is working from traditional Icelandic historical chronologies that are inconsistent with the historical record.

Ultimately, Nordal's construction of *Bjarnar saga's* internal chronology may be correct in as far as it goes, based on the cues given in the text. But its historical anomalies are resolvable. Moreover, they have intertextual correlations within the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus; *Bjarnar saga's* early dating of Knútr's reign has historiographical precedent. Indeed, the faulty chronology of these years, so clear in the attribution of Knútr as king as early as 1011, provides some clue as to the traditions being accessed by *Bjarnar saga*. As Simon says in opening his discussion of the saga's chronology:

The author of *Bjarnar saga* obviously had a fairly extensive knowledge of the Kings' Sagas, but from which ones he derived his knowledge would scarcely be possible to determine with any certainty.⁵⁹

There is no reason to dispute this assertion. The chronology of the saga's opening chapters correlates to those of various *konungasögur*, identified as part of the same tradition by their parallel historical incongruities. This explains why the timelines of the *Bjarnar þáttr* and *Bjarnar saga* splice together so easily; not only does the *Bjarnar þáttr* draw on the *Bjarnar saga* chronology in its genesis, but is embedded within a *konungasaga* predicated on the same timeline of events. Both of Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs sögur*, that which forms the basis for the *Bæjarbók* version and that contained in *Heimskringla*, present a similar chronology to that which Nordal hypothesises for *Bjarnar saga*. In the reckoning of *Óláfs saga*, it was in 1012 that Eiríkr abdicated his rulership in Norway, summoned to join the invasion fleet that campaigned to win Knútr the crown of England.⁶⁰ This early dating of Knútr's kingship is also attested in

⁵⁸ *Bjarnar saga*, ed. by Nordal and Jonson, p. lxxxviii.

⁵⁹ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', p. 261.

⁶⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 30–32.

Magnúss saga ins góða, another of the sagas comprising *Heimskringla*, which states that, at his death, Knútr had reigned in England for twenty-four years (as does *Knýtlinga saga*).⁶¹ Granted that, according to the more contemporaneous English historical record, Knútr died in 1035, this would also place his kingship as beginning in 1011 or 1012.⁶²

At this point some broader problems in the chronology of these years in Scandinavian historiography rear their heads. Verse compositions by both Sigvatr and Óttarr attest to Óláfr's active involvement in raiding activity in England, though Óláfr's presence in the area seems not to have entered English cultural memory or, subsequently, the English historical record.⁶³ The identifiable locations of battles they cite, such as Canterbury and London, suggest Óláfr was a member of Porkell's viking forces in the years 1009–12.⁶⁴ Alistair Campbell argues that memory of this activity became intertwined with memory of Sveinn and Knútr's invasions in 1013–16 in the historical traditions of later North Sea societies.⁶⁵ As such, Óláfr appears at the side of Sveinn, or Knútr (or both) in their English campaigns in histories from those of Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus, through to the earliest *Óláfs sögur* which inspired Snorri's own versions.⁶⁶ The testimony given by Óttarr, however, is that in 1014 Óláfr fought on Æthelred's side, an assertion that makes sense in the light of both men's alliances with Porkell.⁶⁷ In turn, it is implausible that Óláfr went on campaign with Knútr in 1016. Firstly, the two kings were rivals for regional authority throughout their reigns. It was knowledge of these antagonisms, combined with Óttarr's statement that Óláfr was allied with Æthelred, which prompted Snorri to alter his versions of *Óláfs saga*. Snorri still places Óláfr in England during Knútr's invasion of 1016, but campaigning on the English side.⁶⁸ Secondly, at this time Óláfr was still consolidating his authority in Norway and it is unlikely he was seeking foreign ventures so shortly after winning his kingdom.

⁶¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Magnúss saga ins góða*, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF XXVII, p. 11, cf. *Knýtlinga saga* 18.

⁶² ASC C–F 1035.

⁶³ Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn*, ed. by Matthew Townend, in *PKS* 1.2, pp. 739–67; Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Vikingarvísur*, ed. by Judith Jesch, in *PKS* 1.2, pp. 533–54.

⁶⁴ Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* (st. 8–11); Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Vikingarvísur* (st. 6–9); *Encomium*, appendix III, ed. by Alistair Campbell, pp. 76–7.

⁶⁵ *Encomium*, appendix III, ed. by Alistair Campbell, pp. 79–80.

⁶⁶ Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.li; *G. Dan.* x.14; *Encomium*, appendix III, ed. by Alistair Campbell, pp. 79–81.

⁶⁷ Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* (st. 13).

⁶⁸ Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 16–20.

It is this conflation of Óláfr, Sveinn, and Knútr's campaigns that has introduced chronological anomaly into the Old Norse-Icelandic historical tradition of these years. In order to reconcile Óláfr's conquest of Norway with his supposed involvement in Sveinn and Knútr's conquests, traditional Icelandic chronologies shifted those English campaigns back to Óláfr's years of raiding. Thus, for example, Snorri's *Óláfs saga* places Sveinn's death around 1009—approximately the same time that Óláfr first arrives in England in that version of events—as opposed to the 1014 of the English historical record.⁶⁹ All of this is to suggest that the *Bjarnar saga* author was not innovating his chronological framework, historically erroneous as it may be. Rather, this is explicit intertextuality. The author adapted his narrative to correlate with Icelandic cultural memory, with the received knowledge of pre-existing chronologies. While this alone is not fatal to *Bjarnar saga's* potential use as a record of historical Anglo-Icelandic cultural contact, it does demonstrate how such memory could be mediated in its transmission. Moreover, it highlights the impossibility of using the text as an independent record; positing any sort of historicity requires that the narrative be interpreted in the light of external sources.

There is, then, a misalignment of around five years between the history of the northern world and the chronology of it preserved in *Bjarnar saga*. Indeed, if the entire chronology of Björn's travels is moved forward by five years, it fits within a workable historical timeline. The Icelander attends Knútr's court toward the start of his reign (1016–18), is in Valdimarr's company toward the end of his (1013–15), visits Eiríkr in Norway once in 1012 and a second time around 1015—perhaps as he prepared to campaign in England, explaining why the meeting was at sea. Moreover, this aligns the narrative with the English historical record. If Eiríkr had left his territories in Norway to his son's governance in 1012 and departed for England, as Snorri's *Óláfs sögur* state, there is no extant account for Eiríkr's activities there in the years leading up to Knútr's conquest.⁷⁰ English sources, however, identify Eiríkr as joining Knútr during his 1015/16 campaign, and it is probable that Eiríkr left Norway around this time.⁷¹ Moreover, not all *konungasögur* support the early dating of Eiríkr's departure and Knútr's kingship. *Fagrskinna*, for example, indicates that Eiríkr ruled Norway at the time of

⁶⁹ ASC C–F 1014; Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 13–14.

⁷⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, p. 31.

⁷¹ ASC C 1016–17; JW 1015–17; *Encomium* ii.7.

Sveinn's death in 1014.⁷² Theodoric Monachus dates Eiríkr's departure to 1015 and states that Knútr's accession to the throne came after Óláfr's departure from England.⁷³ Yet these are anomalies of Scandinavian historiography, and even their chronologies become muddled in the attempt to rationalise the corrupted cultural memory of Óláfr's campaigns in England.

Bjarnar saga likewise attempts to reconcile different streams of cultural memory in recounting Björn's years at Knútr's court. If the *Íslendingasögur* were intended to have a historical function, it was critical that they were imbued with a sense of historicity and authenticity for their audience. In other words, they had to appeal to what was known, to accepted historical knowledge, the accuracy of that knowledge notwithstanding. The *Íslendingasögur* were not composed as historical annals and were not intended to be read as such. The first stream of Icelandic cultural memory accessed by *Bjarnar saga* is that intertextual history of the North Sea world which holds that Óláfr participated in Sveinn and Knútr's English campaigns. As Simon states, identifying from which *konungasögur* the author 'derived his knowledge would scarcely be possible to determine with any certainty';⁷⁴ this is explicit rather than manifest intertextuality. Nonetheless, *Bjarnar saga* does draw on them for its temporal framework of Björn's adventures outside of Iceland, perhaps using an early version of *Óláfs saga* given the intersections of Óláfr and Björn's stories. The second stream is the legacy of Knútr as 'the Great'. By the thirteenth century, Knútr's reputation was not attached to stories of his youthful prowess, but to his legacy as one of northern Europe's pre-eminent monarchs. This is the king that *Bjarnar saga* conjures, a man possessed of his power and wealth. It matters little that this does not accord with the saga's chronology when analysed against the historical record; the author is invoking the timeline and the king known to his audience.

5.4 THEMATIC INTERTEXTUALITY: OF KINGS AND DRAGONS

A third stream of cultural memory adapted by the *Bjarnar saga* author relates to Björn's dragon fight: the exceptionalism of Saga Age Icelanders. Björn's presence at Knútr's court may create a plausible historical realism, but it also places the Icelander among esteemed company,

⁷² *Fagrskinna*, pp. 166–7.

⁷³ Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 14–15.

⁷⁴ Simon, 'A Critical Edition of *Bjarnar saga*', p. 261.

positioning him to be the king's champion. The author is appealing to the nostalgia of his contemporary Icelanders, evoking cultural memory of a time of Icelandic heroes with his depiction of the *skáld* leaping into action to face a marauding dragon. Both *Bjarnar saga's* kings and its dragon embody concerns present in thirteenth-century Icelandic society regarding its perceptions of, and relationships with, the world beyond their shores. They also demonstrate some ways in which the *Íslendingasögur* both use and adapt the past to create meaning. In this, *Bjarnar saga* is in some ways a more literary and less historical example than either *Gunnlaugs saga* or *Egils saga*. This is certainly the case for its depiction of England and Björn's adventure in Knútr's court, which draws on a number of explicit intertextual archetypes. The authorial interventions in *Bjarnar saga*, the editorialisations that shaped cultural memory as it was mediated in textual form, are less ambiguous than in many other *Íslendingasögur*. There are two themes that emerge in the episode at the English court, attached to the figures of the dragon and Knútr. The first is the alterity of the world outside Iceland, the second the performance of kingship. Both are connected to questions of agency and refracted through the nostalgic narrative mode of the *Íslendingasögur*. In this moment Björn is an exemplar of the Icelandic exceptionalism that the Age of Saga Writing imagined for the Saga Age; both the champion of one of Scandinavia's most renowned kings, and a dragon-slayer.

The appearance of a dragon is unique to *Bjarnar saga* among the *skáldasögur*, and almost unique to the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. The only other example is found in *Gull-Þóris saga*, a late text in which the eponymous hero and his companions slay a group of (mostly) sleeping dragons to take their treasure hoard.⁷⁵ That treasure, lacking from the *Bjarnar saga* dragon interlude, defines the use of the motif in *Gull-Þóris saga* as more thematically canonical. One of the primary functions of dragons in Old Norse-Icelandic storytelling, to borrow from Jonathon Evans, was to warn of the 'socially and personally destructive effects of greed.'⁷⁶ A secondary and more narratively driven purpose, prominent in *Bjarnar saga*, was the establishing of a protagonist's heroic credentials. Þórir takes his place alongside Björn as one of Iceland's few dragon slayers. Ármann Jakobsson is, though, no less derisive of the dragons of *Gull-Þóris saga*

⁷⁵ *Gull-Þóris saga* 4, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *ÍF* XIII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1991), pp. 186–9.

⁷⁶ Jonathon Evans, 'As Rare as they are Dire: Old Norse Dragons, *Beowulf*, and the *Deutsche Mythologie*', in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by Tom Shippey (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), pp. 236.

than that of *Bjarnar saga*, declaring they ‘command so little respect that they can hardly be mentioned in the same breath as Fáfñir’.⁷⁷ In Old Norse-Icelandic literature, dragons are more often associated with the *fornaldarsögur*, Fáfñir foremost among them, killed by Sigurðr in *Völsunga saga*. Ármann posits a hierarchy of dragons which places those of the *fornaldarsögur*, particularly Fáfñir and the unnamed dragon killed by Ragnarr Loðbrók in *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, above those of the *Íslendingasögur*.⁷⁸ This, however, is a question of reception.

It is by no means certain that the *Bjarnar saga* author intended the dragon his compatriot faced to be any less terrible than those of myth. For all Fáfñir’s talking and eldritch agency, and for all Sigurðr’s careful planning, the mortal wounding is easily enacted and briefly described.⁷⁹ Björn is faced with a rather more difficult, urgent, and immediately dangerous proposition in his dragon. While it certainly cannot be argued that *Bjarnar saga* and *Völsunga saga* bring the same level of literary artistry to their dragons, for saga audiences there was meaning encoded in the appearance of a dragon no matter the depth of its description. A hero that slew a dragon was set apart as remarkable. While Ármann points to the wide dissemination of legends of Sigurðr and Ragnarr as evidence for the pre-eminence of their dragons and subsequent status as heroes, this wide dissemination also defines them as older tales than those of either Björn or Þórir.⁸⁰ The dragon-slayers Sigurðr and Ragnarr were well embedded within tradition and cultural memory by the time *Bjarnar saga* was put to text. Indeed, various stone carvings that survive from the Danelaw suggest that Sigurðr’s legend reached English shores long before Björn himself was purported to have arrived there.⁸¹ Sigurðr’s tale is also summarised in *Beowulf*, which many commentators currently date to the turn of the eighth century, and draws particular attention to the renown Sigurðr (here as Sigemund) gained from this act.⁸² In truth, Björn’s dragon is probably an example of explicit intertextuality, designed to access cultural memory and equate the Icelander with the heroes of the *fornaldarsögur* generally, and Sigurðr specifically.

⁷⁷ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Enter the Dragon’, pp. 37.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–40.

⁷⁹ *Völsunga saga* 18, ed. and trans. R.G. Finch (London: Nelson and sons, 1965), pp. 30–2.

⁸⁰ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Enter the Dragon’, pp. 38–9; Evans, ‘As Rare as they are Dire’, pp. 236–48 (especially pp. 239–40).

⁸¹ SS Halton (St. Wilfred) 01; Kirby Hill 02; York Minster 34.

⁸² *Beowulf* ll. 879–901, especially ll. 884–887; Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), p. 6.

It is, however, important to recall that the distinctions made between such ‘genres’ as *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* are fundamentally modern in origin. Ármann, for example, includes *Gull-Þóris saga* in his discussion of *Íslendingasögur* dragons, while Evans places it among the *fornaldarsögur*.⁸³ Any perceived dichotomy between the pseudo-realism of the *Íslendingasögur* and the folklorish element of the *fornaldarsögur* is at best illusory, speaking to the reception of saga texts rather than the intellectual milieu of their authorship. As Kathryn Hume highlights, the *Íslendingasögur* ‘focus on social conflict suits modern predilections in a way that giants and dragons do not’.⁸⁴ This is not to say that saga authors were unaware of the narrative conventions of the types of stories they were writing—whether regional tales of political intrigue or the lives of dimly remembered heroes of the pre-Christian world—but that they did not construe these conventions as exclusive. Thus, identifiable historical figures and events at times appear in the pages of the *fornaldarsögur*, just as a dragon may swoop in to harry a royal fleet in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The choice of a dragon as the figure of alterity in this moment is important and deliberate; how the dragon is understood shapes how England is perceived. Scholars studying monsters in the *Íslendingasögur* have theorised the difference between the familiar and unfamiliar ‘other’, the latter termed ‘fictional’ by Hume and ‘the strange’ by Rebecca Merkelbach.⁸⁵ For the familiar ‘other’, Hume points to relatable magics like weather changing and prophetic dreams, while Merkelbach points to ‘monstrous humans’ like those who partake of such magics or *berserkir*.⁸⁶ These fall inside a cultural frame of reference for Icelandic storytellers and their audiences and frequently manifest in the Icelandic landscape of the *Íslendingasögur*, even in those sagas adjudged to be exemplars of the genre or to have particular historical value. As Hume states, this sort of familiar alterity ‘cannot therefore be safely

⁸³ Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Enter the Dragon’, pp. 38–9; Evans, ‘As Rare as they are Dire’, p. 243.

⁸⁴ Kathryn Hume, ‘From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature’, *Studies in Philology* 77, no. 1 (1980), 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3; Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 13–20.

⁸⁶ Hume, ‘From Saga to Romance’, pp. 2–3; Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society*, pp. 14–15. Hume and Merkelbach differ on the matter of *draugr*/revenants based on their theoretical frameworks. While both agree that such ‘human monsters’ necessarily fall outside of experience, for Hume this makes *draugr* ‘fictional’, while for Merkelbach their origins as humans excludes some element of ‘the strange’.

distinguished from realism.⁸⁷ The unfamiliar ‘other’ can more safely be so distinguished and this type of ‘other’, among which dragons must be included, does not often appear on Icelandic shores. Both Björn and Þórir encounter their dragons in foreign lands: the former in England the latter in Finnmörk. At the end of his saga, Kormákr is killed by a giant in Scotland.⁸⁸ In *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, the brutal giant Brúsi and his mother are to be found in northern Norway and are there defeated by the Icelander Orm.⁸⁹ It is Þorstein Ketilsson’s slaying of yet another giant at the opening of *Vatnsdæla saga*, again in Norway, that establishes the fortunes of his Icelandic descendants.⁹⁰ One of the sons of Eiríkr *rauði* (the red) is killed by a one-legged creature, a *uniped*, in Vínland.⁹¹ Examples are plentiful and point to a geographical perception of monstrosity. Unfamiliar alterity is to be found in unfamiliar lands.

This split between the familiar and unfamiliar echoes and parallels the bipartite structure of the *skáldasögur*. At home, the *skáld* participate in familiar conflicts driven by societal, legal, feud and familial structures. In more exotic lands, the conflicts become more exotic: fighting in wars, contesting duels for kings, slaying dragons. These are foils to establish the *skáld*’s heroic credentials. This is the literary function of Björn’s dragon. Yet the dragon is also remarkable in its own right. It places Björn in the company of the dragon-slaying heroes of Germanic myth, men like Ragnarr and Sigurðr, though, as Ármann justifiably ventures, barely so.⁹² This touches on the point that Björn-as-dragon-slayer almost certainly enters cultural memory of the *skáld* when the saga was put to text. It is an authorial insertion. This is indicated by the absence of any reference to Björn’s legacy as such in his intertextual cameos. It is also insinuated by the dragon-slaying’s complete isolation within the text, an isolation that can also be extended to Knútr’s appearance. Björn’s time in Eiríkr’s court establishes the conflict that underlies the saga. His duel in Garðaríki gains Björn his sobriquet. Óláfr’s intervention provides temporary resolution to Björn and Þórðr’s dispute, and the former returns to Iceland with gifts from the king that appear at important narrative junctures.

⁸⁷ Hume, ‘From Saga to Romance’, p. 2.

⁸⁸ *Kormáks saga* 27.

⁸⁹ *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* 7–9, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *ÍF* XIII (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1991), pp. 409–18.

⁹⁰ *Vatnsdæla saga* 1–4.

⁹¹ *Eiríks saga rauða* 12, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *ÍF* IV (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1936), pp. 231–2.

⁹² Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Enter the Dragon’, pp. 37–8.

However, there is no apparent legacy within the text of Björn's two years at Knútr's court, which suggests it to be a late insertion, inauthentic to any ancestor tales of *Bjarnar saga*. The contrast with the cultural memory of Sigurðr, Old Norse-Icelandic literature's premier dragon slayer, could not be starker. The byname *Fáfnisbani* (Fáfnir's bane) accompanies Sigurðr's legacy, both throughout *Völsunga saga* and into the wider Norse (and Germanic) heroic tradition.⁹³ For Björn, there is no prestige forthcoming from his association with one of Scandinavia's foremost medieval kings, no renown attached to his defeat of a dragon.

One key effect of the author's introduction of the unfamiliar 'other' embodied by the dragon is that England is marked out as unfamiliar or alien. There is a comparison to be made here with the figure of alterity from Gunnlaugr's first visit to Æthelred's court, the *berserkr* Þórormr. While the *Gunnlaugs saga* author portrays England in greater detail than the *Bjarnar saga* author, and seems to have had a better grasp of his sources and historical context, this episode at Æthelred's court conforms to a number of intertextual archetypes.⁹⁴ The character of Þórormr is among these. *Berserkir* are familiar figures of alterity in the *Íslendingasögur*, appearing in Iceland and elsewhere in the Scandinavian world. They exist on a spectrum of alterity. Thus, for example, the Swedish *berserkir* brothers of *Eyrbyggja saga* are described as 'eigi í mannlegu eðli' (not human in nature) when in their rage, becoming animal-like and fearing neither weapons nor fire.⁹⁵ The group of Norwegian *berserkir* Grettir kills early in his travels, in turn, are equated with outlaws and perhaps better fit the definition of *víkingar*.⁹⁶ For their part, two of the Vatnsdal brothers are *berserkir* and treated sympathetically, as is the case with numerous ancestors of Icelandic families throughout the *Íslendingasögur*, including Egill's grandfather Kveld-Úlfr.⁹⁷ Gunnlaugr's *berserkr* is of the middle sort, also being named a *víkingr*, and is the only figure of alterity attached to Gunnlaugr's time in England.⁹⁸ The appearance of this familiar 'other', a *berserkr* with a Norse name, is one of those elements that provides the England of *Gunnlaugs saga* an essentially Scandinavian character.⁹⁹ It is familiar. This is also the sense of Egill's time in Æthelstan's company. Such representations of cultural compatibility

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33 (n. 2), 39; Evans, 'As Rare as they are Dire', pp. 231–5; *Völsunga saga* 42–3.

⁹⁴ See Chapter 7, pp. xxx

⁹⁵ *Eyrbyggja saga* 25, cf. *Vatnsdæla saga* 46.

⁹⁶ *Grettis saga* 19.

⁹⁷ *Egils saga* 27; *Vatnsdæla saga* 30, 33, 37.

⁹⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

⁹⁹ Chapter 1, pp. 33–5.

provide some insight into how entwined later Icelanders perceived Viking Age Anglo-Scandinavian societies to be. Yet the dragon of *Bjarnar saga* sits in contrast to this, defining England as unfamiliar and exotic.

Magnús Fjalldal argues that there is little to mark out these heroic interludes of the *Íslendingasögur* set in England as specifically English.¹⁰⁰ While this is a reductive position for the nuanced narratives of *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Egils saga*, it holds particularly true for *Bjarnar saga*. In truth, the *Bjarnar saga* author displays little knowledge of English culture, its political environment in the early eleventh-century, even of its people or geography. Were it not for the his identification of England by name, little in the saga narrative, not even the mention of Knútr, would recommend that setting. Only the saga's chronological framework might hint that Knútr would be found in England at this moment in Björn's biography. Yet this lack of differentiating detail is to the advantage of the author's narrative intent. The England of *Bjarnar saga* is not restricted by audience knowledge, whether its presumed absence or presence. Rather, it serves as a generic backdrop for the unfamiliar 'other' — whether kings or dragons, both absent from the Iceland of the sagas — a canvas on which the *skáld's* heroism can play out. This is fatal to *Bjarnar saga's* potential use as a record of historical Anglo-Icelandic cultural contact. This England is entirely a fabrication of the thirteenth century with nothing to suggest it preserves elements of the history or social contexts of Saga Age England. Yet the passage is not an amorphous insertion. It is anchored to history and embedded in the saga's chronology through the person of King Knútr.

There is no hint in *Bjarnar saga* of the scepticism that *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* bring to the reigns of certain North Sea rulers. Knútr and Óláfr are both accorded a degree of respect by the author and, by extension, the saga's participants. Eiríkr too is portrayed as a gracious lord, while Valdimarr, if somewhat unvalorous in service to the narrative, appears a wise and generous ruler in substance.¹⁰¹ Eiríkr and Valdimarr, however, are characters of the *Bjarnar þáttr* and their depictions must be attributed in some part to the *Óláfs saga* redactor. Knútr and Óláfr are authentic to the extant *Bjarnar saga* manuscript, where the author is somewhat less direct in his praise of the former than of the latter. This may reflect cultural memory of the

¹⁰⁰ Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 113–16.

¹⁰¹ *Bjarnar saga* 3–6.

political antagonisms between Knútr and Óláfr. While *Bjarnar saga* takes no sides, Björn's legacy is more directly tied to that of Óláfr than of Knútr. However, this also means that Óláfr takes a far more active role in the saga than Knútr, and the apparent preferential treatment of the Norwegian king may simply be an effect of his more extensive depiction in the text.

The brevity of the Knútr's portrayal in *Bjarnar saga* is, in fact, representative of the reality that Knútr is not well represented in the wider *Íslendingasögur* corpus. He is present as part of the historical landscape in several sagas, but *Bjarnar saga* is one of only two *Íslendingasögur* in which the king takes an active role. The other is the noted exchange of dialogue between Knútr and Oddi Grímsson in the closing chapter of *Ljósvetninga saga*, ending with a gift of silver to Oddi and his men.¹⁰² Both the reported dialogue and the timeline of its setting are implausible. These matters aside, the saga draws attention to an important aspect of royal reputation and representation in the *Íslendingasögur*. Good kingship was connected to generosity and with it an associated awareness of when it was due and the form and value it should take. *Ljósvetninga saga*, like *Bjarnar saga*, is employing the motif of the gift-giving king in its depiction of Knútr. In this case, Oddi actually identifies Knútr's gift as being too little, thereby forcing the king into gifting a greater amount. The association of dragons with greed and the hoarding of wealth may invite speculation as to whether a certain reputation for avarice accompanied Knútr's legacy in Icelandic cultural memory, but there is nothing in the depiction of the *Bjarnar saga* dragon to suggest such links. Perceived under-compensation is somewhat unusual (though it is also implied in Egill's approach to Æthelstan in the aftermath of Vinheiðr). Kingly gifts are normally seen as sufficient. Certainly, Björn makes no complaints about his reward from Knútr, just as Gunnlaugr appears to consider his gifts from Æthelred to be sufficient. *Gunnlaugs saga* in fact recounts an instance of the opposite problem arising when Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* (silk beard) (995–1042) suggests a comical over-compensation for Gunnlaugr's verse delivered at the Dublin court.¹⁰³

Bjarnar saga clearly places Knútr within the mould of the gift-giving king. His sole explicit act within the saga is the gifting of money and a longship to the Icelander. This is a

¹⁰² *Ljósvetninga saga* 31; Chapter 3, p. 119.

¹⁰³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

widely used topos of Germanic heroic literature and is common within *skáldasögur*.¹⁰⁴ In performing great deeds for a king, that king becomes indebted to the *skáld*. Egill accepts three arm rings, two chests of silver, a cloak, and a laden trading ship for his service to Æthelstan; Gunnlaugr receives an ornate cloak, six ounces gold ring, and a sword from Æthelred; Björn attains money and a longship for his dragon-slaying.¹⁰⁵ This is a further evocation of the heroic imagery of cultural memory by the *Bjarnar saga* author. The intertextual motif of the dragon combines with that of the gift-giving king to symbolise in Björn a heroism so great that even the renowned Knútr *inn ríki* is placed in his debt. In this way, the author creates in Knútr a foil.

Being then a literary construct, Knútr's representation in *Bjarnar saga* has a generic aspect. The saga gives no sense of his character or personality, framing him simply as a lord who would welcome and reward an Icelandic *skáld*—a characterisation which, in truth, does not run contrary to the historical record granted the quantity of skaldic verse that survives from his court. However, *Bjarnar saga* reduces Knútr to little more than a famous name, another canvas against which the *skáld's* heroism can play out. This is not to say that the saga's intention was to diminish the king. The respect the saga states was given Björn at Knútr's court could only be augmented by the king's own reputation as 'the Great'. It seems likely the saga eschews detailed description of Knútr and his reign as it presumes audience knowledge of his legacy. This in turn presupposes an understanding that an act of heroism in Knútr's service, and the subsequent awarding of lavish gifts, proved the exceptionalism of the *skáld*.

The passage certainly ensures there is little doubt as to Knútr's status and stature, even if his portrayal is limited. The text refers to Knútr as *konungr* (king) three times, introduces him in the first instance as *inn ríki*, grants him the agency to ensure Björn *fékk þar góða virðing* (received there great honour), and shows him to be a gracious and wealthy king.¹⁰⁶ This accords with Knútr's representations elsewhere in Scandinavian historiography.¹⁰⁷ The preservation of received reputation is also seen in the saga's treatment of King Óláfr. Óláfr was canonised at Trondheim within a year of his death and his cult had spread widely

¹⁰⁴ See for example: ASC A–D 937; *Beowulf* 1169–1172, 1484–1486; *Das Nibelungenlied* 162–164, 308, 684–686.

¹⁰⁵ *Bjarnar saga* 5; *Egils saga* 55, 64; *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Bjarnar saga* 5.

¹⁰⁷ See for example: Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga* 30–3, 158, 222–6; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* x.15.1, x.16.7, x.17.1

throughout Scandinavia by the Age of Saga Writing, with hundreds of churches dedicated to him.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the Norwegian king is introduced as *inn helgi* (the holy) and, when the author tells of circulating rumours of Óláfr's worthy kingship, it is asserted that this is *sem vert var* (as he deserved).¹⁰⁹ This is, again, foregrounding Bjørn's future interactions with the Norwegian king. While Óláfr's depiction in *Bjarnar saga* is more detailed than that of Knútr, the intent here is similar. The saga narrative is constructed to conform with cultural memory of Knútr and Óláfr's kingships, drawing upon a readily accessible and widely attested storehouse of experience.¹¹⁰ The effect is twofold. Firstly, it enhances the semblance of historicity for a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience, affirming a known narrative rather than subordinating it to authorial intent or sentiment. Secondly, Knútr and Óláfr's reputations augment Bjørn's own presumed greatness, both kings honouring the Icelander, recognising his worth and welcoming him into their courts.

Gunnlaugr and Egill do not enjoy the same sympathetic relationship with the Norwegian rulers of their day, though English kings are invariably treated with positivity. It can be presumed that cultural memory of these kings circulated in the thirteenth century, associated with memorialised events such as Brunanburh, artefacts like Æthelredian coins, and the skaldic compositions that survive from Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr's courts. For thirteenth-century Icelanders, increasingly in the orbit of the Norwegian kings, this memory may have been imbued a sense of political neutrality. This provided saga authors something of a blank canvas as far as English kings were concerned, and their characters could be shaped to aid a *skáld's* own character development. Thus, both Gunnlaugr and Egill are found serving as *hirðmenn* in the English court, and Bjørn's relationship with Knútr should be read as a similar arrangement. In this way, the English kings of the *Íslendingasögur* become exemplars of good kingship though, equally, such perceptions were already latent in those mnemonic verses, coins, and events that carried their legacies. While Knútr was, of course, also a Scandinavian king, his is a legacy very much tied to England, and the *Bjarnar saga* author

¹⁰⁸ Lindow, 'St Olaf and the Skalds', pp. 118-20.

¹⁰⁹ *Bjarnar saga* 6.

¹¹⁰ The legacies of Knútr as conqueror and Ólaf as pious were widely attested in Scandinavia and beyond at the start of the Age of Saga Writing, see for example: Adam Bremensis, *Gesta Hammaburgensis* 2.lix; ASC C-F 1016, 1030, D 1055; JW 1027, 1031; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum* x.16.2, x.17.1; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 15; William of Malmesbury, *G. Reg.* 181, 183.1.

ensures to locate him there, avoiding any problematic associations of his own time with Scandinavian lordship.

Granted that Scandinavians were frequent visitors to English shores through the eleventh century, and considering the trope of the peripatetic *skáld*, it is neither unusual nor unique that Björn attends the English court. Björn's heroism in saving Knútr is a clear example of the heroic Icelander in England, a motif also represented in *Egils saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga's* English episodes. However, the *Bjarnar saga* episode at Knútr's court almost certainly represents the invention, rather than transmission, of cultural memory. This does not, however, mean it is independent of cultural intertextual and memorial frameworks. The travel passages of *Bjarnar saga* do not suggest an unpractised author or functionally inferior saga. This is a carefully constructed and culturally coherent tale that demonstrates the author's synthesis and adaptation of intertextual and intermodal cultural memory.

The brief dragon fight of *Bjarnar saga* is a fourfold narrative construct that shows the author's use of historical frameworks, awareness of audience, and the narrative manifestation of social values and cultural memory. Firstly, it is historically grounded. The framework of Björn's travels can work within both historical and traditional chronologies, implying the saga author was accessing pre-existing textual or oral sources (or both). Secondly, it draws on the storehouse of experience to appeal to what was held to be history by its audience. Here Knútr's reputation is transmitted into a narrative adapted to accommodate that pre-existing legacy. Its treatment is characterised by brevity and the author presumes audience knowledge of Knútr's reputation. Literature encodes narrative with meaning intended for an audience, and the *Íslendingasögur* are no different: the burden of understanding is placed on the reader. This is also evident in the third element of the Knútr passage: the explicit intertextuality of the dragon and the gift-giving king. It was not the author's intent to disrupt the saga's historicity with long digressions into battles with legendary creatures or conversations with kings. These tropes are identifiable across Germanic heroic literature and were pervasive within the author's cultural milieu. They manifest Björn's heroic status. This raises the final element of the story. It was written for an audience of thirteenth-century Icelanders. It is a tale imbued with nostalgia for Saga Age heroes and Icelandic self-determination. England and Knútr are foils for Björn's heroism. They are well-constructed foils, rich in intertextuality and implied

meaning, but they preserve nothing of the history or social context of their setting. The England and the Knútr of *Bjarnar saga* are products of thirteenth-century Icelandic culture.

MEMORIES OF CULTURES: *GUNNLAUGS SAGA ORMSTUNGU* *

Gunnlaugs saga provides a particularly expansive example of the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*, embedded within it a remarkably detailed portrayal of English kingship. Its depiction of Æthelred's England is far more extensive than *Bjarnar saga's* depiction of Knútr's England and, moreover, the English interlude serves an active function within the narrative. The obligations that Æthelred places on Gunnlaugr delay him from returning to claim the hand of his intended bride. As such, while the bones of the interaction remain the same as *Bjarnar saga*, much greater detail is brought to the episode. This allows for a literary framework that underlies *skáldasögur* portrayals of the English court to be hypothesised. Further, unlike *Bjarnar saga*, the travel episodes of *Gunnlaugs saga* are intact. Thus, the Æthelred passages can be read within an authentic narrative context, and Gunnlaugr's interactions with the English king can be compared with the saga's portrayal of other northern European courts. Such analysis reveals the peripatetic *skáld* passages of *Gunnlaugs saga* to constitute a deliberate framework in which the saga author, through Gunnlaugr, establishes a hierarchy among North Sea rulers at the top of which is Æthelred. However, such a vaunted view of the English king may be more appropriately attributed to thirteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory than to authentic cultural attitudes at the turn of the eleventh century.

Much of *Gunnlaugs saga* is set beyond Icelandic shores, with Æthelred's court twice featuring in Gunnlaugr's early travels. These are richly drawn interludes that purport to offer a glimpse of direct interaction between an Icelander and an English king. Yet they must be read with scepticism, in part because of that very narrative granularity. While the names Gunnlaugr and Æthelred may have served alongside the passages' skaldic verses as mnemonic prompts for tales of interaction between the two men, the likelihood that this tradition extended to their extensively quoted dialogue is remote. Æthelred is just one of six North Sea lords depicted in Gunnlaugr's first period of journeying, each characterised in

* From section 6.2, this chapter and the research it contains has been published in a significantly revised form as, Matthew Firth, 'Æthelred II 'the Unready' and the Role of Kingship in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*', *The Court Historian*, 25, no. 1 (2020), 1–14. This article was also the recipient of the 2019 Society for Court Studies essay prize.

different ways, their exercise of lordship in each case unique. The saga author, conscious of his audience, infuses these rulers with commentary on kingly authority consistent with attitudes of his own time. But more than this, the narrative is aware of the literary space it inhabits. Manifest, explicit, and implicit intertextual links to the wider *Íslendingasögur* corpus are readily identifiable; from the naming of other sagas, to quoting episodes from them, to borrowing such episodes, to the shared conventions of the *skáldasögur* that are so evident in Gunnlaugr's travels and in the saga's portrayals of England and its king.

At its most basic level, *Gunnlaugs saga* can be divided into four sections centred on the *skáld's* biography: growing up in Iceland; voyaging to foreign courts and establishing a reputation; a return to Iceland that ignites the saga's central feud; voyaging from Iceland in pursuit of vengeance. This narrative structure parallels that of *Bjarnar saga* more closely than any other of the *skáldasögur*, only diverging in the last particular. Björn remained at home after returning from his travels, his feud with Þórðr playing out in Iceland, while Gunnlaugr and his rival Hrafn, duelling having been outlawed at the *alþingi*, take their feud overseas. In this, *Gunnlaugs saga* is more closely aligned with *Kormáks saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*, the protagonists of which take secondary trips abroad and meet their fates away from Iceland's shores.

The secondary travel episodes of the *skáldasögur* often involve return trips to familiar northern courts. Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld*, for example, served at Óláfr Tryggvason's Norwegian court during his first trip abroad and is subsequently an unlooked-for guest in Earl Eiríkr's Norwegian court in the aftermath of Óláfr's death.¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* tells that it was here that Gunnlaugr himself found Hallfreðr late in the summer of 1006, subsequently travelling back to Iceland with his fellow *skáld*.² In turn, Gunnlaugr returns to Eiríkr's court during his second voyage as he pursues his fatal duel with Hrafn. The English court, however, almost never attracts a visit in these secondary trips abroad. *Egils saga* alone places its protagonist back in England once having returned to Iceland, and the narrative complexity of that text precludes it from this basic four-part framework. In Gunnlaugr's case, he is not found again in Æthelred's company. Both of the *skáld's* visits to the English court occur in his initial three years abroad, before his return to Iceland. Moreover, though Gunnlaugr does return to

¹ *Hallfreðar saga* 11.

² *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

several courts that feature in his first journey, they are far less fully described on his second visit, the narrative of this journey focusing on the build-up to the climactic duel between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn. This expedition lacks that *Bildungsroman* element so integral to the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*, and this holds true more broadly of the *skáldasögur*, including *Egils saga*. It is the *skáld*'s first voyage which fulfils that motif. It is also the voyage in which interactions with foreign courts are most prominent and most detailed and, thus, where those values underlying the cultural memory of them are most readily perceived.

The intertextual relations between *Gunnlaugs saga* and other *Íslendingasögur* are important to understanding the text's composition and to identifying a date for the text's written composition. These are interrelated matters. If the Age of Saga Writing is understood to be divided by the Old Covenant of 1262, the Iceland in which *Gunnlaugs saga* was compiled informs the composition of the cultural memory it codifies. Most importantly, granted that the Old Covenant was concerned with the introduction of kingly overlordship to Iceland, the events of 1262 informed Icelandic attitudes to the institution of kingship.

Gunnlaugs saga is considered a comparatively late text, its authorship conventionally dated to around 1270–80.³ This is late within the context of the *skáldasögur* tradition, if not within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. It is the latest of Clunies Ross' 'core' *skáldasögur*, with *Bjarnar saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, and *Kormáks saga* (and *Egils saga*) all written at least fifty years earlier.⁴ This assessment of *Gunnlaugs saga* is at least partly adjudged by its overtly literary nature. It is, in many ways, an exemplar of the tropes that come together in the *skáldasögur* and instances of intertextuality abound. Events of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdæla saga* are recalled in the saga's early passages;⁵ later in the text, both *Njáls saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* are mentioned by name.⁶ More relevant are the text's connections to other *skáldasögur*. There are, as has been alluded to, significant links with *Hallfreðar saga*. These extend from minor details such as the two men being described in very similar terms—*mikill ok sterkr* (powerful and strong), *jarpur á hár* (chestnut of hair), *nefljótur* (ugly-nosed)—through to more substantial episodes.⁷ During his

³ *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. xxii; *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, pp. xlii–lv; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 115.

⁴ Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre', pp. 26, 32–5; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 114–5.

⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 5.

⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 12.

⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 4, cf. *Hallfreðar saga* 2

appearance in *Gunnlaugs saga*, in an example of manifest intertextuality, Hallfreðr recounts an episode also told in *Hallfreðar saga* in which he had his own conflict with Hrafn.⁸ The direction of this borrowing is not entirely clear, and Andersson argues that *Hallfreðar saga* took the episode from *Gunnlaugs saga*, therefore raising the possibility that *Gunnlaugs saga* was in fact an early text.⁹ However, this neglects to account for *Hallfreðar saga*'s transmission history. While the episode does appear more authentic to *Gunnlaugs saga*, Andersson passes over the fact that the version of *Hallfreðar saga* that includes this story is preserved in the fourteenth-century *Möðruvallabók* codex.¹⁰ Thus, while the *Hallfreðar saga* version of the episode may well borrow from *Gunnlaugs saga*, this may be a late interpolation. Certainly, it does not follow that *Gunnlaugs saga* must be an early text for the *Möðruvallabók Hallfreðar saga* to have drawn from it. This aside, the connections remain, and it is clear the *Gunnlaugs saga* author was conscious of the traditions surrounding Hallfreðr and incorporated them in his text.

The same can be said of Kormákr Ógmundarson. The shared *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse and the implausibility of its authentic attribution to Gunnlaugr have been noted.¹¹ Another parallel can be found observed in the sagas' duelling episodes. Gunnlaugr and Kormák both lose duels to 'the first wound' when their opponents' weapons break on their shields, the shards of which deal very slight injury to the hero.¹² These similarities do not feature as a part of Andersson's argument. He does, however, raise the connections between *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Egils saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*.¹³ The *Egils saga* author is aware of the tradition of Gunnlaugr and Hrafn's rivalry, referencing it twice in his text.¹⁴ In turn, *Gunnlaugs saga* twice borrows descriptions of the *Mýramenn* from *Egils saga*.¹⁵ In contrast, the parallels between *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* exist on the border of explicit and implicit intertextuality, being more of a structural nature. These analogues will be noted where they arise. However, while such connections are important to questions of where the saga fits within the wider

⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10, cf. *Hallfreðar saga* 11.

⁹ Andersson, 'The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr', pp. 38–9.

¹⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 25 (n. 3); Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar saga*', pp. 127, 136–7.

¹¹ Chapter 2, pp. 68–70.

¹² *Gunnlaugs saga* 11, cf. *Kormáks saga* 10.

¹³ Andersson, 'The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr', pp. 39–50.

¹⁴ *Egils saga* 82, 90.

¹⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 1, cf. *Egils saga* 82 (description of Þorsteinn Egilsson); *Gunnlaugs saga* 1, cf. *Egils saga* 90 (description of the *Mýramenn*).

Íslendingasögur corpus, they are not especially relevant to the saga's representations of England. The important point here is the sheer weight of the intertextuality in *Gunnlaugs saga*. It is implausible for *Gunnlaugs saga* to predate the earliest of the *Íslendingasögur*, implausible that it be at the origins of a network of intertextual contact rather than the beneficiary of such.

Ultimately, the degree of intertextuality evident in *Gunnlaugs saga*, the authorial familiarity with *skáldasögur* convention, traditional motifs and chronologies, all serve to recommend it as a late text.¹⁶ The author should be understood to be working within literary frameworks that were well-established by the time of his writing. This is exemplified by the constellation of fully formed intertextual motifs that characterise the narrative, including that of the peripatetic *skáld*. The passages relating Gunnlaugr's travels are no less deliberately constructed than any other part of the saga. The authorial portrayals of North Sea lordship, the individual depictions of each court Gunnlaugr visits, are imbued with commentary that is most readily understood if the saga is accepted as a post-1262 composition.

Gunnlaugs saga's late-thirteenth century composition, therefore, influences its narrative both through the political landscape of its authorship and the relative maturity of the *Íslendingasögur* as a 'genre'. This latter provides for something of a more overtly 'literary' text evident, as 6.2 posits, in a four-part 'English court trope' exemplified by Gunnlaugr's time in Æthelred's company. While intertextual conventions allow for this to be mapped onto *Bjarnar saga* and *Egils saga's* English court episodes, the tone of every *Íslendingasögur* varies: each saga's textual redactor shows his hand. The *Gunnlaugs saga* author is deliberate in his construction of the northern world at the turn of the eleventh century, and his locating of Æthelred's court within it. 6.3 puts forward the case that, interwoven in the trope of the peripatetic *skáld* in *Gunnlaugs saga*, is a ranking of verse-types. The verse-type that Gunnlaugr uses in his audiences with each ruler with whom he visits creates a theoretical hierarchy among them which responds to societal concerns in late thirteenth-century Iceland. The early travel passages of *Gunnlaugs saga* are, in many ways, products of the author's cultural and intellectual milieu, and Æthelred's court epitomises this. What historical elements its portrayal may preserve, as discussed in 6.4, are subordinated to authorial intent, to the

¹⁶ In support of the late dating of the text, see for example: *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, pp. xlii–lv; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 256–7; Phelpsstead, *An Introduction*, pp. 102–4.

adaptation and fabrication of cultural memory, and to intertextual *Íslendingasögur* topoi imbued with meaning for an audience in the Age of Saga Writing.

6.1 GUNNLAUGR'S TRAVELS

There is some sense to once again starting with a contextualising survey of the *skáld's* youth, departure from Iceland, and audiences in some of the Anglo-Scandinavian world's major courts. There is something fickle in Gunnlaugr's character that manifests from his first appearance in the saga. Indeed, the saga leads his introduction and description with the word *bráðger* (impetuous).¹⁷ This impetuosity is demonstrated in the first instance when, at the age of twelve, Gunnlaugr demands his father finance a trading voyage that he might *sjá sið annarra manna* (see the customs of other people)).¹⁸ This is, once again, an example of the motif of the twelve-year-old warrior embarking on his first journey that Jesch identifies.¹⁹ Here *Gunnlaugs saga's* comparatively late date of composition and abundant use of established topoi is again on display. *Gunnlaugs saga* does, however, subvert audience expectation of this trope, with Gunnlaugr's father rejecting the idea and chastising his son for his temerity. Such criticisms pursue Gunnlaugr in his attempts to obtain his desired betrothal to Helga *in fagra*, the granddaughter of Egill.

Upon his father declining to support his ambitions, Gunnlaugr flees to Borg, where he is welcomed by Þorsteinn Egilsson, with whom he studies law. It is here that he also meets Helga who, just as Oddný in *Bjarnar saga*, serves as the catalyst for the conflict between the *skáld* and his rival. However, unlike Þórðr, his analogue in *Bjarnar saga*, Hrafn is given no role during Gunnlaugr's Icelandic youth, being introduced to the story in the Swedish court once Gunnlaugr had already been abroad for some time. Nonetheless, Gunnlaugr, like Björn, departs Iceland voluntarily and, as in *Bjarnar saga*, in *Gunnlaugs saga* the tropes of the peripatetic *skáld* and the three-year betrothal coincide. Yet, while *Bjarnar saga* presents the desire for travel and renown and the desire for marriage as complementary pursuits, there is a tension between them in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Gunnlaugr lives between Borg with Þorsteinn and

¹⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 4; 'bráð-geðr' in Cleasby-Vigfusson, p. 77.

¹⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 4.

¹⁹ Jesch, 'Youth on the Prow', pp. 128–30.

his father's household in Gilsbakki up until his eighteenth birthday, at which time there is something he wants from each of the men. Approaching his father Illugi first, Gunnlaugr once again requests support for his travelling abroad which, this time, Illugi is prepared to grant. In a moment of manifest intertextuality, *Gunnlaugs saga* tells that Illugi purchased a half-share in a ship owned by Auðunn *festargramr*, known for his actions in *Laxdæla saga* which, the *Gunnlaugs saga* author states, had at this time yet to occur.²⁰ That Illugi is willing to go to this expense for Gunnlaugr reflects his assessment that his son has matured over the years. It is not an opinion shared by Þorsteinn.

Gunnlaugr wishes to be betrothed to Helga, and approaches Þorsteinn to arrange the matter. His overtures are rejected, Þorsteinn calling them *hégómi* (nonsense).²¹ Gunnlaugr resorts to insults, perhaps bearing out Þorsteinn's opinion of him. He begins by diminishing Þorsteinn's status, stating that his own father had been proved the greater man, before going on to deride Þorsteinn's greatest moment of personal heroism, suggesting it was only achieved through Egill's help. Both assertions are further examples of manifest intertextuality, the first referring to a remarkable court victory won by Illugi in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the second to Þorsteinn's own successful resolution of a land dispute in *Egils saga*.²² Finally, when Þorsteinn remains unmoved, it is Gunnlaugr who turns to his father for help. Illugi, having just arranged for Gunnlaugr's passage abroad, is less than impressed, calling his son an *óráðinn maður* (unsettled man). These exact words are echoed by Þorsteinn when approached by Illugi on Gunnlaugr's behalf and this unsettled nature persists throughout the *skáld's* life. There is no long service in the court of any given king, nor any settling down to a farmer's life as there was for Björn. Rather, Gunnlaugr's life from this moment until his death only seven years later is characterised by movement and frenetic activity. Wary of Gunnlaugr's nature, but also of damaging his relationship with Illugi, Þorsteinn agrees to an arrangement whereby Helga will wait three years for Gunnlaugr to return, but not be formally betrothed to him. This reserves Þorsteinn's right to unilaterally annul the agreement in the case of Gunnlaugr's late return or simply because, as Þorsteinn says, 'mér virðist eigi skapferði hans' (I do not like his

²⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 5, cf. *Laxdæla saga* 51.

²¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 5.

²² *Gunnlaugs saga* 5, cf. *Eyrbyggja saga* 17 and *Egils saga* 80–4.

temperament). Gunnlaugr's reception of this not entirely flattering arrangement is not recorded, but he nonetheless set out on his ship immediately once it had been agreed.

This is the context of Gunnlaugr's departure from Iceland and gives some sense of the *skáld's* legacy as recalled in thirteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory. This impetuosity is ubiquitous to the individual stories of his life that come together in the text. In part, this could be a simple product of Gunnlaugr's youth—the saga suggests he died at around twenty-six years of age. Sørensen, however, argues that Gunnlaugr's character is more of a literary construct than its attribution to collective memories of a troublesome young poet may imply.²³ He takes it as axiomatic that the manner of a saga character's introduction into a narrative represents the 'official point of view' of the saga author, a sort of summary of that character's nature in what is to follow.²⁴ While the point is too broad to be applied across the *Íslendingasögur* as 'a rule without exception', as Sørensen asserts, it is nonetheless an astute observation of Gunnlaugr and his character arc in *Gunnlaugs saga*.²⁵ Gunnlaugr is introduced as impetuous, is persistent in challenging societal expectations in his Icelandic youth, and carries this fractious attitude out into the world. This puts Gunnlaugr at odds with a number of the rulers whom he visits while abroad, but not all. Here again the taint of thirteenth-century political attitudes can be observed. Gunnlaugr's reception in the courts of those rulers of the northern world whom he visits, the respect he offers them and their perceptions of his behaviour, are imbued with commentary—authorial and societal. No two rulers conform to a single archetype, and each of their interactions with the Icelander requires examination. These serve as the historical and literary frameworks in which the saga situates Æthelred and provide parallel examples against which to examine its portrayal of the English court. Of course, all these audiences are framed by the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*, and some overview of Gunnlaugr's travels is required for their contextualisation.

Gunnlaugr's first port of call is the familiar court of Earl Eiríkr in Lade.²⁶ Eiríkr's centrality to Anglo-Scandinavian politics in the early eleventh century makes Gunnlaugr's

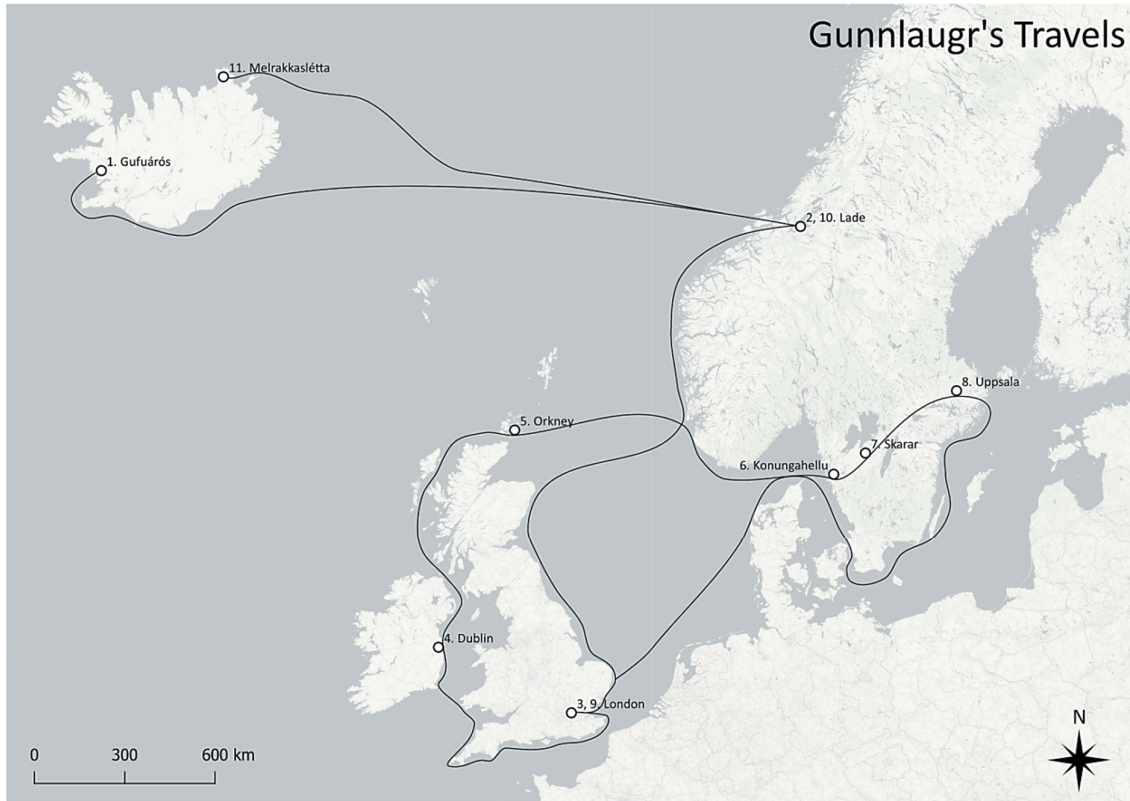
²³ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Individual and Social Values in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 60 (1988), 248–53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6.

appearance here unsurprising. However, though welcomed into the court, unlike his compatriot Björn, Gunnlaugr fails to make a good impression on the earl. The *skáld's* impetuosity and bravado get the best of him, this being the moment when Skúli Þorsteinsson advocates on Gunnlaugr's behalf, prevailing on Eiríkr to spare his life. Gunnlaugr moves on to England, finding Æthelred in London, speaking his verse for the king, fighting the *berserkr*, and departing well-rewarded and in friendship.²⁷



Map 9: Gunnlaugr's travels in northern Europe per Gunnlaugs saga's chronology (M. Firth).

From England, Gunnlaugr goes on to attend courts that have not been touched on previously, but that sit firmly in the Scandinavian world of the Viking Age. The first of these is that of Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* in Dublin.²⁸ Dublin had been founded by vikings around a century before *Gunnlaugs saga's* setting and was ruled by the Hiberno-Norse Uí Ímair dynasty. A cultural continuity with Scandinavia persisted into the eleventh century and Dublin served as a hub

²⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

²⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

for Scandinavian trade, settlement, and exploration in the region.²⁹ Gunnlaugr arrives early in Sigtryggr's long reign, a fact perhaps reflected in the king's ignorance as to how best reward Gunnlaugr for his service.³⁰ From Dublin, Gunnlaugr presses on to Orkney, another region of Scandinavian settlement, then under the rule of Earl Sigurðr Hloðvisson (c.991–1014). Sigurðr, known as *inn digri* (the stout), is a widely attested historical figure in the *Íslendingasögur*, and the *Gunnlaugs saga* author states that 'hann var vel til íslenskra manna' (he was good to Icelanders).³¹ Following a typical poem-gift exchange with this Sigurðr, Gunnlaugr travels to visit a different Earl Sigurðr at Skara in the modern Swedish province of Västergötland. While this Earl Sigurðr is otherwise unknown in the historical record, Gunnlaugr's visit to Skara can be placed within a working historical chronology tied to the internal evidence of the saga:

1002	Gunnlaugr at Eiríkr's court
1002–03	Gunnlaugr at Æthelred's court
1003	Gunnlaugr in Dublin and Orkney
1003–04	Gunnlaugr in Skara
1004	Gunnlaugr and Hrafn at Óláfr's court (Sweden)
1004–06	Gunnlaugr at Æthelred's court
1006	Gunnlaugr returns to Iceland ³²

Gunnlaugr spends the winter in Skara, joining the Yule festivities at Sigurðr's court alongside some men of Eiríkr's court. Surprisingly, this does not give rise to any conflict directly connected to Gunnlaugr's previous behaviour, and circumstances arise that allow Gunnlaugr

²⁹ Anne-Christine Larsen and Steffen Stummann Hansen, 'Viking Ireland and the Scandinavian Communities in the North Atlantic', in *The Vikings in Ireland*, ed. by Anne-Christine Larsen (Roskilde: The Viking Ship Museum, 2001), pp. 120–2; John Sheehan, 'Social and Economic Integration in Viking Age Ireland: The Evidence of the Hoards', in *Land, Sea and Home*, ed. by John Hines, Alan Lane and Mark Redknap (Leeds: Maney, 2004), pp. 182–5; Mary A. Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008) pp. 48–56, 63–4, 82–3. For an overview of Scandinavian settlement in Ireland and its ongoing effects, see Charles Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland: a Review', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. by Howard B. Clarke, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ragnall Ó Floinn (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 288–330.

³⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² After *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jonson, p. lix.

to compose and perform a verse praising Eiríkr, foregrounding reconciliation and a return to Norway. However, the next stop on Gunnlaugr's itinerary is Sweden and the court of Óláfr *sónski* (the Swede) (c.995–1022).³³ The *Íslendingasögur* do not often centre Sweden in their narratives or locate important events there, but in *Gunnlaugs saga* the Swedish court is the backdrop for the origins of the saga's central feud. This is where Hrafn enters the narrative, already established in Óláfr's court, though not yet a *hirðmaðr*. It is of note that both men are listed in *Skáldatal* as having served as court poets to Óláfr.³⁴ In the Swedish court, Gunnlaugr's impetuosity is once more on display. In effect, Gunnlaugr seeks to usurp Hrafn as the premier *skáld* of Óláfr's court. This is despite Hrafn having already insinuated himself into Óláfr's company prior to Gunnlaugr's arrival, and it being Hrafn's initial advocacy for his compatriot that ensured that Óláfr was kindly disposed toward the newly arrived Icelander. While the saga tells that Hrafn and Gunnlaugr subsequently became friends, conflict arises when Gunnlaugr claims before King Óláfr to hold superior status to Hrafn. This decides Hrafn on his path of vengeance, and the saga narrative shifts attention to him at this point. He has his own usurpation in mind: the displacement of Gunnlaugr as Helga's intended. So it is that, laden with gifts from Óláfr, Hrafn returns to Iceland and seeks out his powerful kinsman Skafti *lögmaður* (law-speaker) to serve as intermediary in negotiations for Helga's hand. While Þorsteinn insists on waiting until the end of the negotiated three years, the time expires without any sign of Gunnlaugr's return.

Back in Sweden and in time, Gunnlaugr has departed Óláfr's court with his own gifts from the Swedish king, but unaware of Hrafn's designs.³⁵ His destination is, once more, Æthelred's court. This second visit had been foreshadowed in the first, Æthelred having extracted a promise from the *skáld* to return to England. Both this desire for Gunnlaugr's service and the fickle *skáld*'s willingness to adhere to this promise when he has otherwise proved himself so inconsistent, speaks to Æthelred's characterisation in the saga. Here is a good lord, worthy of service and willing to reward it. In his first visit, Gunnlaugr was rewarded with a cloak for his verse, a sword for his duel, and a gold arm ring on his departure. This sits in contrast with Gunnlaugr's fraught experience at Óláfr's court, where he was given

³³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 9.

³⁴ *Skáldatal*, pp. 100–1.

³⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

no reward for his verse, only unspecified gifts upon his departure. Apart from material reward, however, England was the place where Gunnlaugr had made his name. On his duel with the *berserkr*, the saga states ‘af þessu fékk hann mikla frægð í Englandi og víða annars staðar’ (for this he gained great fame in England and elsewhere).³⁶ No other place in his travels provides Gunnlaugr this platform for heroism. Moreover, the narrative framing of the *berserkr* episode suggests that Æthelred may not simply have *wanted* a man like Gunnlaugr in his retinue, but may have *needed* one. No other man of his court was willing or able to challenge Þórormr; here Gunnlaugr finds no rival for the king’s attention like there was in the Swedish court. It can well be imagined that Gunnlaugr travelled back to England in the anticipation of yet more fame and more wealth.

Despite Gunnlaugr’s likely expectation of a warm welcome in Æthelred’s court, his decision to return to England is a fateful one. Fearful that Knútr—here again named *inn ríki*—is set to invade, Æthelred insists that Gunnlaugr remain to defend the kingdom. As in *Bjarnar saga*, Knútr’s reign is misdated, a threatened invasion by the Danish prince in 1004 being too early for a historical chronology. Nonetheless, the invasion does not manifest, and Gunnlaugr is finally granted permission to depart. However, Gunnlaugr’s window to return to Iceland has passed. He travels first to Lade before attempting the journey to Iceland over open ocean. There he is welcomed by Eiríkr, having been restored to the earl’s favour through the intervention of Sigurðr in Skara and reports of Gunnlaugr’s panegyric spoken at Sigurðr’s Yule festivities having reached Eiríkr’s ears. This does not, however, change the fact that Gunnlaugr has reached Norway in late summer, long after any Norwegian ships intending to travel to, and trade in, Iceland had already departed. This is when Gunnlaugr finds out that his fellow *skáldasögur* protagonist Hallfreðr is waiting offshore, preparing his own return journey to Iceland. Eiríkr has Gunnlaugr taken out to Hallfreðr’s ship and there Hallfreðr tells him of Hrafn’s engagement to Helga.³⁷ Unlike Björn, Gunnlaugr does not interpret this as a reason to impose exile upon himself. Perhaps this is because, to Hallfreðr’s knowledge, Hrafn and Helga are betrothed only, not yet married. And so it is that the two *skáld* depart for

³⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

³⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10, cf. *Hallfreðar saga* 11.

Iceland—too late, as it turns out, to stop Hrafn from wedding Helga—but nonetheless bringing Gunnlaugr’s youthful travels to a close.

6.2 THE SKÁLD IN LITERARY FRAMEWORKS

Gunnlaugs saga does not treat the motif of the peripatetic *skáld* with great subtlety. Rather, it seeks to insert Gunnlaugr into as many noble courts of Northern Europe as the narrative could accommodate. However, the account of Gunnlaugr’s travels is also deliberately constructed, rich in intertextual connections and aware of the historical and literary traditions within which it works. Included among these is what is here termed the ‘English court trope’, a narrative framework of Anglo-Icelandic interaction with archetypal characteristics that are particularly explicit in *Gunnlaugs saga*, but only demonstrable in reference to the parallel episodes of *Bjarnar saga* and *Egils saga*. These commonalities emphasise the literary nature of the texts and, in truth, to a degree further undermine any potential value the *skáldasögur* have as sources of English history. In the first instance, however, the English court trope is best understood as an element of, or subset within, the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*. In the case of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the framework of Gunnlaugr’s travels is explicitly outlined in the saga text when Gunnlaugr speaks a verse to Æthelred in their parting at the end of his first visit:

<i>Koma skal eg vist að vitja</i>	I shall come to visit the courts
<i>vígsdöglinga þriggja,</i>	of three princes of land,
<i>því hef eg hlutvöndum heitið,</i>	as I have promised to men,
<i>hjarls ok tveggja jarla.³⁸</i>	and two earls.

The kenning translated as ‘princes of land’ should be understood as ‘kings’, while the reference to earls is transparent in its meaning. Gunnlaugr intends to visit three kings and two earls (though by this stage of the narrative has in fact already visited one of each—Eiríkr and Æthelred). Questions need to be raised around the authenticity of this verse, or rather what medium it is authentic to: the saga text, or the tradition it codifies. Was it a composition of Gunnlaugr’s time that served a mnemonic function, thus preserving the narrative of his

³⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7 (st. 5). Verse translation drawn from *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 17.

courtly audiences? Or was it composed in later centuries to accompany (and legitimise) the saga narrative?

Gunnlaugr exceeds his quota of three kings and two earls, in each instance speaking a verse to praise the ruler of the court at which he attends. To summarise the story narrated above, Gunnlaugr visits the royal courts of Æthelred in London, Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* in Dublin, and Óláfr *sónski* in Uppsala.³⁹ He also attends the proxy royal court of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson in Lade, and the courts of Earl Sigurðr Hloðviðsson of Orkney and Earl Sigurðr of Västergötland.⁴⁰ The latter is of interest here due to the earl's primarily literary function. As noted, he is not elsewhere attested and seems not to have left a mark in Scandinavian cultural memory outside of *Gunnlaugs saga* where he primarily serves to provide a foil by which Earl Eiríkr is reintroduced to the narrative in a more magnanimous capacity. This Sigurðr may in fact be authorial invention, designed to provide a prose framing narrative which allows the contextual insertion of a pre-existing skaldic verse attributed to Gunnlaugr that praises both an unnamed earl and Eiríkr.⁴¹ This is the panegyric that makes its way back to Eiríkr's ears:

<i>Segið ér frá jarli,</i>	You speak of this earl,
<i>oddfeimu stafir, þeima,</i>	staves of the spear-woman;
<i>hann hefir litnar hávar,</i>	the old man is white-haired,
<i>hár karl er sá, bárur.</i>	but has looked on tall waves.
<i>Sigreynir hefir sénar</i>	Yet, the warrior Eiríkr has seen
<i>sjálfr í miklu gjálfri</i>	himself the great tempest,
<i>austur fyrir unnar hesti</i>	before his sea-stallion
<i>Eiríkr bláar fleiri.</i> ⁴²	more blue breakers.

Problematically, as Kari Ellen Gade has convincingly demonstrated, nearly all the poetry contained in *Gunnlaugs saga* postdates his life, being the compositions of later *skálds*.⁴³

³⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6-9.

⁴⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

⁴¹ P.G. Foote, 'Introduction,' in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu – The Story of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue*, trans. R. Quirk, ed. P. G. Foote (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), p. xv.

⁴² *Gunnlaugs saga* 8 (st. 9). Verse translation adapted from *Gunnlaugs saga* 8, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 20.

⁴³ Kari Ellen Gade, 'The Dating and Attributions of Verses in the Skald Sagas', in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. by Russell Poole (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001), pp. 71-7

Importantly, however, Gade also assesses that the stanzas of *Gunnlaugs saga* cannot date as late as the saga's thirteenth-century composition.⁴⁴ As such, the poetry of *Gunnlaugs saga* enters Icelandic cultural memory between the *skáld's* lifetime and the saga's recording of his life. Precisely when the stanzas became associated with cultural memory of Gunnlaugr in those intervening centuries is, unfortunately, unrecoverable.

Nonetheless, the relationship displayed between the saga prose, the verse Gunnlaugr speaks at Æthelred's court describing his intended travels, and the panegyric spoken at Skara, suggests that the saga author understood the poetry he was attributing to the *skáld* to be authentic. The author was working from pre-existing narrative frameworks, altering them to varying degrees of success in order to include such material relating to Gunnlaugr to which he had access.⁴⁵ So, on the one hand, Earl Sigurðr may have been invented to fulfill the role of the unnamed earl in the first part of the praise verse for Eiríkr, the location of Skara suggested to the author by the chronology of Gunnlaugr's travels between the courts of known historical figures. On the other hand, Earl Sigurðr's inclusion in Gunnlaugr's travel narrative belies the *skáld's* declaration to Æthelred that he would visit three kings and two earls. This statement can only be held to be true when it is considered alongside the saga's historically attestable figures. Thus, the author's attempts to resolve one verse held to be Gunnlaugr's with the received narrative of the *skáld's* biography has given rise to anomalies in how another verse relates to that story. Nonetheless, similar to *Bjarnar saga*, despite any chronological irregularities, in as far as Gunnlaugr's visits to verifiable foreign courts are concerned, the saga author has provided a collection of kings and earls whose reigns do coincide.

It is worth taking a moment to recognise the author's efforts to provide the saga a veneer of historicity, an aspect of *Gunnlaugs saga* that is in many ways more complex and more deftly handled than in *Bjarnar saga*. *Gunnlaugs saga* includes a larger array of northern courts, described within a tighter time frame, and situates Gunnlaugr's travels within a historical chronology that requires little adaptation or calibration (Æthelred's anachronistic fear of invasion by Knútr in 1004 aside). So it is that Poole, correlating the verse fragments of the saga's travel passages with Gunnlaugr's corresponding court affiliations in *Skáldatal*, asserts

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴⁵ Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar saga*', p. 165.

that, 'there is no reason in principle to doubt that [Gunnlaugr's] career in fact took place.'⁴⁶ It is a statement that accepts a historical basis for Gunnlaugr, the Icelandic court poet, yet stops far short of accepting the authenticity of the narrative. Indeed, Poole notes several problematic elements in the saga's construction, the most obvious of these being the aforementioned shared *Gunnlaugs saga-Kormáks saga* verse.⁴⁷ However, Poole highlights a rather more subtle problem in the author's prosimetrum recounting Gunnlaugr's delay at Æthelred's court from the winter of 1004.⁴⁸ In the course of the narrative, the prose account of this time has Gunnlaugr lingering idle at the English court, obedient to Æthelred's request to stay and prepare for a Danish invasion that never eventuates.⁴⁹ Yet a verse the *skáld* later speaks makes the unsupported assertion that his delay was driven by his involvement in battle on Æthelred's behalf.⁵⁰ This, Gunnlaugr's second visit to Æthelred, is of particular importance to this discussion. Whether or not Gunnlaugr drew his sword in anger, his willing compliance with Æthelred's commands portrays a respect not necessarily granted to other authority figures throughout the saga. The English king is treated as distinct from kings and earls with more direct Scandinavian links.

While Poole attributes the variant prose and verse accounts of Gunnlaugr's second visit to the English court to 'divergent developments of tradition,' it is important to bear in mind the fundamentally literary nature of the text.⁵¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* should be seen as a carefully structured story in which the author adapts the traditions and sources available to him, not merely compiles a loosely connected repository of collected oral lore relating Gunnlaugr's adventures. This is the approach to *Gunnlaugs saga* recommended by Robert Cook, who implores critics to ensure that 'historical criticism ... is also responsive to the artistic integrity of the text.'⁵² It is with this in mind that Cook highlights the context of Gunnlaugr's verse relating his second visit to Æthelred.⁵³ This stanza is directed to Hrafn and has the sense

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161; *Skáldatal*, pp. 100–1, 110–1, 114–5 lists Gunnlaugr as having served in the courts of Eirík, Æthelred and Óláfr.

⁴⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11 (st. 20), cf. *Kormáks saga* 3. See chapter 2, pp. 68–70 and above p. 198.

⁴⁸ Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose,' p. 163.

⁴⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

⁵⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11 (st. 16).

⁵¹ Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose,' p. 163.

⁵² Robert G. Cook, 'The Character of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue,' *Scandinavian Studies* 31 (no. 1, 1971), p.1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–4.

of a deliberate and boastful misrepresentation of events by the *skáld* which, in turn, implies a rather more carefully structured narrative and practiced authorial hand than Poole allows. The disconnect between the reality of Gunnlaugr's time in Æthelred's court and his verse representation of it is deliberate. As Jónas Kristjánsson argues, identifying many of the same structural inconsistencies as Poole, the tension between the prose and the verse elements of the saga derives from the author's construction of prose around verses he believed to be authentic.⁵⁴ This is the same process observed in the inclusion or invention of Earl Sigurðr as a method of reconciling the verse spoken in the court at Skara with Gunnlaugr's biography.

Certainly, the author appears to have had a significant narrative tradition relating Gunnlaugr's adventures to draw on and conciliate, with narrative, verse, and characters attested in various texts. *Skáldatal* lists Gunnlaugr and Hrafn as both having served Earl Eiríkr as well as King Óláfr, the names of both *skáld* are noted in connection with their families several times in *Landnámabók*.⁵⁵ *Egils saga* provides a more direct link to *Gunnlaugs saga* in its identification of Egill's granddaughter as the same Helga over whom Gunnlaugr and Hrafn had fought.⁵⁶ In written form, *Egils saga* predates *Gunnlaugs saga*. Perhaps most interesting, however, is the inclusion of four lines of verse in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* that he attributes to Gunnlaugr's authorship; these lines are identical to the first four lines of verse 19 in *Gunnlaugs saga*.⁵⁷ Poole suggests its attribution to the *skáld* is implausible, that the verse had become attached to prevalent cultural memory of Gunnlaugr in the century between his death and Snorri's authorship of *Skáldskaparmál*.⁵⁸ Like *Egils saga*, the composition of *Skáldskaparmál* predates *Gunnlaugs saga* by some fifty or so years. This then points to an earlier tradition preserving something of Gunnlaugr's story, or at least which understood that something of Gunnlaugr's story had been preserved. This reiterates Jónas' point: the *Gunnlaugs saga* author likely believed himself to possess authentic sources relating Gunnlaugr's life, mnemonic skaldic verse attributed to his authorship prominent among them. However, the saga author did not merely fabricate a prose narrative around these sources. He synthesised and

⁵⁴ Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 284.

⁵⁵ *Landnámabók*, S15, H15, H34, S46, H140, S174 (Gunnlaugr), S75, H320, S365 (Hrafn); *Skáldatal*, pp. 100–1, 110–1.

⁵⁶ *Egils saga* 81.

⁵⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 11 (st. 19), cf. *Skáldskaparmál* st. 202.

⁵⁸ Poole, 'Relation between Verses and Prose,' p. 162.

normalised various traditions of Gunnlaugr's life and he adapted them to the wider cultural memory of the Saga Age in his own time. In short, he sought to create meaning for his audience. In this process, the author imbued the Saga Age setting of the narrative with the values and nostalgia of the Age of Saga Writing.

It is critical that depictions of Saga Age kingship in *Gunnlaugs saga* be analysed through the lens of its post-1262 composition. If the portrayal of Æthelred's court and kingship in *Gunnlaugs saga* are indeed deliberate authorial constructs, as argued here, then the author's cultural milieu is central to the characterisation of the king. These are the layers of later interpretation that are most accessible, the codified sensibilities of late thirteenth-century Icelanders being relatively less difficult to identify than those introduced in the saga narrative's transmission over earlier centuries. As the saga's final redactor, the *Gunnlaugs saga* author's editorial choices, his imposition of narrative order on the disparate sources of Gunnlaugr's life, loom large in shaping the literary structures and cultural frameworks that underlie the saga's representations of lordship in the northern world of the Saga Age.

The historical setting for the primary narrative of *Gunnlaugs saga*, based on its internal chronology, can be placed between the years 984 and 1009. It is worth recalling that, for the Christian Icelanders of the Age of Saga Writing, cultural memory of Iceland in this period was critical to cultural identity. It linked them to their pagan ancestors who had first settled the island, to the decision at the *alþingi* in the year 1000 to convert to Christianity, and to a unique self-determining governmental system that rejected kingship as an institution. This was also, of course, an idealised vision of the past. The decision of the *alþingi* to formally accept Christianity as Iceland's religion, for example, was one made under pressure from the Norwegian King Óláfr Tryggvason.⁵⁹ Iceland's perceived independence from external political forces during the Saga Age is only relative to the political spectre of the Norwegian kings of the Age of Saga Writing. Nonetheless, in the context of Iceland's fractious thirteenth-century political landscape, both before and after the Old Covenant, a cultural nostalgia for an era of perceived autonomy and self-determination is understandable. So too is a cultural anxiety around kingship. *Gunnlaugs saga* serves as an ideal case study for the expression of

⁵⁹ Jenny Jochens, 'Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion through Arbitration in 1000,' *Speculum* 74 (no. 3, 1999), pp. 644–66.

these anxieties such as they manifest in the *Íslendingasögur*. The abundance of kings and lords that feature in Gunnlaugr's travels introduce a degree of nuance to, and point to a degree of variation within, those sensibilities. It is not that the author simply imbues *Gunnlaugs saga's* early eleventh-century rulers with thirteenth-century Icelandic ideologies of kingship, but that he relates cultural perceptions of each foreign court Gunnlaugr visits.

It is not surprising to find Gunnlaugr in the presence of the English king. The strong political and cultural affiliation between England and Scandinavia, the theoretical prominence of Æthelred in the Scandinavian storehouse of experience, the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*, and the literary parallels of *Egils saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, all combine to make Gunnlaugr's attendance at the English court almost unremarkable. The details of Gunnlaugr's time in Æthelred's company are, likewise, in some ways unremarkable or even mundane, especially when compared to Egill and Björn's adventures. There are no mythical beasts or legendary battles here to make the narrative especially extraordinary.

However, when differentiating details are stripped from their narratives, a clear inter-textual framework becomes apparent across all the three portrayals of Icelanders interacting with English kings: the English court trope. First, the *skáld* journeys to the English court and is granted direct access to the king. Second, the king is faced with a challenge he is unable to surmount without the Icelander's aid. Third, the Icelander proves himself equal to the task and places the king in a position of indebtedness. Finally, the king performs in the role of the gift-giver, providing the *skáld* reward for his deeds. All four of these story elements have already been observed playing out in *Bjarnar saga*, more than once in fact. While Björn's adventure at Knútr's court quite obviously fits this mould, its brevity already doing much to strip away differentiating detail, his time at Valdimarr's court in Garðaríki is a more exact parallel with the formula as observed in Gunnlaugr's first visit to Æthelred's court. Both *skáld* enter a king's court threatened by a feared warrior, find the king's men unequal to the task, duel the champion and win, and are rewarded with a sword for the heroics.⁶⁰ There are differences of course: Valdimarr's rival is threatening to seize the kingship, Björn is wounded almost to death, and he is also rewarded with the armour of his vanquished foe.⁶¹ The stakes

⁶⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, cf. *Bjarnar saga* 3.

⁶¹ *Bjarnar saga* 3.

are of a magnitude less consequential in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Valdimarr's court is, of course, not an English one, yet the parallel constructions of kingship are clear. What Valdimarr and Æthelred have in common, is a remoteness from Iceland, no reputation for interfering in regional politics. This sits alongside, and informs, the positive reputation Æthelred seems to have enjoyed in Scandinavian cultural memory in the Age of Saga Writing and, therefore, his characterisation in *Gunnlaugs saga*.

6.3 THE SKÁLD AS POET: THE HIERARCHIES OF VERSE

Æthelred's portrayal in *Gunnlaugs saga* warrants especial consideration for what it may reveal of the tension between historicity and cultural memory in the *Íslendingasögur*. *Gunnlaugs saga* adheres closely to the first component of the English court trope with little deviation, and the *skáld* is apparently granted direct access to the king upon arriving in London. This, his first visit to the English court, occurs early in his three years of travelling, Gunnlaugr having only visited the court of Earl Eiríkr before that of the English King.

Gunnlaugr gekk bráðliga fyrir konung ok kvaddi hann vel ok virðuliga. Konungr spyrr hvaðan af lǫndum hann væri. Gunnlaugr segir sem var, 'en því hefi ek sótt á yðvarn fund, herra, at ek hefi kvæði ort um yðr ok vilda ek at þér hlýddið kvæðinu.'

Konungr kvað svá vera skyldu. Gunnlaugr flutti fram kvæðit vel ok sköruliga, en þetta er stefit í:

(Gunnlaugr immediately went into the king's presence and greeted him well and with respect; the king asked him from what land he came, and Gunnlaugr told him. [He then said], "And I have sought this meeting with you, my lord, for I have composed a poem about you, and I wish you to hear it." The king said he was bound to do so. Gunnlaugr performed the poem well and confidently, and this is the refrain:)⁶²

Herr sésk allr við ǫrva

Englands sem goð þengil;

ætt lýtr grams og gumna

All the host stands in awe of the generous
prince of England as of God;
the race of the war-swift king

⁶² The passage is quoted in full in chapter 1, p. 31.

gunnbráðs Aðalráði.

and all the race of men bow to Æthelred.⁶³

Konungur þakkaði honum kvæðið ok gaf honum að bragarlaunum skarlatsskikkju skinndregna hinum bestum skinnnum og hlaðbúna í skaut niður ok gerði hann hirðmaðr sinn. Og var Gunnlaugur með konungi um veturinn og virðist vel.⁶⁴

(The king thanked him for the poem, and as a reward gave him a scarlet fur-lined cloak of the best cloth lined with excellent furs and with an embroidered border down to the hem. He also made him one of his *hirðmaðr*, and Gunnlaugr stayed with the king for the winter and was thought well of.)

Much of the characterisation of Æthelred as king in *Gunnlaugs saga* is dependent upon how the relationship between the Icelandic poet and the English king is read in this passage. It is an interaction that is at once conventional of the literature and unconventional in its portrayal of Æthelred. Despite the outcomes of Gunnlaugr's royal or noble audiences varying greatly in line with either the received narrative or authorial perception, there is a degree of conformity to Gunnlaugr's introductions into court. His arrival in England and initial audience with Æthelred are no different. Gunnlaugr's praise verse upon entering the king's court is not remarkable as an act, no matter how remarkable the description of Æthelred as *gunnbráðs* (war-swift, or dauntless) among other superlatives may be. It is a verse unashamed of hyperbole and intended to flatter, a highly structured composition in *dróttkvætt* metre.⁶⁵ This is, once again, that verse that commentators have homed in on as potential evidence of ongoing English exposure to Old Norse poetic traditions, and perhaps even of Old English-Old Norse mutual intelligibility.⁶⁶ It is clear from the surrounding prose that Æthelred comprehended the verse, recognising the complementary nature of its content and form. While the technical construction of *dróttkvætt* and other poetic measures are of limited interest to this discussion, how they are used in Gunnlaugr's introductions to the Anglo-Scandinavian courts he visits have great importance to how the saga is read. In this it is critical to remain

⁶³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7 (st. 3). Verse translation drawn from *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 15. See also chapter 3, p. 117.

⁶⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6–7.

⁶⁵ On the composition of *dróttkvætt*, see Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 21–3.

⁶⁶ Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 3–11; Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 150–3; Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry', pp. 351, 356; Chapter 3, pp. 104–08.

aware of the intrusion of the author on the narrative. Here Æthelred is explicitly introduced as *góðr höfðing* (a good prince), and the passage is formulated in order to allow the English king to perform that role in a manner recognisable to an Icelandic audience. By welcoming the travelling poet without hesitation and both recognising and responding appropriately to the *dróttkvætt* stanza, Æthelred becomes a foil for Gunnlaugr's own positive traits as he is demonstrated to be a man worthy of the admiration of a good king.

The relationship established between Æthelred and Gunnlaugr through their initial interaction sits in contrast to the Icelander's experiences with the rulers of Scandinavian courts. How Gunnlaugr approaches his invariable audience in every noble court he attends speaks to both his troublesome nature (represented in his sobriquet *ormstunga* [serpent-tongue]) and to a thorough awareness of the status of the person for whom he is composing poetry. He does not always speak a *dróttkvætt* verse. In his first visit to a noble court, that of Earl Eiríkr, Gunnlaugr in fact composes no verse for the Earl. In this episode, much is made of Gunnlaugr's youth and apparent naivety and, upon arrival, Gunnlaugr joins together with the travellers with whom he had arrived in greeting Eiríkr *vel* (well).⁶⁷ However, he is notably brash when personally addressed by the earl and displays a bravado in dealing with the Norwegian ruler that may have appealed to a thirteenth-century Icelandic audience. The only verse Gunnlaugr speaks in Eiríkr's court is to a *hirðmaðr* who challenged the Icelander's attitude, and this is a *kviðlingr* (insult verse).⁶⁸ When Eiríkr himself challenges Gunnlaugr's behaviour in response, the *skáld* is goaded into delivering the line '[bæðir] að þú fengir ei þvílíkan dauðdaga sem Hákon jarl faðir þinn' ([pray] that you do not meet a death like that of your father Earl Hákon).⁶⁹ In his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Snorri records that Earl Hákon died in a pigsty, his throat accidentally slit by an excitable servant while hiding from the titular King Óláfr.⁷⁰ While Gunnlaugr's life is spared thanks to Skúli's intercession, he is nonetheless immediately exiled from Norway.

⁶⁷ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6.

⁶⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6 (st. 2); Diana Whaley, 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas: Social and Professional Relations,' in *Skaldsagas*, p. 290.

⁶⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6.

⁷⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, pp. 297–8.

The extensively quoted dialogue of this interaction recommends it to be the work of the saga's final redactor, even if the broad strokes of the narrative accompanied the verse attributed to Gunnlaugr. And the authorial intent of the narrative framing here seems clear. The at-times fraught nature of Icelandic-Norwegian relations has already been noted, both in the political context of the Age of Saga Writing and as represented in Icelandic settlement narratives.⁷¹ The author is here engaging in manifest intertextuality. He assumes audience familiarity with the tale of Earl Hákon's ignoble death, and he references it to denigrate the Norwegian earls. This also presumes an audience that would have appreciated such a denigration, recognising not only the tale, but the devastating insult Gunnlaugr delivers in referencing it, and his transgression of the norms of courtly audience in so doing. In this way, the author legitimises Gunnlaugr's disrespectful behaviour in the Norwegian court and indeed imbues that behaviour with a sense of Icelandic hostility toward Norwegian authority. This interaction sits in sharp contrast not only to Gunnlaugr's reception in the English court, but to the laudatory language of the author in describing Æthelred.

One of the gratifying elements of *Gunnlaugs saga* is the ongoing development of the protagonist as a character, and he learns from his experience of the Norwegian court. Arriving at Æthelred's court, Gunnlaugr has his *dróttkvætt* stanza prepared and ready to deliver upon gaining audience with Æthelred, and he similarly has verses at the ready for his subsequent court visits. There is, however, little need for especial commentary on Gunnlaugr's introduction to the comically naive King Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* in Dublin, who offers Gunnlaugr two merchant ships as reward for his verse before his advisers intervene. Likewise, his arrivals in the courts of the accommodating Earl Sigurðr Hloðvisson of Orkney, and of Earl Sigurðr of Västergötland, require no detailed comment. It is enough to note that, at each court, verses of a somewhat less formal nature than that used for Æthelred are delivered—their types are specified by the saga author—and are well received and well rewarded.⁷² The second verse Gunnlaugr speaks at Skara (the first is not quoted), however, is worth pausing on. This is the above-quoted verse Gunnlaugr speaks in arbitrating between Sigurðr's men and the visiting *hirðmenn* of Eiríkr's court, praising both earls in a *dróttkvætt* stanza.⁷³ Though the sequence

⁷¹ Chapter 4, pp. 153–8.

⁷² *Gunnlaugs saga* 8-9; Whaley, 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas,' p. 290.

⁷³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8 (st. 9), above p. 207.

falls outside the introduction to court archetype, this use of *dróttkvætt* is of note. Gunnlaugr has otherwise used ‘lesser’ verse forms to praise those rulers below the rank of king, but finding himself in a difficult diplomatic position, Gunnlaugr speaks the *dróttkvætt* verse in an attempt to flatter both earls, and it works. By designating the earls as worthy of the same degree of honour he accorded Æthelred, Gunnlaugr satisfies both sets of *hirðmenn* and has his outlawry lifted by Eiríkr, allowing for their future peaceful interaction. It is possible Gunnlaugr also spoke a *dróttkvætt* verse when granted audience with King Óláfr of Sweden, whose court he visits next in his wanderings, and his last stop before returning to Æthelred. Unfortunately, the saga author quotes no verse here, though we are told it is a *drápa*.⁷⁴ This verse, and its form, prove central to how the conflict of *Gunnlaugs saga* plays out, and display authorial perceptions of Scandinavian rulership once again at play in the narrative.

King Óláfr takes a central role in events at the Swedish court and, to some extent, lies at the genesis of the conflict between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn. The characterisation of Óláfr here is as a duplicitous Scandinavian king who delights in the opportunity to antagonise two Icelanders into animosity. As political commentary, it is not a subtle piece of writing and speaks to a worldview that perceives Scandinavian rulers as an omnipresent threat to the free agency of Icelanders. Yet in displaying this agency, Gunnlaugr once more demonstrates his troublesome nature, just as he did in the Norwegian court. Gunnlaugr arrives in the Swedish court during an assembly to find Hrafn already in attendance. Hrafn lauds his compatriot as worthy of the king’s respect in this first instance, though in a moment unique to these episodes of introduction in *Gunnlaugs saga*, the king declines to listen to Gunnlaugr’s verse. It seems that Hrafn had also been denied the opportunity to demonstrate his credentials as a *skáld* for, sometime later, when Gunnlaugr once again approaches the king to suggest he recite his poem, Hrafn too declares that he has a verse to recite for the king. This is the moment at which the conflict between the *skáld* truly begins. Hrafn insists he should recite first as he was the first to arrive in Óláfr’s court. Gunnlaugr insists he deserves primacy as his ancestors were of higher standing than those of Hrafn. This seems to be Gunnlaugr’s preferred method of insulting his rivals, reminiscent of his response to Þorsteinn’s rejection of his betrothal suit.

⁷⁴ The terms *drápa* and *dróttkvætt* are not mutually exclusive: the latter refers to a metrical structure, while the former refers to a ‘long poem with a refrain’ which frequently employs *dróttkvætt* measure in its stanzas, but not prescriptively so, Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry*, pp. 33–9.

Óláfr's decision that 'Gunnlaugr skal fyrri flytja því að honum eirir illa ef hann hefir ei sitt mál' (Gunnlaugr shall recite first because he becomes ill-tempered if he does not get his own way), cannot be read as complimentary.⁷⁵ Moreover, the king seems to enjoy stoking the conflict, taking pleasure in fracturing the united front Icelanders are so often depicted as presenting when dealing with foreign rulers. In short, in acquiescing to both *skáld* reciting their praise poems, Óláfr also requests that each of the poets critique the other's work.

The results are predictable enough, and both men put their skill with words to use (though their respective poems are not quoted). Hrafn provides his critique first, stating that Gunnlaugr's recitation had gone well, but also of his verse that 'það er stórt kvæði ok ófagurt ok nakkvað stirðkveðið sem Gunnlaugur er sjálfur í skaplyndi (it is a high-minded poem, but rather unattractive and stiff, like Gunnlaugr's own temperament). Gunnlaugr's retort following Hrafn's poem is of the same sort, conceding again that the performance had gone well, but also commenting of Hrafn's composition that 'þetta er fagurt kvæði sem Hrafn er sjálfur að sjá ok yfirbragðslítið' (it is a beautiful poem, though with little substance, like Hrafn himself).⁷⁶ Having thus twice insulted Hrafn in front of the Swedish king, Gunnlaugr has sown the seeds of his own demise, setting in motion the series of events that would see both *skáld* dead in a duel at the end of the saga.

It is worth briefly discussing the second part of Gunnlaugr's critique of Hrafn's poem, as it provides an interesting insight into how to read the poetry Gunnlaugr delivers at each court and, in turn, how the author accords honour to each of the rulers. Following his initial response to Hrafn's recital, Gunnlaugr demands, 'eða hví ortir þú flokk um konunginn? Eða þótti þér hann ei drápunnar verður?' (but why did you compose only a *flokkr* for the king? Did he not seem worthy of a *drápa* to you?).⁷⁷ This speaks to the emphasis the author places on the verse types Gunnlaugr delivers at each court, with the metre or verse type usually stated even where no verse is quoted or, indeed, at times within the verse itself.⁷⁸ Earls Sigurðr

⁷⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* A *flokkr* is a 'long poem without refrain' as opposed to a *drápa* which has a refrain, Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry*, p. 33

⁷⁸ For example, the verse spoken to Sigtryggr ends with the line *þat er drápu lag* [it is in *drápa*-form], *Gunnlaugs saga* 8 (st. 8); in turn we are told the Orcadian Earl listens to the verse Gunnlaugr composed for him (though it is not quoted) *ok var þat flokkr* [and it was a *flokkr*], *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

of Västergötland and Sigurðr of Orkney are addressed with a *flokkr*, while the three kings each receive a *drápa*, and clearly Gunnlaugr perceives *flokkr* to be a lesser form of poetry. The *drápa* in turn can be sub-categorised, and what is preserved of the verse spoken for Sigtryggr is in *runhent* measure as opposed to *dróttkvætt*.⁷⁹ That a *dróttkvætt* verse should be understood as superior within the context of the saga can be gleaned from the fact that it was to this metre that Gunnlaugr reverted when composing unambiguous flattery to satiate the *hirðmenn* of Earls Eiríkr and Sigurðr. Yet that verse stands alone, external to the introduction to court formula, and is not otherwise recorded as forming a part of a *flokkr* or *drápa*.⁸⁰ Thus, when it is considered that the author does not record any lines from the *drápa* recited to Óláfr, of all the rulers Gunnlaugr encounters in the saga, Æthelred alone is the explicit recipient of a *drápa* in court-metre—*dróttkvætt*. The author has, therefore, created a theoretical hierarchy among the rulers of *Gunnlaugs saga* through Gunnlaugr's verses. Æthelred is granted pre-eminence, the kings of Sweden and Dublin are set below him, the two Earls Sigurðr are accorded yet a lower status, and Earl Eiríkr brings up the rear, Gunnlaugr having prepared no verse for his initial audience with the Norwegian ruler.

Refocusing on the first component of the English court trope, Gunnlaugr was thus not only granted direct access to Æthelred upon arriving in England, but was given audience in each court he visited—each encounter an opportunity for authorial posturing. The Swedish court is portrayed as one of intrigue under the control of a sly king, the Norwegian court as one hostile to Icelanders under the control of a man of shameful origin, and the English court as a wholesome place with a virtuous king. These are characterisations of the foreign courts that are only reinforced by the conventions of the verses (or lack thereof in Eiríkr's case) that Gunnlaugr speaks in greeting the rulers. Considering the cultural anxieties around the institution of kingship in late thirteenth-century Iceland—and specifically Scandinavian kingship—it is unsurprising to find the Swedish and Norwegian courts so portrayed. The author clearly understood his audience. However, the Icelandic experience of English kingship was different. English kings were demonstrably historical, but they only tangentially linked to Saga Age Iceland in Icelandic cultural memory. Their names and stories may have been stored and recalled in mnemonic verse and artefacts, but they were peripheral characters

⁷⁹ Whaley, 'Representations of Skalds in the Sagas,' p. 290–1.

⁸⁰ *Gunnlaugs saga* 8.

in the *Íslendingasögur*, in the lives of Iceland's leading families. The relative unfamiliarity of English kings, and their noted perceived neutrality, provided saga authors the opportunity to play with the tropes of kingship. In Æthelred's case, the English ruler is raised higher than his fellow monarchs as he is repurposed to aid in Gunnlaugr's character development.

6.4 THE SKÁLD AS WARRIOR: A FABRICATED NARRATIVE

Turning to the second and third elements of the English court trope, in both Gunnlaugr's first and second visits with Æthelred, the king finds himself in difficult situations which can only be resolved by the Icelander's presence. Despite the saga's overt praise for Æthelred, there does seem to be a narrative subtext that sits well with the tradition of his inept leadership. While Egill stood with Æthelstan to face a coalition army drawn from across the Anglo-Scandinavian world, and Björn stood between Knútr's men and a dragon, Gunnlaugr's challenges are slightly less awe-inspiring. In his second visit to the English court, Gunnlaugr merely awaits a feared invasion that never comes. In his first visit, the *skáld* faced the *berserkr* Þórormr who had cowed not just Æthelred's *hirðmenn*, but the king himself. And perhaps this is not unreasonable. Þórormr certainly seems to have otherworldly agency as Æthelred forewarns Gunnlaugr, presumably having already born witness to the *berserkr*'s powers. This is, specifically, an ability to blunt swords with a simple glance, a power that is not, interestingly, unique to Þórormr. The *berserkr* Moldi of *Svarfdæla saga*, for example, is described as having the same skill, while Saxo tells of no fewer than five men having this ability.⁸¹ This is a trope that exists at a nexus of topoi which demonstrates both the intertextuality underlying *Gunnlaugs saga*, and this episode at Æthelred's court as an evident literary construct.

The most prominent of these topoi is the *hólmganga* itself. The *hólmganga* is a common feature of the *Íslendingasögur* and, as Oren Falk cautions, 'we must remain constantly alert to the strong possibility that particular fights described have been rigged to satisfy the demands

⁸¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7, cf. *G. Dan.* iv.10.3, vi.5.14, vii.2.1, vii.9.12, vii.2.13; *Svarfdæla saga* 8–9. See also, Benjamin Blaney, 'The Berserk Suitor: The Literary Application of a Stereotyped Theme,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 54, (1982), 289. Blaney suggests that a duellist's rendering a blade ineffective in a similar episode from *Egils saga* was likely affected by the 'evil eye'. The saga makes no such mention of the combatant's source of power. *Egils saga* 66.

of their literary context'.⁸² Considering that Björn and Gunnlaugr so swiftly find opportunity to become a king's champion through the *hólmganga* and, moreover, that such duels can involve *berserkr* with inexplicable magical agency, this is not a difficult argument to accept. Yet there are further intertextual layers within the duel between Gunnlaugr and Þórormr. First, the presence of the *berserkr* himself, whom Marlene Ciklamini identifies as ubiquitous to the *Íslendingasögur hólmganga* in the person of 'the unscrupulous duellist'.⁸³ Second is sight as a vehicle for power, a motif seen in connection with the blunted sword elsewhere in the corpus as noted, but also observed more broadly across early medieval cultures.⁸⁴ Last, of course, is Gunnlaugr himself, the archetypal figure of the Icelandic *skáld*. All of these intertextual elements exist alongside and feed into the English court trope. Ultimately, Æthelred and Gunnlaugr conspire to negate Þórormr's power, tricking the *berserkr* by showing him one sword prior to the *hólmganga*, but using another in the duel. Gunnlaugr wins the fight thanks to both Æthelred's advice and the sword the king provides him, hereafter called *konungsnaut* (king's gift) in the text.⁸⁵ It is once again of note that there is little to mark this story out as specifically English. Gunnlaugr's duel with Þórormr should be seen for what it is: a formulaic episode serving to fulfil the narrative requirement for the *skáld* to defend the king.⁸⁶ It is an account that suggests an almost entirely fabricated representation of Æthelred and of his kingdom; the author treats England as an extension of the Scandinavian world with little nuance, differentiating detail, or direct knowledge of the region.

Further suggesting that the author was working within a Scandinavian tradition that included only a theoretical knowledge of England in general, and Æthelred specifically, is the saga's silence on the St Brice's Day massacre on 13 November 1002.⁸⁷ The chronology of the saga locates Gunnlaugr's first visit to England around the time of the event, in the winter of 1002/03. While there is no Scandinavian tradition memorialising the deed—something which

⁸² Oren Falk, 'Bystanders and Hearsayers First: Reassessing the Role of the Audience in Duelling,' in 'A Great Effusion of Blood?': *Interpreting Medieval Violence*, ed. by Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 99.

⁸³ Marlene Ciklamini, 'The Literary Mold of the *Hólmgongumaðr*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 37 (1965), 118

⁸⁴ Matthew Firth, 'Allegories of sight: Blinding and power in late Anglo-Saxon England', *Ceræ*, 3 (2016), 1–33.

⁸⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga*, 7.

⁸⁶ Chapter 5, pp. 195–6.

⁸⁷ ASC C–E 1002; S 909; Chapter 3, pp. 116–20.

could be considered an odd omission from Scandinavian cultural memory had many settlers been subjected to wholesale slaughter—the English tradition was a rich one that grew in the telling. By the time *Gunnlaugs saga* was written, this included the slaughter and mutilation of all the Danes who resided in England, which in turn is said to have prompted a Danish invasion under King Sveinn.⁸⁸ Considering that the saga author has given some, admittedly loose, attention to providing Gunnlaugr’s travels a workable chronology, it is interesting that this historical touchstone was omitted. The author was either ignorant of the event, did not understand that it fit within the timeline he was constructing, or did not feel that Æthelred’s order to massacre the Danes within his lands was conducive to the image of English kingship he was seeking to establish. It would be convenient to the discussion at this point if it could be asserted that the saga deliberately omits the event in order to doctor Æthelred’s reputation, but this seems unlikely. Rather, the author appears to be working from ignorance. His shaky grasp on English culture is on display in Gunnlaugr’s entrance to the Æthelred’s court and in his duel with the *berserkr*, both of which adhere to Scandinavian literary and cultural conventions with little concession to English tradition. That the St Brice’s Day massacre does not form a part of the narrative simply shows that, in the saga’s characterisation of Æthelred, there is little contact between English and Icelandic cultural memory. There is, in this particular, little overlap between English and Icelandic storehouses of experience.

Gunnlaugr’s second visit to Æthelred in the years 1004–06 displays similar problems of chronology and omission that provide further evidence the author was not accessing English sources to construct his narrative of Æthelred’s reign. The most egregious error of chronology contained in the saga is, of course, implied in Æthelred’s requirement that Gunnlaugr stay by his side in the case that England were invaded by the forces of Knútr.⁸⁹ Presuming again a birth year in the last decade of the tenth century, in 1004 Knútr would have been around ten years of age; his campaigns of English conquest only occurred a decade after *Gunnlaugs saga* reports this threat to Æthelred’s kingship. Here is also found the previously noted reordering of Knútr’s rulerships, *Gunnlaugs saga* joining Snorri, Saxo, and Theodoricus, among other Scandinavian sources, in claiming or implying that Knútr inherited the Danish

⁸⁸ See for example: *G. Reg.* ii.177; HH vi.2; Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 1002. See also Keynes, ‘The Massacre of St Brice’s Day’, pp. 43–55.

⁸⁹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

throne upon his father's death and used that position of power to launch his campaign in England.⁹⁰ However, dating Knútr's Danish kingship to as early as 1004 falls outside even the already-noted misalignments of traditional Icelandic chronologies.⁹¹

Gunnlaugs saga's placing the threat of Danish invasion in 1004 may represent yet a further conflation of Sveinn and Knútr's activities in England. The *Chronicle* does record that Sveinn campaigned in England in 1003 and 1004.⁹² In early-twelfth century English historical tradition, this is the campaign that is understood to have been prompted by the St Brice's Day massacre, William of Malmesbury recording that Sveinn's sister had been killed by Æthelred's men as part of the coordinated offensive.⁹³ This is highly unlikely granted the lack of evidence for Scandinavian cultural memory of the event, no less such an important figure losing a relative to it. Niels Lund points to the acquisition of wealth as being Sveinn's primary motivation.⁹⁴ No matter Sveinn's intent, it would be unremarkable were this campaign to have been caught up in traditions around his later campaigns. The general confusion in the timeline of the early eleventh-century Danish invasions that characterises traditional Icelandic chronologies has already been noted. These accounts do, however, codify certain details, some sitting on firmer footing than others. So, for example, Sveinn is usually understood to have forced Æthelred into exile, before dying in England, after which Knútr flees England only to later return and conquer it.⁹⁵ These details accord with the English historical record, even if the timelines diverge.⁹⁶ In contrast is the almost universal belief in Scandinavian histories that Knútr inherited the Danish throne immediately upon his return to Denmark, though the

⁹⁰ *G. Dan.* x.14.1–7; Snorri, *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 30, 158; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 15. See also *Historia Norwegie* xviii. Chapter 3, p. 121.

⁹¹ Chapter 5, pp. 181–4. While one edited edition of *Gunnlaugs saga* does comment that 'the author of *Gunnlaugs [saga]* shares this error with other Icelandic historians', the sources that form the basis for this assertion are not identified, *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Foote and Quirk, p. 10 (n.1). It seems probable Foote and Quirk intend simply to refer to the disrupted chronology of these years in Icelandic histories.

⁹² ASC C–E 1003–04. See also *JW* 1003–04, who more clearly specifies this Sveinn as the Danish king.

⁹³ *G. Reg.* ii.177. See also William of Jumièges, *Gesta Normannorum ducum* v.6, ed. by Elizabeth M.C. van Houts, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1995), i, pp. 14–16; and also HH vi.2, who omits the sister but maintains that the Danish offensive was in response to the St Brice's Day massacre.

⁹⁴ Niels Lund, 'The Danish Empire and the End of the Viking Age', in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. by Peter Sawyer (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp. 167–9. See also Roach, *Æthelred*, p. 200.

⁹⁵ *G. Dan.* x.14.1–2; *Historia Norwegie* xviii; *Óláfs saga Helga*, pp. 13–14.

⁹⁶ ASC C–F 1014.

evidence of the English historical record, including those texts which stem from his own court, negate this assertion.⁹⁷

Of further note is that Scandinavian histories of the Age of Saga Writing rarely provide dates for this period, even if they establish chronologies. This leaves these internal chronologies to be affixed to historical time through events datable by external sources, the same process whereby a theoretical timeline has been established for *Bjarnar saga* and, indeed, for *Gunnlaugs saga*. Thus, similar anomalies can often be observed between *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, demonstrating the intertextuality of the 'genres' and their reliance on traditional chronologies. However, the date for Knútr's threatened invasion provided by the reconstructed timeline of *Gunnlaugs saga* is so unusually early as to suggest the author was working slightly outside of this tradition. It seems that the author (or his source) understood Sveinn's campaign of 1003/04 and Sveinn and Knútr's joint campaign of 1013/14 and Knútr's campaign of 1015/16 to be more-or-less the same event. Such a perception may have been reinforced by the stability of English rulership in the first years of the eleventh century. Despite Sveinn and Knútr's campaigns in England extending for well over a decade, Æthelred was king throughout all of them. Granted that cultural memory of Æthelred's England was largely invested in artefacts and mnemonic oral media, given the fragmentary nature of the Scandinavian historical record, it is not difficult to see how the various Danish invasions may have merged in the retelling. However, this particular alteration within (or corruption of) Icelandic cultural memory is one seemingly specific to *Gunnlaugs saga*. Whether consciously through his own intervention, or unwittingly through the received narrative of Gunnlaugr's adventures abroad, the saga author absorbs the known conflict between Æthelred and Knútr that occurred after 1014 into the earlier narrative setting of *Gunnlaugs saga*.

Ultimately, though the saga author certainly had some grasp on the history of early eleventh-century Scandinavia and adapted Gunnlaugr's travels to provide them a degree of historicity, the chronology of the *skáld's* second visit with Æthelred was unresolvable and thus left unresolved. In any event, Knútr's attack did not materialise, and Gunnlaugr's near two-year delay in England allows the narrative conflict to move forward.⁹⁸ On this note, it is worth

⁹⁷ ASC C–F 1014–1016; *Encomium* 1.3–4; *Knútr's Letter to the English* (1019/20).

⁹⁸ *Gunnlaugs saga* 10.

mentioning that Gunnlaugr is frequently accused of tarrying unnecessarily throughout the saga, thus allowing his opponents the freedom to plot without repercussion.⁹⁹ It should, however, be remembered that, in his first visit to the English court, Gunnlaugr was made Æthelred's *hirðmaðr*, and it must be understood that he is here under obligation to remain in Æthelred's service until the king allows him to depart. This is not to say that Gunnlaugr is not indeed an aimless tarrrier and the writer of his own tragedy, yet this time spent at the English court is not evidence of it.

Turning to the final element of the English court trope, the *skáld's* reward has already been noted as ubiquitous to the royal service of his fellow Icelanders.¹⁰⁰ Gunnlaugr is, of course, well compensated for his service. It is of note in this case, however, that each gift is given in response to a particular action: this is not a single act of gift-giving as seen at Bjørn's departure from Valdimarr and Knútr's courts. Of further note is Æthelred's honouring of the *skáld* in making him a *hirðmaðr*.¹⁰¹ This is a curious and problematic role for the Icelandic to fulfil and, as noted, caused Gunnlaugr significant personal loss. The *hirðmaðr* was not a feature of Icelandic society; the term implies a duty of service to a ruler which ran counter to the Icelandic governmental system. The political structure that dominated Iceland in Gunnlaugr's time was founded on the relationship between *goðar* and their followers, *þingmenn*. The role of a *þingmaðr* as supporter of his *goði* had attendant in it an autonomy of service and association not available to a *hirðmaðr*. Theoretically, a *þingmaðr* could decline service to his *goði* and change allegiance at will; however, as seen in Gunnlaugr's second visit to the English king, a *hirðmaðr* was not in a position to defy his lord.¹⁰² In that case, though it caused Gunnlaugr to break his betrothal contract in Iceland, Gunnlaugr felt himself unable to defy Æthelred's demand that he stay in England to protect his lord.

Nonetheless, the author does not treat Gunnlaugr's position in the English court as anomalous and Icelandic *hirðmaðr* can be found at most courts—Skúli performed at Eiríkr's court as a *hirðmaðr*, and Hrafn in turn was made a *hirðmaðr* in Óláfr's court.¹⁰³ Indeed, the main

⁹⁹ See for example: Cook, 'The Character of Gunnlaug,' pp. 12–14; Whaley, 'Introduction,' p.32.

¹⁰⁰ Chapter 5, pp. 191–2.

¹⁰¹ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁰² Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 134–7.

¹⁰³ *Gunnlaugs saga* 6, 9.

difference between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in that respect is that Hrafn was granted permission to depart by Óláfr, while Gunnlaugr was not given leave by Æthelred.¹⁰⁴ Even here a degree of authorial commentary contrasting the English and Scandinavian kings may be hypothesised. Gunnlaugr was granted immediate access to the Æthelred, made a *hirðmaðr* directly upon reciting his poem, and then later required to remain at king's side due to "íþróttu þinna ok vaskleiks" (your accomplishments and courage).¹⁰⁵ Hrafn in his turn is initially found at the Swedish court at *óæðra bekk* (a low bench); is clearly not welcomed to recite his verse for the king upon his arrival; is only made *hirðmaðr* after some significant time in the Swedish court; and immediately requests leave to depart upon receiving that reward, which is granted.¹⁰⁶ While the author may be using these points of difference to contrast the inherent worth of the two characters, the description of the variant treatment an Icelandic *hirðmaðr* could expect between Scandinavian and English courts seems pointed. The *Gunnlaugs saga* author has located the narrative in a world where Scandinavian rulers actively undermined the integrity of Icelandic self-determination, represented in the person of the *skáld*, while Insular rulers understood the value of such men and treated them with honour.

The motif of the peripatetic *skáld* is here, therefore, infused with political and ideological values born of the author's own cultural milieu, and deliberately so. Each episode in a foreign court is a vehicle for the author to provide cultural and political commentary. The characterisation of Scandinavian lordship as each leader is introduced has inherent within it a degree of hostility. Eiríkr and Gunnlaugr may later reconcile, yet the Norwegian earl is initially portrayed as weak, a man who can be dishonoured in his own court, the son of a man who died in a pigsty. The Swedish king is sly, seemingly gaining enjoyment by setting Icelanders against each other. The 'Danish king' Knútr is an enemy who sits off-stage. In contrast, Insular rulers, even those with Scandinavian cultural connections, do not receive the same censure. Sigtryggr in Dublin is generous if a little naive, Earl Sigurð of Orkney is friendly and, of course, Æthelred is an exemplar of *good* Scandinavian kingship. This reiterates that there is nothing particularly English in his portrayal. Direct Icelandic experience of English

¹⁰⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 9–10.

¹⁰⁵ *Gunnlaugs saga* 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Gunnlaugs saga* 9.

kingship, both in the context of the saga's setting and its authorship, was minimal and thus, as a literary construct, Æthelred was manipulable for an Icelandic audience.

In the English king, the author had a foil which allowed for the demonstration of the Icelander as the hero of kings without invoking any cultural anxieties around Scandinavian kingship. Æthelred is therefore granted higher status in the saga than his counterparts and, as the king's reputation is augmented, so too is that of the *skáld* that twice stood ready to defend him. There is, however, no evidence of a historical basis for Æthelred's portrayal in the saga, and little evidence of contact between English traditions of his kingship and those Scandinavian traditions of it on which the *Gunnlaugs saga* author drew. The loose awareness of where Æthelred fit within the chronology of Scandinavian history, or even within the timelines set out in Icelandic tradition, evident in the saga, shows little specific knowledge of his reign. The descriptions of the English court, moreover, display little understanding of any cultural distinction between tenth-century England and Scandinavia. Thus, any preservation of Æthelred and England in Icelandic cultural memory as part of Gunnlaugr's tale is fundamentally corrupted in the sense of its utility as a source of English history. Æthelred's characterisation in *Gunnlaugs saga* is almost entirely a literary product of late thirteenth-century Iceland. The author imbued the narrative of Æthelred's reign, and of Gunnlaugr's travels more generally, with the cultural nostalgia and political and ideological values of his own time as he sought to create meaning for his audience.

MEMORIES OF EVENTS: *EGILS SAGA SKALLAGRÍMSSONAR*

There are various elements of *Egils saga's* depictions of England that set it apart from *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. In the first instance, its portrayals of England and events that occur there are more expansive even than in *Gunnlaugs saga*. In the second, Egill is twice in England, and not as a part of a single journey in the way of Gunnlaugr's two visits to Æthelred's court. Egill, moreover, visits with two kings there: Æthelstan on both journeys, and Eiríkr *blóðøx* as king of Northumbria on the second. Finally, and most importantly, Egill's experiences in England are more readily tied to events of the English historical record than those of his fellow *skáld*. This last is particularly unusual. As noted of the St Brice's Day massacre, individual moments of Anglo-Scandinavian conflict could resonate in English cultural memory and yet leave no mark within Icelandic or Scandinavian cultural memory.¹ The famed 991 Battle of Maldon also exemplifies this:² there is no Scandinavian tradition of the encounter. As *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* demonstrate, the Icelandic storehouse of experience did not usually preserve this degree of granularity in its recollection of Saga Age England. As codified in the *Íslendingasögur*, it recalled individual kings, elements of their characters, and their connections to famous Icelanders. Yet that storehouse of experience rarely preserved identifiable and externally correlatable historical events. That, however, may be what is seen in *Egils saga*: the Battle of Brunanburh on Egill's first visit to England, the short reign(s) of Eiríkr of York on his second.³ Though, any attempt to correlate these events of English history with the *Egils saga* narrative presents its issues. *Egils saga*, like *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, is an overtly literary text. Its departures from the English historical record allow at most the assertion that the saga *likely* refers to Brunanburh and to King Eiríkr of York, not that it *certainly* does so. And the question remains as to whether the additional detail *Egils saga* brings to its English episodes provides a greater degree of historicity than observed in the other *skáldasögur*.

¹ Chapter 3, p. 119.

² ASC A–F 991.

³ *Egils saga* 50–55, 61–62.; ASC D 948, D–E 952, 954.

Egill's appearances in Æthelstan's armies and at Eiríkr's court in York are two of the most extensively analysed episodes in Anglophone saga criticism.⁴ This is for two reasons: the passages preserve elements that are unique to the saga corpus, and to English historiography. The description of events surrounding the battle named as Vinheiðr in the text is the most detailed extant account of Brunanburh, while *Egils saga's* identification of Eiríkr *blóðøx* as king of Northumbria represents a detail of Scandinavian cultural memory that is absent in the English tradition of a king named Eiríkr (or Yryc) ruling in York in the mid-tenth century.⁵ Yet it does not follow that the saga's internal chronology is any more easily reconciled with a historical chronology than either *Bjarnar saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*. Nor is the correlation of events in the saga without its challenges and challengers. Yet even the most sceptical readers dare to hope that something of England's history is memorialised in *Egils saga's* pages to help fill the *lacunae* in the English historical record of the tenth century. It is a sentiment John Hines encapsulates in his article on Egill's *Höfuðlausn* or head-ransom poem, stating that 'the narrative of *Egils saga* is practically useless as an historical document; but it may still preserve some genuine facts'.⁶ Extrapolated more broadly, it is a statement that epitomises the approach this thesis has taken to the sagas, and accurately represents its conclusions on the English court episodes of *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*.

Comparative, historiographical analysis of English sources with the relevant passages of *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* demonstrates that they do indeed contain cultural memory of England. Further, this cultural memory preserves within it a certain degree of historicity in as far as it recalls individual English kings, where they fit within tenth- and eleventh-century Scandinavian history, and the fact of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact. However, the chronologies of *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga* also demonstrate that this is a mediated historicity that works from and within Scandinavian historiographical tradition. *Egils saga* is little different. The identification of Eiríkr *blóðøx* as ruler of Northumbria is, for example,

⁴ As limited examples, see Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', pp. 27–51; Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan', 15–31; Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story', pp. 305–14; McDougall, 'Discretion and Deceit', pp. 109–42; Woolf, 'Erik Bloodaxe Revisited', pp. 189–93. See also chapter 3, pp. 96–7.

⁵ ASC D 948, D–E 952, 954.

⁶ John Hines, 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn* in Time and Place', *Saga Book*, 24 (1994–97), p. 84.

exclusive to Norwegian and Icelandic sources.⁷ English annals and histories do record an Eiríkr ruling there, but he is not clearly identified as the exiled Norwegian King. Moreover, as discussed below, Icelandic traditions of Eiríkr *blóðøx's* reign in Norway in the 930s does not easily marry with the *Chronicle's* record of Eiríkr of York's rule in the late 940s/early 950s.⁸ Hines is correct to say that 'the narrative of *Egils saga* is practically useless as an historical document', at least in as far as it can stand alone as such.

Yet there are very few historical texts whose narratives can, or should, stand alone as sources of history. The English episodes of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* show that England was *remembered* as a part of the Scandinavian world of the Saga Age. The texts verify English accounts of Anglo-Scandinavian contact (in a broad sense); they offer a glimpse of a Scandinavian perspective of that interaction; they show that the legacies of English kings circulated through the North Sea world and demonstrate what was deemed worth remembering. There is historical value to this. The unique elements of the *Íslendingasögur* are not indicative of 'a closed literary system', as Hermann highlights.⁹ The historical peoples, geographies, and chronologies of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* all demonstrate their intertextual links within Old Norse-Icelandic literature more broadly, generic designations notwithstanding. This corpus in turn links to wider medieval European historiography, extending to England. Ari Þorgilsson's knowledge of the death of Edmund the Martyr, for example, has already been noted,¹⁰ while *Landnámabók* uses the reign of King Alfred the Great as a temporal marker and also demonstrates familiarity with Bede's works.¹¹ The *skáldasögur* exist within in an inter-cultural network of history writing and, even if their historical value can only be observed comparatively with other texts within that network, they may still serve to provide richness and depth to historical knowledge of Viking Age England. Seeking to identify the 'genuine facts' Hines posits of *Egils saga's* depiction of Eiríkr's court,

⁷ See for example, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* vii, ed. by M.J. Driscoll, 2nd edn (London: VSNR, 2008), pp. 16–17; *Egils saga* 61–62; *Fagrskinna*, pp. 76–7; *Historia Norvegie* xii; Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, p. 152.

⁸ For an overview of the debates surrounding Eiríkr's reign(s), see Matthew Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire* (Pickering: Blackthorn Press, 2014), pp. 74–84.

⁹ Hermann, 'Saga Literature, Cultural Memory', pp. 335–7. See also Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 30–7.

¹⁰ Chapter 4, pp. 135–6.

¹¹ *Landnámabók* S1, H1, S3, H3.

or the 'historical understanding' Foot sees as underlying the Vinheiðr narrative,¹² is not without merit.

Beyond the Saga Age, however, it is also important to bear in mind that the *Íslendingasögur* are also of historical interest for what they reveal of the Age of Saga Writing. The passages of *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* that are set in England all reflect thirteenth-century societal attitudes and storytelling conventions. In short, they reveal how thirteenth-century Icelanders memorialised the past. However, there are two additional factors to consider for *Egils saga*. Firstly, its likely status as the earliest of the sagas under consideration. This is in terms of both content and composition, being set in large part in the 930s and having been written in the 1220s.¹³ The earlier composition of *Egils saga* cannot be understood to grant the text greater historical authority than *Bjarnar saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*; the similar shift in setting means it is no closer to its subject matter in terms of timeframe than the other *skáldasögur*. Secondly, the saga's possible authorship by Snorri Sturluson looms over the study of its composition.¹⁴ Both of these matters are inextricably entwined within *Egils saga's* composition and the scholarship that surrounds it; however, they are not singled out for especial attention in this chapter, even though they necessarily inform it. These are but two of the many ongoing debates in saga criticism that centre *Egils saga*.

The debates of saga scholarship which draw attention in this chapter are those that directly intersect with the study of English history. These align with Egill's two visits to England. First, as addressed in 7.2, is the question of whether *Egils saga* can be understood as a historical source for the Battle of Brunanburh. Second, and considered in 7.3, is whether the saga's account of Eiríkr blóðøx's rule in Northumbria can be reconciled with the English historical record. There are two elements to the examination of each episode: comparative analysis of *Egils saga's* narrative with English histories and the accounts of the wider Old Norse-Icelandic corpus; analysis of the passages' internal literary structures. Taken together, these approaches serve to establish the historicity of Egill's adventures in England, while also

¹² Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 180–1; Hines, 'Egill's *Hofuðlausn*', p. 84.

¹³ Andersson, *The Partisan Muse*, pp. 140–1; *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, *ÍF* II (Reykjavík: HÍF, 1933), pp. liii–lxx; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family sagas', p. 116.

¹⁴ See for example, Cormack, 'Egils saga, *Heimskringla*', pp. 61–8; Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 234–7; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Er Snorri höfundur *Egils sögu*?', pp. 48–67. See also chapter 4, pp. 155–8.

identifying the layers of transmission and adaptation that established the final, literary form of those adventures. Moreover, when Egill's experiences are compared to those of Björn and Gunnlaugr, patterns emerge that provide insight into the agency that thirteenth-century Icelanders perceived their Saga Age compatriots to have held in England. However, just as in the case of Björn and Gunnlaugr's travels, Egill's visits to the English court do not occur in isolation. Rather, they are formulated within the contextualising travel narrative construct of the peripatetic *skáld*, and this iteration of the motif requires attention.

7.1 EGILLS'S TRAVELS

Though many aspects of Egill's narrative trajectory parallel those of his fellow *skáld*, his travels do not precisely conform to the same formulae as those of Björn and Gunnlaugr. This fact no doubt feeds into Clunies Ross' identifying it among the *skáldasögur* outliers.¹⁵ The saga author states that Egill's first journey abroad encompasses a full twelve years.¹⁶ Unlike *Bjarnar saga*, which attempts to account for Björn's location and occupation throughout his six-year adventure, or *Gunnlaugs saga* with its checklist of northern courts, accounting for the passage of time seems to be of lesser concern in *Egils saga*. Lacking the romantic prelude that characterises most *skáldasögur*—or at least one that directly involves the hero—there is no urgency for Egill to return to Iceland, little at stake to add narrative tension to any delays. The primary tension in this part of the saga, established across three voyages out of Iceland, is Egill's building conflict with Eiríkr *blóðøx*. Egill's first journey also differs in his companionship. Though Björn and Gunnlaugr voyage abroad in company, their companions play little role in their continuing travels. In contrast, throughout his first twelve years adventuring, Egill is usually accompanied by his brother Þorolfr. Also lacking a little in the geographical scope of Björn and Gunnlaugr's adventures, the brothers base themselves in Norway, Denmark, and England. This leads to limited exposure to royal or quasi-royal courts. The Danish King Haraldr Gormsson (d. c.986) is mentioned, but he is not an active participant in the narrative. Egill and Þorolfr only have direct interaction with the kings of Norway and England. Finally, Egill does not seek out the Norwegian court in the manner of Björn and

¹⁵ Clunies Ross, 'The Skald Sagas as a Genre', p. 37.

¹⁶ *Egils saga* 57.

Gunnlaugr. Egill's attendance at Eiríkr's travelling court, the initial source of their conflict, is happenstance, even if the framework of the English court trope plays out as expected.

Despite its variations on the theme, Egill's first trip still comprises something of a *Bildungsroman* narrative. Granted the saga's early composition, it is tempting to speculate that Egill's initial travels represent an early phase in the development of the peripatetic *skáld* tradition. For all the detail and literary flourishes provided certain individual episodes within his travels, the voyaging framework is a degree less ambitious and deliberately constructed than that found in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. It would then follow that *Bjarnar saga* represents the motif of the peripatetic *skáld* at an intermediary stage in its evolution,¹⁷ with the deliberate literary construct observed in *Gunnlaugs saga* representing something of an apex in its literary development. Nonetheless, it remains that, for each *skáld*, no matter the distinctive elements of their own metaphorical journey to maturity, their first voyage away from Iceland is exactly that. Some sense of the young Egill's departure from Iceland in Þorolfr's company has already been given.¹⁸ He sets sail at age twelve or thirteen, another of Iceland's remarkable youths,¹⁹ and returns home twelve years later; a friend to one king, an enemy of another, a veteran of viking raids and of war, bearing treasures gifted by King Æthelstan.

After leaving Iceland, the brothers first head to Norway, where Eiríkr *blóðøx* is king, having inherited the Norwegian throne from his father Haraldr *inn hárfagri* during Þorolfr's previous visit.²⁰ Þorolfr no doubt anticipated a warm welcome from Eiríkr. On that earlier visit, he had spent some time in the company of Skalla-Grímr's *fóstbróðir*, Þórir Hróaldsson, in whose household Eiríkr was being fostered. Þorolfr had gifted Eiríkr a ship and, in return, Eiríkr had intervened with his father on Þorolfr's behalf to ensure he was not held accountable for the actions of his ancestors Kveld-Úlfr and Skalla-Grímr.²¹ With this seemingly came permission for Þorolfr to use Norway as his base for *víking* over the following seasons. Subsequently, when Eiríkr gained the throne, Þorolfr came into his service as *hirðmaðr* and

¹⁷ The unresolved and likely unresolvable question of the date of *Bjarnar saga's* composition should be born in mind. For an overview, see Finlay, 'Interpretation or over-Interpretation?', pp. 61–87.

¹⁸ Chapter 4, pp. 146–7.

¹⁹ Cf. *Finnboga saga* 4–8; *Grettis saga* 14–16. This fits in with the broader motif identified by Jesch, though her focus is on young Scandinavian kings, in 'Youth on the Prow', pp. 123–4.

²⁰ *Egils saga* 37, 39.

²¹ *Egils saga* 36.

standard bearer and the two men campaigned together in Bjarmaland. Þorolfr's association with Eiríkr's court also led to his befriending the king's wife, Gunnhildr. However, whatever goodwill there was between Þorolfr and Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, Egill was to make short work of it.²² And in the end, Þorolfr would prove to be more loyal to his brother than to the Norwegian royals.

The conflict between Egill and Eiríkr in Norway foregrounds their interactions in York during Egill's second stay in England, but it needs little more than summary here. In essence, seemingly conscious of his brother's ornery nature, Þorolfr keeps Egill firmly in the background during his reunion with Eiríkr and subsequent visit to Þórir Hróaldsson's homestead. The saga states that during this time Þorolfr and Egill's relationship is strained, though Egill befriends Þórir's son, Arinbjörn. Arinbjörn will prove a valuable ally at Eiríkr's court in York. To cut a fascinating story egregiously short, a situation arises in which Egill and a man of Þórir's household named Qlvir have need to beg to hospitality at a farm run by a man named Bárðr on the island Atley. Bárðr holds stewardship of the farm from King Eiríkr and, unbeknownst to Egill and Qlvir, Eiríkr is making his own way there. While Bárðr at first tries to hide the two men's presence on the island and offers them something of a diminished hospitality, Eiríkr finds out they are there and has them brought to the main feast. Egill, intent on repaying Bárðr's initial slight by abusing his reluctant hospitality, speaks jeering verse and drinks copious amounts of the ale he had not been previously offered.²³ Conscious of the insult, Bárðr provokes Gunnhildr into an attempt to poison Egill. Egill thwarts this, slays Bárðr on his way out the door and, over the following days, escapes pursuit and makes it to the relative safety of Þórir's homestead. Arinbjörn prevails on his father to arrange a peace with Eiríkr, which is attained upon the agreement that Egill would not remain in Norway.

Gunnhildr's leading role in this moment of conflict is not unusual. It is characteristic of the episodes in which she features alongside Eiríkr that she is the primary antagonist. It is she that seeks to goad Eiríkr into action against the Skallagrímssýnir, whereas Eiríkr's inclination most often seems to be to arrange peace with Egill, perhaps in deference to his former relationship with Þorolfr. That is certainly what Eiríkr implies when Gunnhildr next

²² *Egils saga* 37.

²³ *Egils saga* 43–44.

raises the matter of seeking vengeance on Egill, and on Þorolfr as well, who in her assessment can now be considered no better than his brother.²⁴ This episode occurs after a period of *viking* in Denmark and the Baltic which Þorolfr, Egill, and their Danish allies left to pursue in the spring after Eiríkr had pronounced Egill's exile from Norway (map 10). These adventures encompass the previously noted friendly interaction with a Danish landholder in Halland.²⁵ By autumn, however, they are back in Þórir's company in Norway, and it is this that attracts Gunnhildr's ire. Bárðr's death was merely the prelude to the hostilities between Egill and the queen. It is what follows from their return to Norway that truly establishes the background for Egill's later reception at Eiríkr's court in York.

Granted that Egill's return to Norway transgresses Eiríkr's order of banishment, the *skáld* again requires the intercessions of his hosts. In them, though, Egill has effective supporters; Þórir and Arinbjörn are, respectively, Eiríkr's *fóstrfaðir* and *fóstbróðir*. In the face of Eiríkr's deference to Þórir and Arinbjörn, and apparent fidelity to his former *hirðmaðr*, Þorolfr, Gunnhildr sets a plot in motion to kill the Skallagrímssýnir. At this point, it is worth noting that certain episodes repeat in *Egils saga*. Þorolfr's status at this moment in the narrative is a case in point, his rise and fall from the graces of the Norwegian king mimicking those of his uncle and namesake, the brother of Skalla-Grímr, during Haraldr's reign.²⁶ A similar parallelism is observable between the dynamics that play out upon Egill's unlooked-for arrival in Norway at this time, and his later unlooked-for arrival in Northumbria.²⁷ In both instances Egill looks to Arinbjörn for support; relies on Arinbjörn's intercessions to ensure his survival in the face of Eiríkr's animosity; contends with Gunnhildr's plots, which seemingly sit outside of Eiríkr's own designs and knowledge; and gains favourable judgement (or reluctant tolerance) from the Norwegian king. As Torfi Tulinius observes, even if it is an early saga, *Egils saga* is not mere record of oral lore, but rather deliberately constructed written

²⁴ *Egils saga* 48.

²⁵ *Egils saga* 48; chapter 3, p. 85.

²⁶ Cf. *Egils saga* 10–19. On repeating patterns in *Egils saga*, see Torfi Tulinius, 'The Construction of *Egil's saga*', in *Egil the Viking Poet*, pp. 23–39, especially pp. 24–5. See also Baldur Hafstað, *Die Egils saga und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen Werken des nordischen Mittelalters* (Reykjavik: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands, 1995), pp. 135–48.

²⁷ Cf. *Egils saga* 61–63.

literature that owes much to authorial intervention.²⁸ Here the author is entrenching certain character traits and expected behaviours already established in the Atley episode, and thereby foregrounding the manner in which events play out later in England. These repetitions, moreover, work toward audience expectations by accessing cultural memory. *Egils saga's* characterisation of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's rule reflects traditions held across the wider corpus of Scandinavian literature.²⁹

In response to both Bárðr's killing and Egill's return to Norway, Gunnhildr plots with her brothers to kill either Egill or Þorolfr. This meets with limited success. Gunnhildr intended for her brothers to intercept the Skallagrímssýnir at a well-attended pagan sacrifice at Gaular in Norway. Forewarned, however, Egill remains with Arinbjörn at Þórir's farm in Firðafylki while Þorolfr is accompanied everywhere by Þórir, and Gunnhildr's brothers are unable to gain access to him. In frustration, Gunnhildr instructs her brother Eyvindr to kill any member of Þórir's retinue. Eyvindr is able to accomplish this, and is subsequently sent to the court of Haraldr Gormsson in Denmark for safety. On that last point, there are a number of matters of note. Firstly, Eiríkr is complicit in arranging Eyvindr's escape to Denmark, which suggests he is less neutral than implied by his earlier agreement to spare the Skallagrímssýnir retribution. Secondly, Gunnhildr's support from Danish royalty is ubiquitous to Scandinavian histories and literature, with *Historia Norwegie* asserting that she was Haraldr Gormsson's sister.³⁰ However, this did not hold universal consensus within Icelandic cultural memory in the Age of Saga Writing, and is not the tradition accessed by the *Egils saga* author.³¹ Gunnhildr's brothers are named as Eyvindr and Álfr, their father is Qzurr tóta, and there is nothing to

²⁸ Tulinius, 'The Construction of *Egil's saga*', pp. 23–39; Torfi Tulinius, 'The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as Basis for Saga Composition and Interpretation', in *Skaldsagas*, pp. 206–16. See also: Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger*, pp. 73–85; Hafstað, *Die Egils saga*, pp. 135–48; William Sayers, 'Generational Models for the Friendship of Egill and Arinbjörn', *Scripta Islandica*, 66 (2015), 143–76.

²⁹ See for example, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum v; Brennu-Njáls saga 3–5; Fagrskinna*, pp. 74–6; *Historia Norwegie* xii; Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, pp. 147, 149; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 2, 4. Criticism in these texts is primarily directed toward Gunnhildr as opposed to Eiríkr; *Egils saga's* treatment of the king reflecting its thematic hostility to Norwegian kingship. On *Egils saga's* distrust of Norwegian kingship, see Ármann Jakobsson, 'Royal Pretenders', pp. 50–2; Hines, 'Kingship in *Egils saga*', pp. 16–21.

³⁰ *Historia Norwegie* xii. See also Cormack, '*Egils saga, Heimskringla*', pp. 62–3.

³¹ In Icelandic cultural memory, Gunnhildr's father is Qzurr lafskegg who hails from Hálogaland in the north of Norway, according to *Fagrskinna*, p. 74. See also, for example, *Brennu-Njáls saga 3; Egils saga 49; Snorri Sturluson, Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, p. 135. The Norwegian synoptic history *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* also records Qzurr as her father in chapter 5.

indicate that the protection being sought in Denmark derives from sibling bonds. No matter the nature of their connection, Haraldr welcomes Eyvindr, and even puts him in charge of Denmark's naval defences.

What follows has already been briefly touched upon.³² Egill and Þorolfr set out *viking* in Denmark and, as their expedition begins, they become aware that Eyvindr has set an ambush for them. The brothers spring the trap, defeat Eyvindr and seize his goods and ship while he is forced to swim for safety. In this moment Egill speaks a verse mocking Eyvindr.³³ If there were any doubts that Egill was on a trajectory for a dramatic show-down with Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, those should now be put aside. However, at this point Þorolfr chooses the path of wisdom in deciding they should not overwinter in Norway, and this is when the brothers hear word of Æthelstan's need for men.

It is a curiosity of the text that Æthelstan's first appearance is less-well embedded within the narrative than his second, or indeed than any of Eiríkr's. Eiríkr and Egill's antagonisms escalate over four individual and distinct episodes. The first two, outlined above, occur during Egill's first trip abroad, the second two over two subsequent journeys. That he seeks Æthelstan a second time, looking for refuge in the aftermath of conflict with Eiríkr, reflects the parallelism of which *Egils saga* seems so fond. However, while each of the Eiríkr episodes is, to some degree, evenly weighted, this is not the case with Æthelstan's two depictions. In each instance, the Eiríkr conflict is described in some detail and imbued with cultural memory of his reign, identifiable through intertextual Scandinavian traditions. In contrast, Egill's first visit to the English court is *very* extensively narrated, while his second visit is recounted so briefly as to give a sense of being glossed over. Moreover, there is no build-up to the account of Vinheiðr/Brunanburh—the episode comes as something of an abrupt non-sequitur. The tone of the narrative shifts: dialogue is exchanged for reported speech; summation replaces narration for the chapters covering the lead up to the battle. The battle itself serves little narrative purpose, and is not directly referenced again in the text. There is also a case to be made that Brunanburh does not fit well on a timeline in which Eiríkr is regnant in Norway. As Clare Downham highlights, however, this is representative of the

³² Chapter 3, p. 90.

³³ *Egils saga* 49.

broader problems that arise in attempting to reconcile Scandinavian traditions of Eiríkr's kingships in Norway and Northumbria with the English historical record.³⁴ This is not limited to questions of chronology, but extends to matters of identity, of whether the Eiríkr who ruled Northumbria in English and Scandinavian cultural memory are one and the same.³⁵ That debate is considered in detail below. The point here is that the Vinheiðr episode sits somewhat at odds with the narrative around it, yet at the same time is not completely removed from it.

There are two important events to note from the Vinheiðr passages. Firstly, that Þorolfr dies in the battle. Secondly, that Egill is richly rewarded for his service to the English king. The former begets the latter, and the latter is a familiar element of the English court trope as identified in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. Þorolfr's death also causes Egill's increased reliance on Arinbjörn in matters relating to Eiríkr. In turn, even though Vinheiðr is not mentioned again in the text, the two chests of silver Æthelstan gives Egill are referenced several times. In fact, it drives a sub-plot which again demonstrates a parallelism. First an aged Skalla-Grímr, unhappy that Egill would not share the treasure with him, takes his own wealth and buries it in secret in the countryside that his heir may not inherit it.³⁶ In truth, Æthelstan had instructed Egill to give the money to his father in compensation for Þorolfr's death should he return to Iceland.³⁷ Later an aged Egill, similarly displeased with his own grandson, took Æthelstan's silver out into the wilderness and hid it before he died.³⁸

Both Þorolfr's death and the chests of silver locate the Vinheiðr episode within the wider narrative, as does Egill's later welcome at the English court. This raises two possibilities. Perhaps what is seen here is the adept hand of a skilled author interweaving a completely independent story within that of Egill's life. This is plausible given the stylistic shift in the

³⁴ Clare Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed? The Mystery of the Last Viking King of York', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 14 (2004), 57–9.

³⁵ On both the chronology of the reign of Eiríkr of York and his identity, see Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', pp. 27–51; Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed?', 51–77; Clare Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland. The Dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2007), pp. 112–20; Peter Sawyer, 'The Last Scandinavian kings of York', *Northern History* 31 (1995), 39–44; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Early Kings of Norway, the Issue of Agnatic Succession, and the Settlement of Iceland', *Viator* 47 (2016), 173; Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, pp. 74–9; Woolf, 'Erik Bloodaxe Revisited', pp. 189–93.

³⁶ *Egils saga* 60.

³⁷ *Egils saga* 55.

³⁸ *Egils saga* 87.

passages that cover the prelude to the battle, and that Egill and Þorolfr are at best peripheral characters within them. Alternatively, and more likely, Þorolfr's death and Egill's reward are authentic to the *Egils saga* narrative, their repercussions already embedded within the continuing story. The tonal shift may then be attributed to the author adapting whatever story stood in the place of the Vinheiðr passages in Icelandic cultural memory of Egill's life with reference to the famous Battle of Brunanburh. By this theory, the author either introduced the battle in its entirety or, adapting external material, augmented a briefer version of it already present and more in keeping with the saga's tone and Egill's other interactions. A blending of two narratives may explain why, following the extensive scene-setting passages in which they scarcely feature, the brothers return to the fore once the fighting begins, the action gathers momentum, and dialogue resumes.

In the aftermath of Brunanburh, Egill recognises his need to provide for Þorolfr's wife and their child and begs leave to depart England. Æthelstan grants this and the two men depart in friendship, the king's statement that he would prefer Egill to remain echoed in a similar exhortation on their second parting.³⁹ The passages between this departure from England and Egill's return encompass a great deal of movement and cover an extended timeframe, yet the narrative is characterised by a brevity that belies the Vinheiðr passages. Egill returns to Norway in the summer, finding that Þórir has died and Arinbjörn taken over his responsibilities. Egill does not interact with Eiríkr or Gunnhildr on this visit, though at the end of winter Arinbjörn advises Egill depart Norway given the latter's hostile intent. The main narrative intent behind Egill's season in Firðafylki is to have the *skáld* marry his brother's widow Ásgerðr. This is *Egils saga's* cursory nod to the *skáldasögur* romance tradition.⁴⁰ It is Arinbjörn, the ever-loyal friend, who arranges the couple's betrothal and marriage that winter, having learned of Egill's desires.⁴¹ Come spring, Egill and Ásgerðr leave for Iceland and arrive home in Borg, the saga recounting that Egill had been absent for twelve years. This closes out Egill's first trip abroad.

³⁹ *Egils saga* 55, 62.

⁴⁰ Chapter 4, p. 133.

⁴¹ *Egils saga* 56.



Map 10: Egill's first journey through northern Europe per Egils saga's chronology. A Humber landing site in England is suggested, though not identified in the text. A site for Brunanburh has not been posited (M. Firth).

The outcomes of Egill's first journey abroad are familiar: the *skáld* returns to Iceland with newfound wealth, with friends and enemies in high places, with a reputation for poetic composition and heroic deeds. For the same token, however, Egill's travels have differed greatly from those of Björn and Gunnlaugr and fit less fully within the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*. The narration favours detailed exposition of experiences with two kings as opposed to a litany of visitations at various northern courts. Moreover, of these two, Egill only seeks audience with one: Æthelstan. Egill never states why he wants to travel, but he is seemingly less driven by a desire to prove himself in the eyes of Scandinavia's leading men than he is by the acquisition of wealth. He and Þorolfr spend most of their time *viking* in the Baltic, Denmark and Frisia, while attendance at Æthelstan's court is framed as in pursuit of mercenary employment. Egill's attendance at King Eiríkr's travelling court at Atley is happenstance and in the face of Þorolfr's apparent desire to keep his brother from meeting the king. Nonetheless, Egill's subsequent outlawry does recall Gunnlaugr's own exile from Norway at the hands of Earl Eiríkr. Both *skáld* are reacting to perceived slights from members of the rulers' households, and both rely on familial allies' proximity to the Norwegian ruler to enable their safe departure. There is, however, a great deal more to Egill's escape than to Gunnlaugr's,

involving an unlawful killing, duelling magics between Gunnhildr and Egill, and a daring swim to safety. Further, there is no later reconciliation such as Gunnlaugr enjoyed. In subsequent journeys from Iceland, Egill only deepens the rift with Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, their conflict coming to a head in the Anglo-Scandinavian city of York.

Little of note happens during Egill's time back in Borg and it takes up little space in the text, though he is there 'að vetrum skipti mjök mǫrgum' (over many winters).⁴² Yet, some matters of domestic interest *are* raised that link into this discussion. Skalla-Grímr's daughter Sæunnr marries one of Egill's companions and veteran of Brunanburh, Þorfinnr *strangi* (the severe). The saga indicates that Björn Hítðælakappi was their grandchild. In the passage that follows, the author describes the ongoing settlement of the Borgarfjörðr region, and draws attention to Illugi *svarti*, Gunnlaugr's father.⁴³ His inclusion alongside the *Mýramenn* gives credence to *Gunnlaugs saga's* statement that 'Illugi var annar mestur höfðingi í Borgarfirði en Þorsteinn Egilsson' (Illugi was the second greatest chieftain in Borgarfjörðr after Þorsteinn Egilsson).⁴⁴ The appearance of Björn and Illugi demonstrates the retrospective nature of the narrative; in particular, the implication that Björn was a known heroic figure means these passages could not have been adopted into *Egils saga* any earlier than c.1020. Whether the seemingly digressive genealogies entered the narrative during an oral phase of composition or are the work of the saga author cannot be established with any certainty. No matter when they became part of Egill's story, they serve to locate the *skáld* within a wider Saga Age world. Egill, Björn, and Gunnlaugr were all well-embedded within regional cultural memory. The manifest intertextuality of their appearances in each other's sagas works to interweave regional traditions of Borgarfjörðr's leading men into a single literary-historical edifice.

The main *event* that occurs at this point of the narrative is the death of Ásgerðr's father in Norway, and the claiming of his full wealth by her brother-in-law Berg-Önundr. Egill sees Ásgerðr as being due an equal share of her father's estate, and thus sets out to Norway to press this claim. What follows is integral to the saga's commentary on kingship. The Icelander seeks to make a legal case for some portion of the estate to pass into his control via his wife's inheritance. However, in Norway, legalities can be subordinated to the king's authority, and

⁴² *Egils saga* 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Gunnlaugs saga* 4; Gunnlaugr himself is also mentioned in *Egils saga* 81, 89.

Eiríkr supports Berg-Ǫnundr. What follows is a rich tale of conflict that establishes the groundwork for Egill's final clash with Eiríkr. In short, Egill's efforts prove futile. Matters come to a head at the Gulapíng (Gula assembly) in the presence of King Eiríkr, Egill's safety only guaranteed by Arinbjörn's might in manpower. Here Berg-Ǫnundr insults Egill and questions Ásgerðr's legitimacy. Gunnhildr in turn mocks Eiríkr's timidity and tolerance of Egill's impertinences, serving a formulaic whetting or incitement role, common in the *Íslendingasögur*.⁴⁵ The assembly descends into chaos and, while Egill departs unmolested, Eiríkr begins a hunt for him at sea. Egill escapes, though with the loss of his ship and ten men, and having killed one of Eiríkr's *hirðmenn*. Yet this is not the sum of Egill's transgressions. Arinbjörn provides Egill a ship that he may return to Iceland, but on his way through the islands to the west of Horðaland, Egill stops by Berg-Ǫnundr's farm, killing him and Eiríkr's *fóstrson*, Fróði. Egill then runs into (figuratively and literally) Eiríkr's son Røgnvaldr's ship, killing him and his men; raids the king's estate on Askr island, killing and looting; raises a scorn-pole cursing Eiríkr and Gunnhildr to be driven from Norway; and finally sails home.⁴⁶

There are two incidents of note during Egill's next stay in Borg. Firstly, this includes the episode in which Egill refuses to share Æthelstan's silver with Skalla-Grímr, with Skalla-Grímr subsequently hiding his own wealth, and then dying.⁴⁷ It is, as noted, a death in every way emulated by Egill in his own old age, his never-spent trophy of Brunanburh buried in Mosfell. Secondly, Egill's curse takes rapid effect. Hákon *Aðalsteinsfóstri*, Eiríkr's half-brother, returns to Norway from his fosterage at Æthelstan's court and forces Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from the throne. Eiríkr goes first to Orkney, then raids in Scotland and England where Æthelstan, having raised a defensive force, goes to meet the exiled Norwegian king. According to the saga, Æthelstan makes Eiríkr a *subregulus* in Northumbria as a defensive bulwark against the Scots and Irish.⁴⁸ In theory, this would place Eiríkr's arrival in the north of England between Brunanburh in 937 and Æthelstan's death in 939. However, this timeline does not work within the saga's internal chronology any better than it does within the

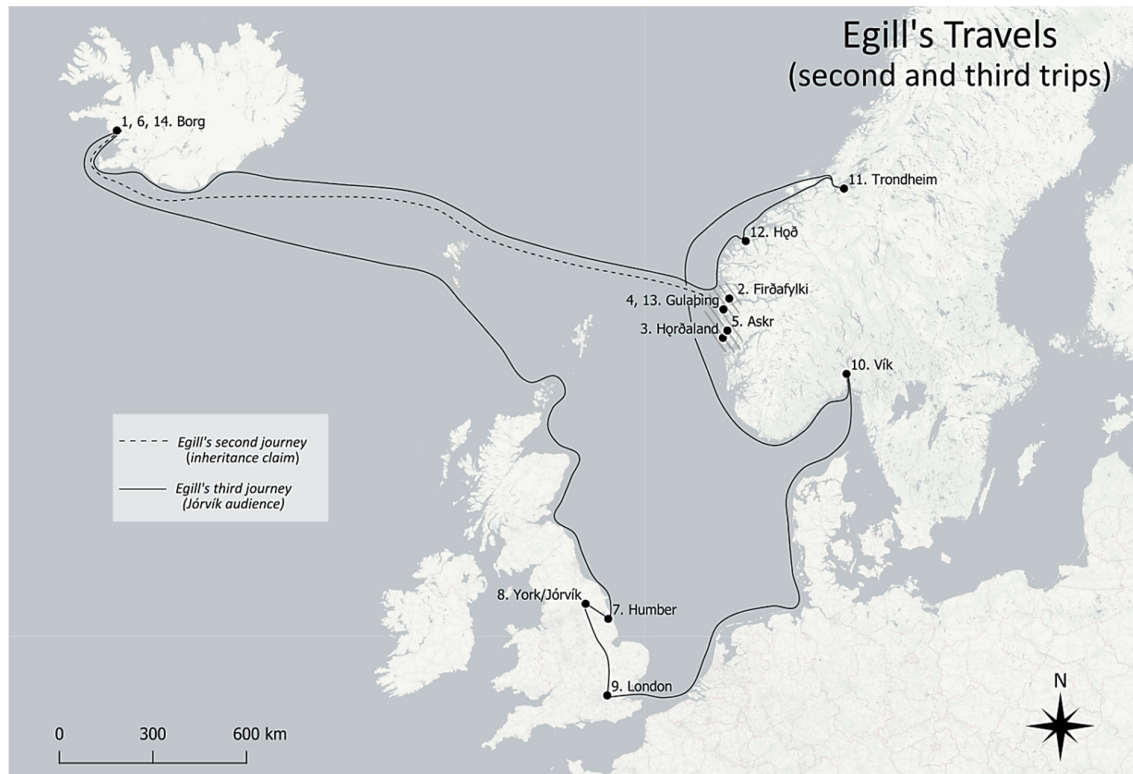
⁴⁵ *Egils saga* 57. On the whetting motif and women's incitements to actions, see Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 17–24.

⁴⁶ *Egils saga* 58–59.

⁴⁷ *Egils saga* 60.

⁴⁸ *Egils saga* 61.

historical record, bearing in mind that between his first and second journeys, Egill was at Borg ‘over many winters’.⁴⁹ Cultural memory of Eiríkr interacting with Æthelstan and through him gaining lordship in York is, nonetheless, ubiquitous within Scandinavian histories of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, historicity notwithstanding.⁵⁰



Map 11: Egill's second and third journeys through the North Sea world per *Egils saga's* chronology. The saga states that, in his third trip, Egill skirted north of Orkney and followed the Scottish coast to the Humber (M. Firth).

Egils saga's shift of setting to Northumbria has little real narrative effect. Eiríkr's faithful *fóstbróðir* Arinbjörn goes with him, as does Gunnhildr, meaning the primary players within the ongoing feud with Egill are all within a proximity that allows the dynamics perpetuating it to continue. And soon Egill will join them. One of Gunnhildr's first acts upon arriving in York is to enact a curse that Egill 'skyldi aldrei ró bíða á Íslandi fyrr en hún sæi hann' (should never know peace in Iceland until she had seen him).⁵¹ Soon after, in Borg, Egill becomes restless and desires to travel again.

⁴⁹ *Egils saga* 57.

⁵⁰ See for example, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* vii; *Fagrskinna*, pp. 76–7; *Historia Norwegie* xii; Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, p. 152. Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 2 also notes Eiríkr's welcome by Æthelstan, but makes no note of his being offered regional overlordship in Northumbria.

⁵¹ *Egils saga* 61.

Finally, the narrative arrives at the crux of the Egill-Eiríkr conflict, the moment to which the saga author has been building. Egill puts out to sea late in the season and, skirting Orkney for fear Eiríkr was still resident there, Egill and his men battle the weather down the Scottish coast only to be shipwrecked in the Humber, whereupon Egill learns he has washed up on the shores of Eiríkr's new kingdom. The *skáld* has two allies in England, and Arinbjörn is closer than Æthelstan, and so Egill heads to York. Just as at the Gulaping, Egill is escorted into Eiríkr's court backed by Arinbjörn's men and advocated for by his friend, who states that Egill deliberately sought out the king to seek reconciliation. Gunnhildr again performs the whetting archetype as she seeks to goad Eiríkr into executing Egill. Arinbjörn manages to stay that execution for one night and advises Egill to spend it composing a twenty-stanza *drápa* in praise of the king. Despite Gunnhildr attempting to derail the attempt, first by distracting Egill in the form of a bird during the night and then taking control at Eiríkr's court the following morning, Egill still manages to recite his verse for the king, his *Höfuðlausn*. This is a famous poem, discussed below, and an important piece of evidence in trying to establish the historicity of Eiríkr's rule in York.⁵² In as far as the immediate narrative context goes, even if the framing is, as John Hines states, 'self-evidently a fanciful and implausible story',⁵³ *Höfuðlausn* does its job.⁵⁴ Though so too does Arinbjörn's advocacy. For love of his *fóstbróðir*, appreciation of Egill's verse, and desire to appear a just ruler, Eiríkr allows the *skáld* to leave his court though once more exiles him from his lands. Egill immediately heads south to Æthelstan.

Egill's second visit to the English king's court is not an extensive vignette and is of lesser importance to this discussion than the episodes at Vinheiðr and York. It is a moment, however, that connects England into a wider Anglo-Scandinavian political milieu with greater

⁵² While *Höfuðlausn* is ubiquitous to discussion of the saga, it is not ubiquitous to the *Egils saga* tradition and is omitted from the *Möðruvallabók* of the three main manuscripts. Its form varies in the other two. See Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Verse and Prose in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*', in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, ed. by Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010), pp. 193–5; Russell Poole, 'Non enim possum plorare nec lamenta fundere: *Sonatorrek* in a Tenth-Century Context', *Laments for the Lost in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Jane Tolmie and M. J. Toswell (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), p. 177; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Egil Strikes Again: Textual Variation and the Seventeenth-Century Reworkings of Egil's Saga', in *Egil the Viking Poet*, pp. 176–8.

⁵³ Hines, 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn*', p. 84.

⁵⁴ *Egils saga* 61–62.

success than seen in either *Bjarnar saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*. It also reflects certain intertextual tropes already observed in the English court trope of those two sagas, and serves to close out the period of journeying delimited by Egill's conflict with Eiríkr, beginning with the feast at Atley and ending with the audience in York.

In the spring following events in York, both Æthelstan and Egill are found in London. Egill, still intent on claiming the lands he held by Berg-Önundr, seeks Æthelstan's permission to depart for Norway. This need for the king's permission to depart England, a feature of both of Egill's periods in Æthelstan's court, is paralleled in the English court episodes of *Gunnlaugs saga*, perhaps suggesting that Egill, like Gunnlaugr, had been made a *hirðmaðr* of the English king in recognition of his deeds. Æthelstan's permission is forthcoming, though again with an admonition that he would prefer the *skáld* to remain. At their parting, Æthelstan performs in the same gift-giving role as Knútr and Æthelred, gifting the Icelander a laden merchant ship. And so Egill heads for Norway, likely more hopeful of success than on his last visit. He has, in theory, been pardoned by Eiríkr while in England, and the man on the Norwegian throne is Hákon, Æthelstan's *fóstrson*. The adventures that follow in Norway are colourful, often digressive, and replete with intertextual motifs and narrative structures. Egill does gain audience with Hákon and is ultimately successful in claiming Ásgerðr's inheritance, if by bloody means. However, the saga's interest in the English political milieu departs with Egill from London's docks, and thus also closes that part of the saga of relevance to this thesis.

7.2 THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH

Stepping back within the saga's chronology, Egill's first visit to England and *Egils saga's* first intersection with English history is in the context of an uprising against Æthelstan's authority, and the subsequent battle at Vinheiðr. Granted that the overarching narrative of the chapters relaying Egill's first three journeys focuses on the building tension between Egill and Eiríkr, the saga's extended account of the English campaign seems an odd inclusion. This is not to say it is inauthentic to Egill's biography. Egill's reward from Æthelstan is referenced throughout the text and plays its narrative role; he has an established relationship with Æthelstan prior to his second visit to England. It seems clear that Egill's performance of some service for the English king in his first visit belongs within the narrative. There is, moreover,

no reason to think this would not take the form of some heroic or military deed, adhering to the intertextual models of the English court trope. Brunanburh is, then, perhaps a logical setting. Æthelstan's name circulated on coins and in Scandinavian histories and *konungasögur*,⁵⁵ while accounts of his victory at Brunanburh were also widely disseminated.⁵⁶ Yet the noted shift in style and lengthy interruption to the otherwise quick-building Egill-Eiríkr conflict cannot pass without comment. The case made here is that a tradition of Egill's service in Æthelstan's army was indeed embedded within Icelandic cultural memory, but that the author augments that tradition, drawing upon and adapting external materials.

A convincing case can be put forward for Vinheiðr's identification as the Battle of Brunanburh, though the narrative is replete with anomalies, errors, and inventions. This is *the* famous battle of Æthelstan's reign, a battle that intersected with Insular Scandinavian politics, and the only battle that leaves an imprint beyond the immediate English historical record. It is entirely understandable that such would have entered Scandinavian and Icelandic cultural memory. Though, it must be borne in mind that no single source provides a full and reliable account of the event. The most contemporary source, the *Battle of Brunanburh*, is focused on the battle itself and recounts it in a highly stylised form which, while preserving some details of the participants and outcomes, provides little clue as to the context of the battle, the immediate lead-up to the event, or even how it was conducted.⁵⁷ Other early Insular sources such as the *Annals of Ulster* tend to brevity with no contextualising detail, and even Æthelweard, for all the implications that Brunanburh loomed large in the cultural memory of his own time as *magnum bellum*, fails to provide anything but a limited sketch of the event.⁵⁸ The need for historians to complement the patchy historical record of Æthelstan's reign with detail drawn from later sources has already been noted,⁵⁹ as has the status of William of Malmesbury's *Gesta regum* as the most detailed medieval account of such.

⁵⁵ See for example, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum v*; Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, pp. 142–4; Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 2.

⁵⁶ See for example, *Annals of Ulster* 937.6; *ASC A–D* 937; *Æthelweard* 4.5; *G. Reg.* ii.131.4; Geffrei Gaimar, *Estoire des Engleis*, lines 3513–3529. For an exhaustive list of medieval texts that recount the battle—numbering some 53 accounts in total—see Michael Livingston, ed., *The Battle of Brunanburh: A Casebook* (Exeter: The University of Exeter Press, 2011), pp. 28–154.

⁵⁷ *ASC A–D* 937.

⁵⁸ *Æthelweard* 4.5.

⁵⁹ Chapter 3, p. 95.

William's account of Brunanburh, or Brunefeld as he calls it, has some parallels with the *Egils saga* account of Vinheiðr, enough to warrant the suggestion of intertextual links. This is not to say that the two texts had direct contact. It is possible that William's *Gesta regum* may have made it to Iceland by the early thirteenth century, having been authored around a century before *Egils saga*, but there is no clear evidence of this. It would be more accurate to say that the intertextual parallels are indicative of two authors who drew on a shared tradition. That tradition is, in Bjarni Einarsson's consideration, certainly English in origin. Bjarni has previously noted the parallels between the *Egils saga* and *Gesta regum* accounts of Brunanburh/Vinheiðr; however, he did not realise their full extent, and drew a very long bow in attributing the similarities to direct borrowing by the *Egils saga* author.⁶⁰

William in fact recounts the Battle of Brunanburh twice, in keeping with his idiosyncratic narration of Æthelstan's reign. The first of these, according to the editors of *Gesta regum*, is based on the *Chronicle's* account for the year 937.⁶¹ Perhaps a case could be made for this being the bones of William's narrative, but it is much lengthier than any account of Æthelstan's rule in any extant *Chronicle* text. It provides a great deal of additional detail in comparison and, moreover, William seems to have been ignorant of the *Battle of Brunanburh* poem, which comprises the full length of the A–D-text entries for 937, suggesting he looked elsewhere for his information on the battle.⁶² William's second account of Brunanburh comes from material he claims to have found in a *volumen vetustum* (ancient volume).⁶³

There has, rightly, been some debate as to whether William should be taken at his word or whether the section drawn from his 'ancient volume' is fabricated. This centres on the prosimetrical nature of this section of *Gesta regum*; there is little debate around the prose material which is understood to have been drawn from said 'ancient volume', but the authenticity of the verse passages has been brought into question. This is pertinent, because William's second account of Brunanburh is in verse. This is independent of the *Battle of Brunanburh*, and stylistically is identified as twelfth-century Anglo-Latin by Michael

⁶⁰ Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger*, pp. 229–53, esp. 243–7, cf. Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan', pp. 22–5.

⁶¹ *G. Reg.* ii. 131; *G. Reg.*, ed. Thomson, ii, pp. 114–15.

⁶² *Ibid.* See also C.E. Wright, *The Cultivation of Saga in Anglo-Saxon England* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), pp. 144–6.

⁶³ *G. Reg.* ii. 131.

Lapidge.⁶⁴ This need not, however, be as fatal to the possibility that the verse derives from an older composition as Lapidge supposes. As Rodney Thomson points out, the type of bombastic (*sufflata*) Latin William describes accords well with the characteristic hermeneutic style of tenth- and eleventh-century England. Moreover, William is clear that he is parsing this material for his audience, translating it into a twelfth-century Latin idiom rather than retaining his source material verbatim.⁶⁵ In all probability, William was drawing on a non-extant source for Æthelstan's reign, composed close to the king's lifetime. It is of interest then that there are distinctive parallels between William's accounts of Brunanburh and *Egils saga's* description of the Battle of Vinheiðr. This gives the impression that the saga's introductory framework for the battle accesses the same comparatively early tradition, or a redaction of it.

The *Egils saga* chapters that narrate the lead-up to the battle are not just stylistically distinct; these also have the clearest parallels to William's narrative. As such, they are the most likely to have drawn on an English source or tradition. Egill and Þorolfr's arrival in England and audience with Æthelstan fits well enough within the peripatetic *skáld* narrative at this point of the saga. However, Egill and Þorolfr undergo a sort of pseudo-baptism to enter the king's service, which is something of unusual detail. It does, though, accord with the saga's assertion that Æthelstan was known as *inn trúfasti* (the true in faith).⁶⁶ That sobriquet is also used of Æthelstan in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, the only other use of the cognomen for the English king in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, highlighting again the links between those two texts.⁶⁷ The byname, reflecting Nordic naming traditions associated with character traits, may of itself reflect cultural memory drawn from the same English traditions William was accessing, whereby Æthelstan was famed for his piety, church patronage and relic collection.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *G. Reg.* ii. 135.7–9; Michael Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 62–71. See also David N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar. Six Essays on Political, Cultural and Ecclesiastical Revival* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992), pp. 142–3, 146.

⁶⁵ *G. Reg.*, ed. Thomson, ii, pp. 116–18. See also Foot, *Æthelstan*, 251–8; Michael Wood, 'The Making of King Aethelstan's Empire', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), pp. 265–6.

⁶⁶ *Egils saga* 50.

⁶⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, pp. 143–4.

⁶⁸ See for example, *G. Pont.* v.246.2–3; *G. Reg.* ii.135.3–6, 138B; *Historia de Sancto Cuthberto* 26–27, ed. by Ted Johnson South (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 65–7. It is of note that William's primary account of Æthelstan's collecting of relics is located within that material drawn from the 'ancient

Such engagement with external historical traditions becomes more evident in the subsequent chapter, which establishes the historical context of the Hiberno-Anglo-Scandinavian conflict.

Egils saga opens its account of the conflict by stating that ‘Óláfr rauði hét konungur á Skotlandi’ (Óláfr the Red was king in Scotland).⁶⁹ This is not correct. The King of Alba at Brunanburh is widely attested to have been Constantine II.⁷⁰ He *was* allied with an Óláfr, around whom there was quite some confusion from medieval English historians. William of Malmesbury states that this is Óláfr Sigtryggsson, son of the Sigtryggr who had married Æthelstan’s sister in 926.⁷¹ In contrast, Simeon of Durham records that it is Óláfr Guðrøðsson, the same Norse King of Dublin who took the throne of York in 940 in the aftermath of Æthelstan’s death.⁷² For their part, Henry of Huntingdon and John of Worcester refer to the man in question as *Anlaf regem Hibernie* (Óláfr King of Ireland), ignoring the fact that this could apply to either Óláfr and, moreover, that both of them claimed the Northumbrian crown at various points in the 940s.⁷³ It is generally accepted that the person in question here is Óláfr Guðrøðsson,⁷⁴ but in this confusion it is understandable that the Scottish and Irish leaders may intentionally or unintentionally have been conflated in Icelandic cultural memory.⁷⁵ That Óláfr *rauði*, also called Óláfr *Skotakonungr* (King of Scots) in the text, may have been a cultural memory of one of the Irish Óláfir might be indicated by the saga’s statement that he was a descendant of the semi-legendary king Ragnarr Loðbrók. Both Óláfr Guðrøðsson and Óláfr Sigtryggsson were scions of the Hiberno-Norse Uí Ímair dynasty, whose progenitor is at times thought to be Ívarr *inn beinlausi* (the boneless), one of Ragnarr’s sons, though this is by no means a secure identification.⁷⁶ More probable is that this is another example of the

volume’, and this tradition is not reported by his main contemporaries such as John of Worcester and Henry of Huntingdon.

⁶⁹ *Egils saga* 51.

⁷⁰ See for example, *ASC* A–D 937; *G. Reg.* ii.131.3–4; *JW* 937.

⁷¹ *G. Reg.* ii.131.4.

⁷² *SD*, i, p. 76.

⁷³ *HH* v.18; *JW* 937. It is of note that Henry terms Óláfr as *rex* and Constantine as *dux*, clearly perceiving the former to be the leader and prime mover in events.

⁷⁴ Downham, ‘Last Scandinavian Kings of York’, p. 29; Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 169–70; Halloran, ‘The Brunanburh Campaign’, pp. 140–3.

⁷⁵ See Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger*, pp. 240–1, who argues this does not necessarily undermine the historical credibility of *Egils saga*.

⁷⁶ Downham, *Viking Kings*, pp. 9, 15–16; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, ‘High-Kings, Vikings and Other Kings’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 22, no. 83 (1979), 283–323; Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, pp. 27–8, 43–5, 54–7.

connections between *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*. The passage which follows Óláfr's introduction in *Egils saga* is that summary of Scandinavian settlement in Northumbria shared with *Heimskringla*, the version in the latter stating that this had been led by Loðbrók's sons.⁷⁷

Following this contextualising chapter on the political milieu in northern England at the time of the battle—in which neither Skallagrímsson is mentioned—the saga author provides a much longer passage on the more immediate context of the battle and its lead-up.⁷⁸ The sense here again is that the material is heavily dependent on an external source that is only occasionally, and somewhat clumsily, directly connected to the wider *Egils saga* narrative. Egill and Þorolfr are still almost entirely absent. A single verse by Egill alongside the brief statement that Æthelstan placed the brothers in charge of the Scandinavian contingent of his army represents the extent of their involvement.⁷⁹ Both insertions appear otherwise unrelated to the rest of the chapter.

Here there are six explicit and unique parallels with William's accounts of the battle. Firstly, a ruler named Óláfr is Æthelstan's primary opponent; Constantine makes no appearance in *Egils saga* and is a peripheral figure at best in both of William's accounts of the battle. Secondly, the antagonisms are driven by land incursions from Scotland into Northumbria with no mention of a waterborne force. This is at odds with earlier accounts of Brunanburh which invariably record that Óláfr Guðrøðsson arrived with a fleet. Taking the *Gesta regum* and *Egils saga* accounts together, Kevin Halloran has speculated William's attribution of this action to Óláfr Sigtryggsson may be correct, with the younger Óláfr attacking from the north with Constantine, and his older namesake sailing from Ireland later in the campaigning season.⁸⁰ Thirdly, both texts record little resistance to the invasion from the north, albeit for different reasons. *Egils saga* suggests that Æthelstan's lieutenants offered little by way of effective resistance, William that Æthelstan deliberately allowed Óláfr to advance into Northumbria to lure him into a false confidence.⁸¹ This also reflects a fourth

⁷⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, pp. 152–3; Chapter 3, p. 104.

⁷⁸ *Egils saga* 52.

⁷⁹ There is no indication, as Fjalldal posits with undue certainty, that the subsequent negotiations involved the brothers, Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 71.

⁸⁰ Halloran, 'The Brunanburh Campaign', p. 141.

⁸¹ This is per William's prose account of the battle, *G. Reg.* ii.131.4. William's verse account attributes the incursions to Æthelstan's indolence, *G. Reg.* ii.135.8.

shared narrative element, that the battle site was deliberately chosen by the English. *Egils saga* has Æthelstan issue Óláfr a challenge to meet in battle at Vinheiðr, whereas William simply has Æthelstan halt his tactical retreat at Brunefeld.

Æthelstan's tactical retreat, or delay of pitched battle, is a fifth notable shared motif. In *Egils saga*, Æthelstan retreats south to collect an army while his lieutenants engage in faux negotiations with Óláfr, designed to buy the king time to return with greater forces. Such a gathering of troops is also implied by William, who asserts that at Brunefeld Óláfr was faced with *magnis uiribus militum* (great forces of soldiers).⁸² The *Egils saga* delaying tactic has been identified as being particularly folkloric in nature by a number of commentators, and Ian McDougall draws attention to elements of the tale that reflect the parallelism so characteristic of *Egils saga*.⁸³ William's version of events is not free from such flourishes; at the parallel moment in his prose retelling, Óláfr dresses as a minstrel to infiltrate the English camp and spy out where Æthelstan's tent lay so as to mount a night attack.⁸⁴ This story is unique to *Gesta regum*, but not unique within *Gesta regum*. William recounts a near-identical story of Alfred the Great escaping the somerset fens dressed as a minstrel to infiltrate the Heathen Army camp.⁸⁵ This is a good reminder of the literary nature of medieval historiography, even within those texts that are commonly thought to hold relative historical merit. Nonetheless, it is tempting to speculate that the folkloric interludes presaging the battle in both *Egils saga* and *Gesta regum*, for all their differences, represent a faint memory of such manoeuvring for advantage in the days before the armies met. Speculation aside, the final parallel between *Egils saga* and *Gesta regum*, which comes in the battle's aftermath rather than its prelude, is that both recount that the 'King of Scots' died in the battle.⁸⁶ This is a curious addition by William who, as far as the outcome of the battle is concerned, otherwise adheres to the *Chronicle's* account quite closely. The *Chronicle*, however, makes clear that both Constantine and Óláfr escaped the battle. William is the first historian to introduce the Scottish king's death to the narrative

⁸² *G. Reg.* ii.131.4.

⁸³ Alistair Campbell, ed., *The Battle of Brunanburh* (London: Heinemann, 1938), pp. 68–80; Lee M. Hollander, 'The Battle on the Vin-Heath and the Battle of the Huns', *JEGP*, 32, no. 1 (1933), 33–43; Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story', pp. 311–13; McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', p. 116–17, 126–31.

⁸⁴ *G. Reg.* ii.131.4–6.

⁸⁵ *G. Reg.* ii.121.5.

⁸⁶ *Egils saga* 54 (*Skotakonungr*); *G. Reg.* ii.131.6 (*rex Scottorum*).

of Brunanburh, no extant source reports again this until *Egils saga*, and all later medieval Insular histories that follow this narrative are indebted to William.

It is improbable that such a large number of parallels between *Egils saga's* account of Vinheiðr, and William's accounts of Brunanburh (particularly his prose version) are merely coincidental, the product of some sort of incidental, intercultural, implicit intertextuality. The most logical explanation is that both versions of the story drew upon a lost progenitor. This is not to say that they both accessed the same text; the variations in the folkloric elements of the tale are sufficient to indicate *Egils saga* and *Gesta regum* represent divergent, culturally specific memories of Brunanburh. Yet, their similarities are also telling, and the probability is that, through whichever routes of transmission, the foundation of both texts' accounts of Brunanburh access the same tradition of the battle. *Egils saga's* Battle of Vinheiðr is best understood as an Icelandic cultural memory of the Battle of Brunanburh.

Objections to so identifying Vinheiðr largely arise out of questions of relative historicity. Downham, for example, expresses some scepticism in her recent article on the location of the Battle of Brunanburh.⁸⁷ In effect, for Downham, the inaccuracies of the Vinheiðr narrative outweigh its similarities to English accounts of the events of 937, and thus 'it is not clear if it is even the same battle that is recounted'.⁸⁸ This is, perhaps, overly sceptical. Certainly some scepticism is due, and Downham is right to question how reliable *Egils saga's* account of the battle is,⁸⁹ especially those elements of it that cannot be externally verified, given its numerous demonstrable factual errors, the otherwise unknown Óláfr *rauði* being a case in point. However, taking this position on the Vinheiðr passages then necessitates the explaining away of the similarities between them and English accounts of the Battle of Brunanburh. These cannot be summarily dismissed; they hint that some memory of events resided in the Icelandic storehouse of experience. However, this is not the same as saying that

⁸⁷ Downham, 'A Wirral Location', pp. 24–5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ See also Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 5–7; Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan', 15–31; Hollander, 'The Battle on the Vin-Heath', 36–8; McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', pp. 109–33, all of whom accept that Vinheiðr is intended to describe Brunanburh, but raise significant doubts as to its historicity.

that *Egils saga* is a record of English history; there is a transmission period of some three hundred years that must be considered.

Vinheiðr is an echo of Brunanburh much as Æthelred and Knútr's courts in *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga* are echoes of moments or periods in English history. Whatever historical knowledge may lie at the genesis of these stories, it has been adapted in its retellings, repurposed for alternative narratives, shaped in its transitions between media. In short, the saga account of the battle exemplifies cultural memory. By mediating English history via the generic conventions of the *Íslendingasögur* and refocusing it on an Icelandic protagonist, the author creates both interest and meaning for his thirteenth-century audience. In this way, such passages perform a historical function. Yet they were not intended to be, nor could they be, some sort of historical guidebook in the manner that those seeking the location of Brunanburh have at times treated the Vinheiðr narrative.⁹⁰ In McDougall's wonderfully sardonic words, 'setting off to find Brunanburh equipped only with a copy of *Egils saga* offers prospects of little more than a pleasant walk and a good read'.⁹¹

While the location of Brunanburh is tangential to this discussion—the various arguments are well-surveyed by Downham⁹²—McDougall raises a good point in as far as the ongoing debate relates to *Egils saga*. Seeking the same level of regional topographic accuracy as found in English grants or charters, but within the literary texts of an external culture, is an endeavour destined for disappointment.⁹³ At such point in the future that the battlefield is located, the features of the identified site may perhaps be correlated to the account of *Egils saga*. However, even in the case that *Egils saga* did somehow preserve an accurate record or description of the battle site, it remains that this accuracy could only be identified through the text's comparison to a topography located in the first instance via the English archaeological

⁹⁰ For overviews on the topographical debate, see Halloran, 'The Brunanburh Campaign', pp. 137–8, 144; McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', pp. 116–24. For the onomastic debate, see Cavill, 'Scandinavian *vína*', pp. 357–61; Townend, *English Place-Names*, pp. 88–93. See also Chapter 3, p. 95 (nn. 69–70).

⁹¹ McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', p. 132.

⁹² Downham, 'A Wirral Location', pp. 15–32, though cf. Wood, 'Searching for Brunanburh', pp. 138–59, who argues for a Yorkshire site for the battle.

⁹³ McDougall, 'Discretion and deceit', pp. 131–2.

record. Cognisance of genre expectation, cultural signifiers, and authorial intent is imperative in the search for historicity in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Nonetheless, the overtly literary nature of the Vinheiðr passages, observable in the characteristic use of repeating motifs and parallelism, can also be overstated. Fjalldal, for example, suggests that the very presence of such literary devices makes any inference 'of oral traditions or details of historical relevance' suspect.⁹⁴ This ignores two basic elements of saga composition. Firstly, that these are intertextual narratives that do not exist independent of literary or historical context. The folkloric and formulaic elements of the Vinheiðr narrative bespeak implicit and explicit intertextual links to the medieval literatures of Iceland and of Europe more widely.⁹⁵ The saga's awareness of English history, no matter how muddled it is in the retelling, is similarly indicative of manifest intertextuality, of details that the author could not have fabricated in the moment. He was, for example, aware of Æthelstan's familial connections to his predecessors Edward the Elder and Alfred the Great, familiar with Northumbria's historic rule by *Danakonungar* (Danish kings), conscious of Æthelstan's annexation of the region, and he knew of the ongoing resistance to English rule in the north.⁹⁶ Secondly, the author's influence on the saga text must be considered. Literary devices are not evidence for a lack of historical basis, nor of a lack of oral transmission. It is natural that a skilled saga author would reinterpret a narrative using the literary modes and conventions of his own time. It is, moreover, expected that such an author would augment meaning within his narrative with reference to contemporary political concerns. In identifying this, Fjalldal would seemingly be on safer ground:

The imaginary vision of an English court where justice and generosity prevail is in stark contrast with the less than favorable impression which the saga offers of the Norwegian courts of King Harald and his sons ... the author hardly included the Vinheiðr episode to relate an event in the history of Anglo-Saxon England, but as a literary counterpoint with a thinly veiled political message.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan', p. 26.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–7; Hollander, "The Battle on the Vin-Heath", 36–8.

⁹⁶ *Egils saga* 50–51, cf.

⁹⁷ Fjalldal, 'A Farmer in the Court of King Athelstan', p. 31; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 81–2.

Fjalldal's assessment of the Vinheiðr episode, then, is reminiscent of the case made here for *Gunnlaugs saga's* hierarchy of rulers established through the authorial framework of the travel narrative. By this reckoning, Æthelstan's characterisation, just like that of Æthelred, is invested with thirteenth-century cultural nostalgia and political and ideological values. He is a deliberately constructed 'good king', his court idealised in deliberate juxtaposition to those of the saga's Norwegian kings. Again, however, this adaptation of cultural memory does not preclude an element of historicity. As A. Keith Kelly puts it, 'sagas are neither purely history nor purely fiction; they are both, and indissolubly so'.⁹⁸ Byock explains in further detail, that 'Icelandic prose story telling was a form of ethnographic expression that allowed authorial creativity while retaining its roots in historic tradition.'⁹⁹ Vinheiðr can be at once similar and dissimilar to Brunanburh, to be an overtly literary composition while at the same time having some historical authenticity in its genesis.

There is little at stake for historians in accepting the expertise of saga critics, and much to be gained by reading Vinheiðr with an eye to both historical correlation and literary convention. Likewise, there is little at stake for historians in accepting that Vinheiðr was intended to represent Brunanburh, that an event of English history lies at the story's origins, that it encapsulates some enigmatic Icelandic memory of the battle. Such a conclusion does not carry with it an implication that the narrative should be understood as a reliable historical source; there are more than enough inaccuracies to demonstrate this is not the case. Yet, the differences between the Vinheiðr of *Egils saga* and the English historical record of Brunanburh are, in some ways, just as revealing as their parallels, if for different reasons. Whereas correspondences demonstrate that the Battle of Brunanburh resided in the Icelandic storehouse of experience, variations demonstrate the form that this cultural memory took. These variations attest to the introduction of inaccuracy and misconception into Icelandic traditions of the battle; they reveal a narrative mediated to the generic conventions of the *Íslendingasögur*, and expose the author's use and adaptation of his source material. Such elements need to be laid bare and peeled away to identify what, if anything, remains of historical value to the study of the events surrounding Brunanburh. As Kelly exhorts, any

⁹⁸ Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story', p. 310.

⁹⁹ Byock, 'Social Memory and the Sagas', p. 303.

‘attempt to unravel the individual threads of truth from the skein of fiction’ is surely preferable to simply dismissing the saga’s account of the conflict.¹⁰⁰

Once the author dispenses with his quest to provide context for the battle and the fighting begins in earnest, a more typical *Íslendingasögur* narrative mode resumes. Egill and Þorolfr return to the action, dialogue again becomes a feature of the text, and clear links are made between the events of the battle and the brothers’ earlier adventures in the saga. The saga’s account of the battle itself, unrivalled yet also unsupported as a detailed record of how Brunanburh unfolded, has been well-rehearsed by saga critics and historians alike.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, Æthelstan emerges victorious, and the Skallagrímssýnir are central to that victory. The two most important outcomes of the event that point to external mnemonic markers and provide links to the processes of cultural memory are Þorolfr’s death in the conflict, and the resulting compensation/reward that Æthelstan provides Egill.

Þorolfr’s death is a remarkable moment in the saga. This is not simply for the manner in which it motivates the narrative, driving Egill closer to both King Æthelstan and Arinbjörn. Rather, it is remarkable because, in this moment, it may be possible to identify an external witness to the brothers’ involvement in Æthelstan’s wars. The following stanzas appear in Haukr Valdísarson’s *Íslendingadrápa*:

Vörðu hauðr þás, hǫðu	Two brothers gave battle
hlýrar tveir, með dýrum	when they defended the ground
foldar vörð ok fyrða,	with the worthy guardian
fleinglygg, Aðalsteini;	of land and men, Æthelstan;
þollr varð allr enn ellri	the elder tree of the halberd [warrior]
atgeirs í fǫr þeiri,	was lost in the expedition,
hrings fell á því þingi	he fell in the sword’s meeting,
Þórolfr enn hugstóri.	Þórolfr the brave-hearted.
Egill fekk unda gagli	Egill, with a drawn sword,
(ulfs kom hrafn at tafni,	provided food for the bird of wounds [raven],

¹⁰⁰ Kelly, ‘Truth and a Good Story’, pp. 313–14.

¹⁰¹ See for example, Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 69–72; Foot, *Æthelstan*, pp. 179–81; McDougall, ‘Discretion and deceit’, pp. 112–14.

hykk burgusk vel varga)	the raven was present at the wolf's sacrifice;
verð með brugðnu sverði;	I believe the wolves ate well;
sonr rauð síðar brynjur	he made the long mailcoats red with blood;
(sverða-Freyr) í dreyra	the gracious Freyr of swords [warrior]
(mildr klauf skatna skjöldu)	split the men's shields,
Skalla-Gríms enn snjalli.	Skalla-Grímr's bold son. ¹⁰²

Clearly this narrates the same events as the Vinheiðr passage, and the question must be whether Haukr's composition predates or postdates the writing of *Egils saga*. Only in the case of the former can the stanzas provide evidence of oral circulation or a pre-existing tradition of the Skallagrímssýnir fighting at Brunanburh. And this is the position convincingly argued by Jónas Kristjánsson who, in his analysis of the poem, places the composition of *Íslendingadrápa* in the twelfth century, pointing not only to matters of style, but to discrepancies that indicate the poem's independence of saga narrative, and to the poet's repeated references to having 'heard' the tales he recounts.¹⁰³ For his part, Bjarni Einarsson has dated the *drápa* to the second half of the thirteenth century, which position supports his argument the *Egils saga* author worked almost entirely from contemporary literary sources rather than from oral tradition.¹⁰⁴

If Jónas' dating is accepted, as is current scholarly consensus,¹⁰⁵ *Íslendingadrápa* points to cultural memory of the brothers' service in Æthelstan's armies (and of Þórofr's death in England) circulating prior to *Egils saga's* composition. And, indeed, it is a cultural memory that predates the *drápa*; Haukr reports this as received knowledge alongside various other legends of Icelandic heroes. It is, nonetheless, a heroic elegy reminiscent of the *Battle of Brunanburh*, replete with stock motifs that suggest it belonged to an oral tradition associated

¹⁰² Haukr Valdísarson, *Íslendingadrápa* st. 9–10, in *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912), i, p. 557. Translation based on that provided by Townend in *English Place-Names*, pp. 90–1.

¹⁰³ Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Íslendingadrápa and Oral Tradition', *Gripla*, 1 (1975), 83–8. See also Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in *Old-Norse Icelandic Literature*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 242–3; Cavill, 'Scandinavian *vína*', pp. 357–8; Townend, *English Place-Names*, pp. 90–1.

¹⁰⁴ On dating, see Bjarni Einarsson, 'Íslendingadrápa', *Tímarit Háskóla Íslands*, 4 (1989), 127–31; on *Egils saga's* sources, see Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger, passim*, esp. pp. 229–53 for Egill's travels.

¹⁰⁵ See for example, Cavill, 'Scandinavian *vína*', p. 358; Gade, 'Dating and Attributions', p. 56; Mikael Males, *The Poetic Genesis of Old Icelandic Literature* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), p. 76 (esp. n.146); Townend, *English Place-Names*, p. 91.

with Egill's adventures, an intrinsically mnemonic composition. Yet, Bjarni's case for *Egils saga's* reliance on external literary sources, particularly for its travel passages, is not without merit. Other commentators have likewise suggested an English influence on the saga's account of Brunanburh.¹⁰⁶ This connects to the wider debate around orality and literacy in the Old Norse-Icelandic corpus, a debate that need not be a zero-sum game. Oral and written literatures coexist within literate societies, and saga authors compiled their narratives from both. At this point it is worth reiterating the two-part hypothesis of the Vinheiðr passages put forward here. It is plausible that the scene-setting chapters were drawn from an English source with commonalities to that used by William of Malmesbury, adapted by the *Egils saga* author to augment the battle passages. In turn, the style of the battle passages and their correlation to *Íslendingadrápa* recommend them as more authentic to Icelandic traditions of Egill's legacy. Yet neither can that earlier cultural memory of Egill and Þórolfr's time in England be an invention untethered from any links to Anglo-Scandinavian intercultural exchange. All stories, after all, have their origins somewhere; some *experience* of Brunanburh passed into Icelandic cultural memory. Returning to the idea of mnemonic verse, memory of the event and an early tradition of the brothers' involvement may have been stored in, and recalled from, the storehouse of experience via the skaldic verses attributed to Egill in the battle's aftermath. Here the saga records four stanzas variously lamenting Þórolfr and recalling the battle, and a verse and refrain from a *drápa* composed in honour of Æthelstan.¹⁰⁷

Egill speaks his first two verses—one an elegy for his brother—as he buries Þórolfr. Following this, he joins Æthelstan's victory feast, clearly expecting reward or recompense. There are several ways to read how Egill comes to gain his reward from Æthelstan. In some ways, this conforms to the archetypal gift-giving king motif, and demonstrates certain elements characteristic of the English court trope of the *skáldasögur*. Egill renders Æthelstan a service he was uniquely positioned to perform, composes a *drápa* in praise of the king, and receives his gift in the king's court.¹⁰⁸ There are patterns here familiar from *Bjarnar saga* and

¹⁰⁶ Alan Binns, 'The York Viking Kingdom: Relations between Old English and Old Norse Culture', in *The Fourth Viking Congress*, ed. by Alan Small (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), pp. 179–89; Townend, *English Place-Names*, pp. 88–93.

¹⁰⁷ On the authenticity of these verses, see Campbell, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 5–7; *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, pp. vi–viii.

¹⁰⁸ *Egils saga* 55 (st. 21–2).

Gunnlaugs saga. Nonetheless, not all appears amicable between Æthelstan and Egill. It was Æthelstan's plan to separate the brothers in the battle despite Egill's objections, and Egill seems to hold the king in some part responsible for Þórolfr's death. Upon entering the hall, the *skáld* is shown to a place of honour facing the king, but refuses to drink, sitting there thrusting his sword in and out of its scabbard, scowling and refusing to drink. It is only once Æthelstan passes Egill one of his own arm rings that the Icelander deigns to set his sword aside and drink, speaking a suitable verse in that moment.¹⁰⁹ His good humour only returns, however, when the two chests of silver in compensation for Þórolfr's death are given to him. Notably, in this moment, Egill thanks Æthelstan for both the gifts (*gjafar*) and his kindnesses (*vinmæli*), establishing the friendship between the *skáld* and the king that provides Egill with a legitimacy in England that he lacks elsewhere.¹¹⁰ This is, according to Laurence de Looze, a strategic narrative element within the broader schema of the Egill–Eiríkr conflict that underlies the travel section of *Egils saga*, foregrounding its conclusion in York.¹¹¹

Before leaving the Vinheiðr episode, however, it is worth pausing a moment on the chests of silver. The idea that Æthelstan's name was circulated by, among other things, his specie is not without foundation. As noted, the chests were reputedly hidden by Egill shortly before his death, the authorial voice indicating that the buried treasure remained something of a regional legend in his own time. Importantly, the saga author also reports that *enskir penningar* (English coins) were known to have been found in a ravine east of Egill's farm following heavy thaws.¹¹² While the saga does not specify that these were Æthelstanian coins, the implication of the text is that they were and, moreover, that such continued to be found long after Egill's death. No matter their true provenance (if of course they existed), such mnemonic tokens would have recalled Icelandic cultural memory of Æthelstan, while the landscape of their finding would have served its own mnemonic function in prompting

¹⁰⁹ *Egils saga* 55 (st. 19).

¹¹⁰ On gift-giving in *Egils saga*, see Nahir I. Otaño Gracia, 'Vikings Of The Round Table: Kingship in the *Islendingasögur* and the *riddarasögur*', *Comitatus*, 47 (2016), 84–9.

¹¹¹ Laurence de Looze, 'The Concept of the Self in Egil's Saga: A Ricoeurian Approach', in *Egil the Viking Poet: New Approaches to Egil's saga*, ed. by Laurence de Looze and others (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), pp. 67–8.

¹¹² *Egils saga* 87.

cultural memory of the *skáld* who served in the English king's army. Like Brunanburh, however, the site of Egill's hoard remains elusive.

Egils saga's account of Vinheiðr, or Brunanburh, is invested as much in oral as in textual cultural memory. The saga author appears to be combining two traditions, one regional and Icelandic and with an oral component, the other seemingly drawn from an external, probably English, literary source. The combination makes for an unusually long digression that interrupts the otherwise rapidly-building tension between Egill and Eiríkr. But this is a product of the author's handling of his sources; recollection of the brothers' service in Æthelstan's armies seems an authentic element of the saga narrative at this point. Yet simply because Vinheiðr can be identified as Brunanburh, because some historical knowledge of the political milieu of northern England can be demonstrated, it does not follow that Vinheiðr can serve as anything more than an analogue for the Battle of Brunanburh. Vinheiðr yet again recalls Turville-Petre, whose point that English history can verify skaldic verse while the reverse is rarely true,¹¹³ can be extrapolated more widely. The *Íslendingasögur* cannot alone illuminate English history. Rather, English history illuminates those passages of the texts that are set in England, demonstrating both the knowledge and ignorance present in Icelandic cultural memory of events in the region.

7.3 THE COURT OF EIRÍKR BLÓÐØX IN YORK

The Scandinavian tradition of Eiríkr's reign in Northumbria is far more robust than the Icelandic tradition of Egill's service in Æthelstan's army. However, as already alluded to, it brings the discussion once again to chronological anomaly, in this instance one that has elicited some scholarly debate. The political history of the final decades of Scandinavian rule in northern England are murky at best. In the case of Eiríkr there are two intertwined questions: firstly, whether the Eiríkr or Yryc of the *Chronicle* is in fact Eiríkr *blóðøx*; secondly, when exactly this Yryc ruled in York. *Egils saga* is entwined within this debate. It both purports to provide additional detail of the political situation in Northumbria in the 930s, and introduces an alternative historical narrative to that provided by English sources. Specifically,

¹¹³ Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxx.

whereas the *Chronicle* places Yryc as reigning in York twice, in 947/48 in the D-text and 952–54 in the D–F-texts, *Egils saga* places Eiríkr on the throne of York at a point between Brunanburh in 937 and Æthelstan’s death in 939, enthroned with the latter’s permission. Further, the only identifier the *Chronicle* provides for Yryc is as *Haroldes sunu* (Harald’s son) in the 952 entry of the E and F-texts. Eiríkr *blóðøx* was, of course, the son of Haraldr *inn hárfagri* and so the conclusion that the *Chronicle*’s Yryc is our Eiríkr may be a logical one. Yet the provenance of this attestation is unknown; the F-text was composed around 1100, the E-text around 1121, both based upon a progenitor for which the date of composition is unrecoverable (though mid-eleventh century seems probable).¹¹⁴ There is less ambiguity in *Egils saga*’s identification of the King Eiríkr of York as Eiríkr *blóðøx*, the exiled Norwegian royal, the saga being representative of the broader Scandinavian tradition which held that Eiríkr *blóðøx* ruled in York in the latter years of Æthelstan’s reign.¹¹⁵ Naturally, this has led scholars to seek to correlate the accounts of the English and Scandinavian historical records, and to synthesise the events recounted in the *Chronicle* with those of *Egils saga*.

Turning first to the identification of Yryc, the most convincing early case for this being Eiríkr *blóðøx* was put forward by W.G. Collingwood in 1901.¹¹⁶ Collingwood’s identification did, however, rest heavily upon *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, taking overly credulous approaches to the texts by the standards of modern saga criticism. It was, nonetheless, a convincing thesis and became the default throughout the twentieth century. Thus, in his foundational *Anglo-Saxon England*, Frank Stenton, for example, recounts Eiríkr’s deposition as Norwegian King, his subsequent raiding, and two stints on the Northumbrian throne as settled fact, locating events within the timeline established by the *Chronicle* and glossing over any chronological anomalies.¹¹⁷ In her turn, the inestimable Dorothy Whitelock also seems to have taken a *prima facie* approach to Eiríkr’s reign in York. In her translation of the *Chronicle*, she refers the reader seeking to identify the Yryc of the D-text entry for 948 to document eleven in volume one of *English Historical Documents*, which turns out to be nothing more than a

¹¹⁴ Stafford, *After Alfred*, pp. 205–06, 216–17, 305–07.

¹¹⁵ See for example, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* vii; *Fagrskinna*, pp. 76–7; *Historia Norvegie* xii; Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, p. 152.

¹¹⁶ W.G. Collingwood, ‘King Eirík of York’, *Saga Book 2* (1898–1901), pp. 313–27.

¹¹⁷ Stenton, Frank, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 360–2.

translation of the relevant section of *Egils saga*.¹¹⁸ None of this is to say that the historical Yryc of the *Chronicle*, a Scandinavian king of York who also leaves numismatic evidence of his reign, was not Eiríkr *blóðøx*. Indeed, it is quite probable that the two should be identified as the same person. However, that identification relies on a deeper analysis of the texts than the simple correlation of two instances of the use of a comparatively common Scandinavian name.

The evidence of the *Chronicle* E–F-texts would seem of foremost importance here. Although Eiríkr's sobriquet, *blóðøx*, is recorded as early c.961 in a *lausavísa*, or single stanza composition, by Eyvindr *skáldaspillir*, it is unattested outside Scandinavian sources.¹¹⁹ As such, alternative markers of identity are required if Eiríkr *blóðøx* is to be associated with his Yorkish namesake, and his designation as 'Harold's son' could prove to be one such of these. While Downham rejects this line of reasoning, it is not entirely clear that she is convinced by her own case so much as she is presenting a viable alternative, adopting 'the guise of Devil's advocate' in her own words.¹²⁰ Downham's solution is to propose Yryc as an Eiríkr of the Uí Ímair dynasty. However, as Townend notes, Uí Ímair leaders tended to use a conventional and limited array of names (thus the surfeit of Sigtryggir at this juncture of Anglo-Hiberno-Norse history), and there is no known Eiríkr of the dynasty, no less an Eiríkr Haraldsson.¹²¹ It remains, however, that the reign of a King Eiríkr (or Yryc or Eric) in York is authentic to English cultural memory, being transmitted not only via the *Chronicle*, but also by Simeon of Durham, William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and their contemporaries and successors.¹²² Moreover, coinage was issued out of York in the name of an *Eric rex* (fig.13).¹²³ While these coins cannot be reliably dated without reference to external textual chronologies, the use of Eric rather than Eiríkr is of note for, as Sverrir Jakobsson suggests, this could denote a king of Danish rather than Norwegian origin.¹²⁴ This supports the idea that Yryc and Eiríkr

¹¹⁸ *ASC: A Revised Translation*, ed. by Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1961), p. 72, n. 5: 'Eric Blood-axe, son of Harold Fairhair of Norway, who came to England as an exile. See EHD 1, No. 11.' For which, see Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents*. Volume 1, c.500–1042, 2nd edn. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), pp. 325–32.

¹¹⁹ Eyvindr *skáldaspillir* Finnsson, *Lausavísa* 1, ed. by Russell Poole, in *PKS* 1.1, pp. 215–16. On potential meanings of *skáldaspillir*, see Poole's introduction to Eyvindr on p. 171.

¹²⁰ Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed?', p. 52.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 73–7; cf. Townend, *Viking Yorkshire*, p. 76. See also, Woolf, *From Pictland*, pp. 187–8.

¹²² *G. Reg.* ii.126.1; *HH* v.22; *JW* 950; *Life of St Cædmon*, in *Early Sources of Scottish History, 500–1286*, ed. and trans. by Alan Orr Anderson (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1922), i, p. 441; *SD*, ii, pp. 126–7.

¹²³ *MEC*, p. 837.

¹²⁴ Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Early Kings of Norway', p. 173.

blóðøx were indeed different men. Nonetheless, numismatists have almost universally accepted these as evidence for the reign of Eiríkr *blóðøx* in York, while at the same time aligning the two different Eric coin designs with the two reigns the *Chronicle* ascribes to Yryc.¹²⁵



Fig. 13: Eric sword type (1.4 g), York, Ingelgar (ON) moneyer. Obv. [Eric | Rex], sword in centre, top and bottom pellets; rev. [Ingelgar in], small cross pattée in circle. YORYM: BA2295 © York Museums and Gallery Trust

Eiríkr *blóðøx* was, of course, the son of a Haraldr, and there is a case for Occam's razor to apply here. There is no known Eiríkr Haraldsson as politically active in the North Sea world of the mid-tenth century as Eiríkr *blóðøx*. The challenge remains, however, that no English source provides a categorical identification of Yryc as such. Moreover, Downham's thesis that Northumbrian stories of Yryc, some quite probably composed in the regional Old Norse dialect, passed into the wider Scandinavian storehouse of experience is a tempting one.¹²⁶ This is especially so in the light of the hypothesised English influence on the Vinheiðr narrative outlined above, and given the example of the conflation of historical figures in Icelandic cultural memory provided by *Egils saga's* merging of Constantine and Óláfr. Downham points out that the earliest source to identify Yryc as Eiríkr is the late twelfth-century *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, and suggests the merging of the two men may derive from Eiríkr's fame relative to his namesake in later Scandinavian cultural memory, alongside uncertainty relating to Eiríkr's life after his expulsion from Norway.¹²⁷ Yryc's biography fills a gap in this lacuna,

¹²⁵ See for example, Blackburn, 'The Coinage of Scandinavian York', pp. 337–46; C.E. Blunt, B.H.I.H. Stewart, and C.S.S. Lyon, *Coinage in Tenth-Century England from Edward the Elder to Edgar's Reform* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), pp. 98, 160, 211; Svein H. Gullbekk, 'Vestfold: A Monetary Perspective on the Viking Age', in *Early Medieval Monetary History*, p. 344; MEC, pp. 296, 837 (cf. index, p. 887).

¹²⁶ Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed?', pp. 63–4.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 56–9.

and Downham points to the anonymous *Eiríksmál*, found only in *Fagrskinna*, as evidence that traditions of King Yryc's reign circulated throughout Scandinavia.¹²⁸ Unfortunately, this is not entirely convincing. She hinges this identification on the poem's supposedly Northumbrian vocabulary; however, as R.D. Fulk notes, there is hardly consensus on this matter, and *Eiríksmál*'s most recent commentators have rejected the idea of Old English influence.¹²⁹ Moreover, even if such vocabulary is present, this does not preclude the poem having been composed for Eiríkr if he was indeed King of Northumbria for a time. The poem's dating is relatively secure as mid-tenth century, and the *Fagrskinna* prose indicates it was commissioned by Gunnhildr upon Eiríkr's death.¹³⁰ The poem itself may have served a mnemonic purpose in preserving this detail, and there is no convincing reason to reject the testimony of the text.

A verse composition perhaps more likely to point to links between English and Icelandic cultural memory, and of more direct relevance to this discussion, is verse 33 of *Egils saga* (or Egill *lausavísa* 24). While the verse does not name Eiríkr, it does state that speaker travelled across the sea to visit the lord of England, the heir of Haraldr. In this, it echoes the *Chronicle*'s record rather than the Scandinavian tradition of Eiríkr *blóðøx*'s rule (though the latter may have been implied to its audience). It is curious then that *lausavísa* 24 has more-or-less been ignored in the ongoing discussion of Yryc's identity, though Egill's *lausavísur* do, broadly, attract less attention than his named long-form compositions. Egill speaks *lausavísa* 24 on his first meeting with Eiríkr in his court in York as he abases himself before the king, seeking a clemency he has little right expect. The verse is tenth-century in style and its authenticity has not been challenged.¹³¹ As such, it was at the very least composed within living memory of Eiríkr's life, and by the Age of Saga Writing was clearly perceived to have been Egill's composition, and likely has longer provenance as such. The vast majority of Egill's *lausavísur* have secure lines of transmission in the *Egils saga* manuscript tradition and, contextually, *lausavísa* 24 fits comfortably within the narrative context.¹³² This raises the

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62–3.

¹²⁹ *Eiríksmál*, ed. by R.D. Fulk, in *PKS* 1.2, p. 1004.

¹³⁰ *Eiríksmál*, pp. 1003–05; *Fagrskinna*, p. 77.

¹³¹ *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, pp. vi–ix; Gade, 'Dating and Attributions', p. 64. Though Egill *lv*. 24 has elicited little, if any, dedicated attention.

¹³² Margaret Clunies Ross, 'A Tale of Two Poets: Egill Skallagrímsson and Einarr skálaglamm,' *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 120 (2005), 70. See also *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar A-Redaktionen* (st. 33), ed. by Bjarni

possibility that the prosimetrum here codifies and synthesises both English and Scandinavian cultural memory of the King Eiríkr of York. In the former, as per the *lausavísa*, Eiríkr is remembered as Haraldsson rather than *blóðøx*, with that sobriquet only appearing posthumously and mostly localised within Scandinavia. The latter, in turn, takes the implication of the *lausavísa* that the English ruler Egill visited was the former King of Norway, and makes it explicit in the prose by naming him *Eiríkr konungur blóðøx*.¹³³ Importantly, *lausavísa* 24 seems an authentic and early element of the *Egils saga* narrative. It is attested in all three major *Egils saga* traditions, unlike Egill's far more famous *Höfuðlausn* which is most often pointed to as evidence of Yryc being Eiríkr.

Höfuðlausn is one of two longer poems that sit at the crux of the case for Yryc to be identified as Eiríkr, the other being *Arinbjarnarkviða*, a panegyric for Arinbjörn. *Höfuðlausn* is attested in two of the three primary redactions of *Egils saga*, while *Arinbjarnarkviða* appears in only one.¹³⁴ Both compositions are, nonetheless, intrinsically connected to *Egils saga*, with those few verses that appear in external contexts always attributing them to Egill's authorship.¹³⁵ Hines makes the case that it can reasonably be understood that 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn* was performed at Eiríkr's court in York in the middle of the tenth century'.¹³⁶ In support of this, he identifies that the poem has resisted efforts to identify anachronism, points to its 'conspicuously evoked' English setting, and contrasts this with the overtly Scandinavian (as opposed to Anglo-Scandinavian) cultural space within which the poem's content and performance operates.¹³⁷ Poole likewise argues for the authenticity of *Höfuðlausn*, as well as *Arinbjarnarkviða*, pointing to English features in the former, and suggesting that the apparent 'detachability' of the poems from their prose contexts in transmission is evidence of centuries

Einarsson (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 2001), p. 115; *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar C-Redaktionen* (st. 31), ed. by Michael Chesnutt (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 2006), p. 97.

¹³³ *Egils saga* 61.

¹³⁴ Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Egil Strikes Again', p. 178. See also Russell Poole, 'Variants and Variability in the text of Egill's *Höfuðlausn*', in *The Politics of Editing Medieval Texts*, ed. by Roberta Frank (New York: AMS Press, 1993), pp. 65–105.

¹³⁵ For example, compare *Höfuðlausn* st. 1 and *Skáldskaparmál* 350; *Höfuðlausn* st. 2 and *Skáldskaparmál* 31; *Arinbjarnarkviða* st. 24–25 appear only in *Third Grammatical Treatise* (pp. 98–9, 210–11, 226–7), duly attributed to Egill, but are not recorded alongside the other twenty-three verses found in *Möðruvallabók*.

¹³⁶ Hines, 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn*', p. 102.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 97–102.

of ‘memorial transmission’.¹³⁸ Both commentators, nevertheless, caution that simply because *Höfuðlausn* is composed for an Eiríkr of York, it does not follow that this *must* be Eiríkr *blóðøx*.¹³⁹ Townend does, however, note that the internal evidence of the poem points to a Norwegian, rather than an Irish audience.¹⁴⁰

The Norwegian connections of King Eiríkr of York are yet more explicit in *Arinbjarnarkviða*. The relevant passages are framed as Egill reflecting on the events that led to him speaking his *Höfuðlausn*, and Arinbjörn’s interventions on his behalf (though the poem is recited at some point after Eiríkr’s death).¹⁴¹ Here Egill reminisces on his time in Eiríkr’s Northumbria, reflecting that ‘stýrði konungr / við stirðan hug / í Jórvík (the king reigned, firm of mind, in York).¹⁴² In this instance, the Eiríkr in question is identified as belonging to the dynasty of Haraldr *inn hárfagri*, *Ynglings burar* (a son of the Ynglingar).¹⁴³ This would seem to be a positive identification of Eiríkr *blóðøx*. In stanzas 10 and 11, in line with the earlier narrative, Egill goes on to praise Arinbjörn for standing at his side at Eiríkr’s court, and for the influence he held over proceedings there. Townend also draws attention to stanza 22 in which Egill, reflecting on current affairs, asserts that Arinbjörn now holds significant lands and wealth in Norway under Eiríkr’s sons (Hákon also having died). The implication is that Arinbjörn is a powerful Norwegian magnate.¹⁴⁴ Thus, in the tenth-century verse just as in the thirteenth-century prose, Arinbjörn is presented as a Norwegian lord who held power in the court at York. The saga tells, after all, that Arinbjörn and Eiríkr were *fóstbræðr*, and so Arinbjörn was likely an exiled supporter Eiríkr in York, his fortunes in Norway waxing and waning with those of Eiríkr and his sons. The case made here is necessarily circumstantial, but *Arinbjarnarkviða* provides the clearest evidence of Eiríkr *blóðøx* having ruled in York.

Nonetheless, it is true that, as Downham states, when isolated from their prose framing, neither *Höfuðlausn* nor *Arinbjarnarkviða* explicitly identifies the English King Eiríkr of whom they speak as Eiríkr *blóðøx*.¹⁴⁵ But, as with *lausavísa* 24, expecting an identification via

¹³⁸ Poole, ‘Non enim’, p. 177–8.

¹³⁹ Hines, ‘Egill’s *Höfuðlausn*’, p. 88; Poole, ‘Non enim’, p. 178.

¹⁴⁰ *Höfuðlausn* st. 14; Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, p. 77.

¹⁴¹ *Egils saga* 80, *Arinbjarnarkviða* st. 1–8.

¹⁴² *Arinbjarnarkviða* st. 4.

¹⁴³ *Arinbjarnarkviða* st. 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Arinbjarnarkviða* st. 33, *Egils saga* 80; Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, p. 76.

¹⁴⁵ Downham, ‘Eric Bloodaxe – Axed?’, p. 60.

that sobriquet could be considered anachronistic. Its first use by Eyvindr *skáldaspillir* dates to after 961 and, placing the poems within the narrative chronology, *Höfuðlausn* would certainly predate this, with *Arinbjarnarkviða* composed around the same time as Eyvindr's *lausavísa*.¹⁴⁶ The contextual clues of the poems alone, quite independent of the fictionalised narrative structure that surrounds them, makes it improbable that Egill is talking about any other Eiríkr than Eiríkr *blóðøx* Haraldsson. No doubt, the identification of Yryc as the Eiríkr *blóðøx* requires certain leaps of faith, but these are, in many ways, perfectly justifiable leaps. It would be fair to say, in as far as it attests that Eiríkr *blóðøx* ruled in York, that *Egils saga* here preserves a plausible historicity, even if certainty remains elusive.

Despite this, *Egils saga* still demonstrates the familiar pitfalls of attempting to use the *Íslendingasögur* as sources of English history. Just as observed in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*, reconciling traditional Icelandic or Scandinavian chronologies with the English historical record is a fraught pursuit. The Scandinavian tradition of Eiríkr *blóðøx*'s rule in York does not easily correlate with English accounts of the reigns of King Yryc and King Æthelstan. Even Collingwood, guilty of giving *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* undue historical credence in the matter of Yryc's identity, was wary of their timelines for Eiríkr's reign in York. 'The fact is,' he asserted, 'that Snorri knew very little about English history 250 years before his time, and soon gets out of his depth.'¹⁴⁷ This is an assessment that does have something to recommend it. The *Chronicle* implies that, following his annexation of Northumbria in 927, Æthelstan retained hegemony over the region for the rest of his reign. This was not uncontested, as the Battle of Brunanburh demonstrates; nonetheless, there is no indication that a Scandinavian leader managed to reclaim the throne of York, no less an exiled Norwegian king, prior to Æthelstan's death. It was not, according to the *Chronicle*, until the reign of Æthelstan's younger brother, Edmund, that English control over the region again slipped. The kingship passed first back to Óláfr Guðrøðsson, the same that had participated in the Battle of Brunanburh, then to Óláfr Sigtryggson, son of the same Sigtryggr whose death paved the way for Æthelstan's conquest, then to Edmund. All this between the years 940 and 944, and the instability

¹⁴⁶ Eyvindr *skáldaspillir* Finnsson, *Lausavísur*, pp. 213–14; *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, p. lii–liii.

¹⁴⁷ Collingwood, 'King Eirík of York', p. 324.

continued through to the year 954, as this timeline based on Downham's hypothesised chronology highlights:

937	Battle of Brunanburh
939	Death of Æthelstan Edmund becomes King of the English
940	Óláfr Guðrøðsson becomes King of York
941	Death of Óláfr Guðrøðsson
942	Óláfr Sigtryggsson's first reign in York
944	Edmund expels Óláfr Sigtryggsson Óláfr flees to Dublin
946	Death of Edmund Eadred becomes King of the English
947/8	Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> 's first reign in York
948	Eadred expels Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i>
949	Óláfr Sigtryggsson's second reign in York
952	The Northumbrians expel Óláfr Sigtryggsson Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> 's second reign in York
954	Eadred expels Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> /Eiríkr <i>blóðøx</i> is killed Eadred becomes King of York ¹⁴⁸

In his introduction to *Egils saga*, Sigurður Nordal proposes a similar chronology, drawing on both the text and the external historical markers of English history. He adds the details that Egill departed England the year after *Vinheiðr*, in 938, that Eiríkr was deposed as King of Norway in 947 and that Egill spoke his *Höfuðlausn* in 948.¹⁴⁹ This is hypothesised at best, and Nordal is aware of this, stating 'að vonlaust er að tímasetja hvern atburð sögunnar nákvæmlega' (that it is hopeless to try to precisely date each event of the story).¹⁵⁰ And it is true that the chronology of *Egils saga* is less easily resolvable in the light of the English

¹⁴⁸ Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', p. 49. This chronology is largely faithful to the *Chronicles* D-text.

¹⁴⁹ *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, pp. lii–lii

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. lii.

historical record than either *Bjarnar saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*. The main problem is that a chronology based around the *Chronicle*, such as those of Downham and Nordal, places Eiríkr's kingships in the reign of Eadred (946–55), Edmund's successor, whereas *Egils saga*, alongside a wider corpus of Scandinavian historical texts, is clear that Eiríkr arrived in England during Æthelstan's reign, and that any authority he assumed came with the English king's blessing and under his authority.

Despite this, the idea that Eiríkr became *subregulus* in York under Æthelstan's overlordship is not universal within medieval Scandinavian historiography. The three late-twelfth-century Norwegian synoptic histories all associate Eiríkr with England and Æthelstan, but there are different versions of the story, and in none is Eiríkr made a king. Theodoricus provides the earliest account of Hákon's fosterage in the English court, and thus of the links between Æthelstan and the children of Haraldr. He goes on to recount Eiríkr's cruelty as King of Norway (reserving a special place for Gunnhildr in this judgement), his expulsion in favour of his brother Hákon, and his flight to England, where he was honoured by the king and remained the rest of his days.¹⁵¹ Contextually, Theodoricus likely intended for the king who welcomed Eiríkr to England to be understood as Æthelstan, although this is not explicitly stated. There is no indication of Eiríkr receiving any particular English authority. In turn, *Historia Norwegie* too identifies Hákon as Æthelstan's foster son and as Eiríkr's usurper in Norway. Here it is told that Eiríkr fled to England where he was welcomed, baptised, and made ealdorman over Northumbria.¹⁵² This sequence of events closely parallels Egill's trajectory at Æthelstan's court, and suggests that *Historia Norwegie*, just as *Egils saga*, drew upon circulating cultural memory of Æthelstan's piety, of his regional hegemony, and of Northumbria's Scandinavian character. Finally, *Ágrip* again recounts Hákon's time in Æthelstan's court, his deposition of Eiríkr, Eiríkr's fleeing to England, his welcome by Æthelstan, and his being provided *an earldom in Northumbria*.¹⁵³ A number of additional details, not found in Theodoricus, indicate *Historia Norwegie* and *Ágrip* fall within the same tradition. They both indicate that the Northumbrians expelled Eiríkr, which parallels the 954 *Chronicle's* entry in the D and E-texts. They both indicate that it was Gunnhildr who raised the

¹⁵¹ Theodoricus Monachus, *Historia* 2.

¹⁵² *Historia Norwegie* xii.

¹⁵³ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* vii.

ire of the Northumbrians, prompting this action. They also both state that Eiríkr died raiding in Spain, a detail unique to the texts and probably in error; those English historians who do report his death place it in England, as do the majority of Scandinavian historians, including Snorri Sturluson.¹⁵⁴

The thirteenth-century *konungasögur* are also less than clear that Eiríkr actually became a king under Æthelstan's overlordship. While *Fagrskinna* and Snorri's *Hákonar saga Góða*, for example, name him as *Eiríkr konungr* during his time in Northumbria, this may merely be acknowledging his prior status in Norway. In the moment when Æthelstan receives the exiled Norwegian, favouring him for love of Hákon, *Fagrskinna* states Eiríkr is given Northumbria as *friðland*—a sort of territorial authority obliging the recipient to protect the region.¹⁵⁵ *Hákonar saga*, one of the texts that comprises *Heimskringla*, indicates a similar arrangement in Northumbria, making explicit that his authority was held 'from King Æthelstan', his subservient status made clear in the requirement he accept baptism before taking power.¹⁵⁶ Of the discussed sources, *Hákonar saga* alone identifies York as Eiríkr's base in northern England, a detail obviously paralleled in *Egils saga*. *Egils saga*, for the most part, does fall within the broader Scandinavian tradition of Eiríkr's biography, noting Hákon's connection to Æthelstan, Eiríkr's exile from Norway, and Æthelstan's blessing of his rule in Northumbria. Where *Egils saga* differs, however, in its unequivocal statement that Eiríkr held royal authority by the time Egill arrived in the Humber:

...at Eiríkr konungur blóðöx var þar fyrir [Egill] ok Gunnhildur, ok þau hófðu þar ríki til forráða, ok hann var skammt þaðan uppi í borginni Jórvík.¹⁵⁷

([Egill found] that King Eiríkr *blóðöx* was there with Gunnhildr, and they held a kingdom here, and were staying not far away, up in the city of York.)

The D and E-texts of the *Chronicle* are no less clear in establishing royal authority for stating in 948 the Northumbrians 'hæfdon genumen him Yryc to cyninge' (had taken Eiríkr as their king). The various statuses given Eiríkr in England by Scandinavian histories—welcome

¹⁵⁴ *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, ed. by M.J. Driscoll, p. 91; *Eiríksmál*, pp. 1003–05; Roger of Wendover, *Flores historiarum* 954; Axel Seeberg, 'Five Kings', *Saga Book* 20 (1978–9), 106–13.

¹⁵⁵ *Fagrskinna*, p. 76.

¹⁵⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Hákonar saga Góða*, p. 152.

¹⁵⁷ *Egils saga* 61.

guest, ealdorman, holder of *friðland*—may represent a confusion about the political realities on the ground in tenth-century England in later cultural memory. *Egils saga*, in contrast, does seem to describe a *subregulus* arrangement that accords with the English identification of Eiríkr as king. This may be yet further evidence of the influence of an English source on *Egils saga's* depictions of England. If so, however, it is limited. It remains that *Egils saga* places the start of Eiríkr's kingship in York between the years 937 and 939, on a historical timeline linked to the Battle of Brunanburh and Æthelstan's death. There is no evidence to support this in English sources, nor of an English cultural memory of such. Yet it is not a simple matter of Scandinavian cultural memory and its recorders having erroneously located Eiríkr's rule in York in the reign of the wrong English king. *Egils saga*, *Heimskringla*, and *Fagrskinna* all integrate Eiríkr's rise to power in England within English regnal history; he may arrive in the later years of Æthelstan's reign, but is deposed and killed during Edmund's kingship.

The questions in the debate regarding the chronology of Eiríkr's reign in York revolve around when Eiríkr departed Norway, when he arrived in England, and what he did in the meantime. Scandinavian sources, *Egils saga* included, state Eiríkr assumed the throne of Norway directly after the death of Haraldr. Tradition holds that this would have been in the early 930s, and Eiríkr only held the throne for one year, according to *Egils saga*.¹⁵⁸ Yet *Egils saga* also only has him appearing in England after 937, so what of the intervening years? *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* place him in Orkney; *Ágrip* places him in Denmark; Theoderic, *Historia Norwegie*, and *Fagrskinna* make it a direct trip. Many of these sources also relate raiding activity. *Heimskringla*, for example, states that Eiríkr raided around Scotland and northern England from Orkney. Little sense of time is given here, and it is plausible this may have been Eiríkr's occupation for some years; *Hákonar saga* implies that Æthelstan's offer of lordship in York derived in part from his desire to halt this activity. Alex Seeberg has put forward the interesting theory this may even have occurred before 937, that Æthelstan brought Eiríkr onto the English side at Brunanburh and rewarded him with Northumbria.¹⁵⁹ This is, however, argued from silence; Eiríkr makes no appearance in the English historical record until 947,

¹⁵⁸ *Egils saga* 60; Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, p. 83; Downham, 'Eric Bloodaxe – Axed?', p. 57; Bruce Lincoln, *Between History and Myth: Stories of Harald Fairhair and the Founding of the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 9.

¹⁵⁹ Seeberg, 'Five Kings', p. 108.

and there is no hint of cultural memory of him fighting alongside his Icelandic nemesis in *Egils saga*.

Nonetheless, a more plausible argument for Eiríkr ruling from York in the late 930s has been put forward, largely based on the late tenth-century *vita* of St Cathroe of Metz. The *vita* recounts a journey in which the saint visits a King Eiríkr of York.¹⁶⁰ Alex Woolf places this visit between 939 and 943, hypothesising that Eiríkr did indeed rule as a *subregulus* in Northumbria in the years after Brunanburh, a post-war settlement reminiscent of the *friðland* arrangement of *Fagrskinna*.¹⁶¹ Woolf, in effect, finds material support in *Life of Cathroe* for Icelandic traditions of Eiríkr's reign in York, pointing specifically to its manifestation in *Egils saga*. And he marshals a number of interesting arguments based on tenth-century sources, but these are again largely from silence: absences from witness lists, a large grant that makes no mention of Eiríkr, the lack of any *Chronicle* entries between 937 and 939.¹⁶² This body of evidence is not wholly convincing, and does not sufficiently explain the *Life of Cathroe's* naming of this Eiríkr's wife as a completely different woman to Gunnhildr. Downham has undertaken an extensive critique of these arguments, concluding 'that near contemporary Insular chronicles still provide the most reliable guide to the events of these years'.¹⁶³ Ultimately, it is difficult to reject the dates ascribed to Eiríkr's two reigns in the D and E-texts of the *Chronicle* on the basis of the various lacunae in the English historical record, a single reference in hagiography authored in a French monastery, and thirteenth-century Icelandic cultural memory.

Unlike *Bjarnar saga*, there is no theory here that will easily align the saga's internal chronology, the various traditional Scandinavian and Icelandic chronologies, and the timeline of the English historical record. A choice needs to be made as to whether the English or Scandinavian historical record best fits the evidence of the text. If the former, then *Egils saga* becomes a key source preserving valuable knowledge of England's history in the mid-tenth century; if the latter, then its historicity and value as a historical source is greatly diminished. Ultimately, there is no evidence of cultural memory of King Eadred in either the

¹⁶⁰ *Life of St Cathroe*, p. 441.

¹⁶¹ Woolf, 'Erik Bloodaxe Revisited', pp. 190–1. See also, Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, p. 75.

¹⁶² Woolf, 'Erik Bloodaxe Revisited', pp. 191–3.

¹⁶³ Downham, 'Last Scandinavian Kings of York', pp. 26–31, 49.

Íslendingasögur, the *konungasögur* or associated Scandinavian histories, and nor is King Edmund mentioned outside of his immediate connection to Æthelstan. Likewise, no numismatic artefacts associated with the kings have been found in Scandinavia. In contrast, Æthelstan loomed large in Scandinavian cultural memory, particularly in association with his connections to Haraldr and his family. His fostering of Hákon is ubiquitous in Scandinavian histories; Snorri Sturluson and William of Malmesbury both relay diplomatic exchanges between Haraldr and Æthelstan. It would be small wonder then if, over centuries of narrative transmission, Eiríkr was attracted into Æthelstan's legacy, plucked from the relative obscurity of Eadred's reign.

It would be fair to say that *Egils saga* offers a greater degree of historicity than observed in the other *skáldasögur*. Certainly, it goes further in illuminating English history than either *Bjarnar saga* or *Gunnlaugs saga*. *Egils saga* can, with some confidence, be understood to intersect with identifiable touchstones of tenth-century English history: the Battle of Brunanburh and the reign(s) of Eiríkr *blóðøx* in Northumbria. At the very least, it demonstrates that knowledge of these events circulated in Scandinavian cultural memory, and perhaps even shows that the saga author had some access to English sources or traditions to augment his tale of Egill's adventures in England. Yet the familiar pitfalls are here. Firstly, the saga's chronology, and the traditional chronologies on which it draws, do not align with the English historical record. Secondly, the saga hews to genre expectations, the narrative and its characters written to align within tropes and motifs weighted with meaning. Finally, that meaning is intended for an audience of thirteenth-century Icelanders; the saga author draws upon their storehouse of experience to build his narrative, a repository of cultural memories that had been retold, reshaped, transmitted, and changed across three centuries. In short, for all its tantalising glimpses of events in England, for all the additional detail it purports to provide them, *Egils saga* only sheds light on English history when read in the light of English history in the first place.

CONCLUSIONS

Bjarnar saga, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* are not unique among the *Íslendingasögur* for portraying England as a site of intercultural contact. Nor are they unique for their depictions of kingship, with the exercise of kingly authority, particularly in Norway, a common thematic interest throughout the corpus. What they do represent, though, are the most detailed portrayals of English kingship found among the *Íslendingasögur*. Indeed, the pictures *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Egils saga* in particular paint of the English political and societal milieu are the most extensive descriptions of English royal courts to be found across the whole Old Norse-Icelandic corpus. In fact, this can be taken further. *Gunnlaugs saga's* depiction of Æthelred and *Egils saga's* portrayal of Æthelstan are quite probably the most extensive caricatures of the kings to be found in medieval historiography outside of the English historical record. As such, they offer the tantalising prospect of providing additional evidence for England's tenth- and eleventh-century history. It is for this reason that, even as they deride the sagas as historical texts, scholars return to *Egils saga* time and again in the hope of uncovering new detail on Brunanburh or on Eiríkr's reign in Northumbria,¹ to *Gunnlaugs saga* for evidence of Old Norse-Old English mutual intelligibility.²

There is, then, a presumed degree of historicity in the *Íslendingasögur* and their accounts of England. The question is how to access it, if it can indeed be accessed. Using *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga*, this thesis has suggested a three-part equation comprising cultural memory theory, intertextuality, and comparative historical analysis. This last is, of course, one of the historian's most basic tools and, when used at the intersection of medieval Icelandic literature and the history and archaeology of Viking Age England, demonstrates two things. Firstly, some historical knowledge underlies depictions of England in the *Íslendingasögur*, at the very least an awareness of who reigned in England and approximately when, and of ongoing Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact and acculturation

¹ See for example, Keith Kelly, 'Truth and a Good Story', pp. 305–14; McDougall, 'Discretion and Deceit', pp. 109–42; Townend, *Viking Age Yorkshire*, pp. 74–84.

² See for example, *Gunnlaugs saga*, ed. by Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 70 (n. 2); Moulton, 'Mutual Intelligibility', pp. 9–28; Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 150–8.

throughout the tenth and eleventh centuries. Secondly, this historical knowledge is obscured by the passage of time and the conventions of Icelandic literary-historical practices.

I. INTERPRETATION AND REINTERPRETATION

The *Íslendingasögur* corpus is highly intertextual and conventional, displaying both the interventions of generations of Icelandic storytellers and responding to thirteenth-century (or later) historiographical practices. Within these narratives, depictions of known peoples and events are common, and such episodes exist in neither a literary nor historical vacuum. The *Íslendingasögur* form a part of a wider intercultural edifice of shared knowledge. Yet these are also idiosyncratic texts, marked out by their vernacular language, by literary convention, and by a particular cultural concern to recall, communicate and preserve the experiences of past generations of Icelanders. Memory and the intent to memorialise lie at the heart of the *Íslendingasögur*. These are texts that consciously draw on and perpetuate cultural memory, the compositions of a society transitioning between orality and literacy through the twelfth century, preserving and reinterpreting inherited stories. This is, fundamentally, a creative process. Such histories are built out of societal recollections of a past beyond living memory, are shaped by social identity, are interpreted in the act of remembering. In this way, the characters of people, of places, and of historical events alter as they are adapted within the storehouse of experience, or collective knowledge, of new generations. They shift to align within new intertextual frameworks, with the ultimate aim of imparting meaning to an intended audience—thirteenth-century Icelanders in the case of the *Íslendingasögur* as written texts.

The results of these processes are narratives that invite scepticism, that seemingly mix fact with fiction and do not stand up well to the scrutiny of modern expectations of evidentiary truth. Thus, while the adventures of Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn can all be located on a timeline including the reigns of Æthelstan, Æthelred, and Knútr, all six men being generally accepted as historical figures, their interactions are, to a degree, fictionalised. Against all odds, Egill is central to Æthelstan's victory at Brunanburh; Gunnlaugr becomes Æthelred's champion, fighting a *berserkr* in defence of the king's honour; Björn slays a dragon in service to King Knútr. Despite this, these purport to be historical texts, and the intent to impart

meaning needs to be held foremost in mind. Culturally familiar narrative devices could serve to codify Icelandic communities' inter-generational collective experience. To again quote Vésteinn Ólason, in the *Íslendingasögur* '[t]he real and imagined are ... not clearly distinguishable phenomena, but rather two aspects of experience...'.³ In other words *how* stories are told may impart just as much meaning for an audience as the details contained within them. The intertextual literary constructs and narrative conventions of the *Íslendingasögur* contain traces of historicity in and of themselves, revealing how historical events were transmitted and understood over time.

This thesis has discussed various aspects of these practices, variously grounded in different literary and historiographical traditions. Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn may indeed be historical figures, but in their biographies, all are made to conform to the motif of the peripatetic *skáld*. For any difference between each of the young men's adventures abroad, there remains a sameness to the narratives as they attain fame and wealth in foreign courts through their poetry and their swords. There is little reason to doubt these careers actually took place, but the impulses that drove them from Iceland and to the performance of such deeds is interpreted and made sense of through literary convention. Similarly, their adventures in England would seem to be an example of explicit intertextuality, conforming to a framework of activity and response that places the *skáld* in high esteem in England. Again, there is perhaps little reason within the context of intercultural movement around the North Sea world to doubt that the men did indeed arrive in the English court. Certainly, the poetry attributed to Egill and Gunnlaugr would imply this was the case. However, the way these interactions manifest in the *skáldasögur* mean that, in detail, they are highly suspect. Thus, historicity and literary convention exist side-by-side, working together to create meaning. Similarly, it is impossible to know what chronologies attached to the stories of Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's travels in their early or oral iterations. They are clearly 'incorrect' in the light of medieval English historiography, but 'correct' within the historical traditions of Iceland and Norway. Even if early versions of these tales did preserve an English chronology, it seems likely that these would have adapted to regional tradition over time in order to better

³ Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', p. 27.

reflect collective knowledge. Such mediation is both understandable and explicable in the context of medieval Icelandic historical practice, yet presents challenges to the locating of any remnant historiography within the sagas' narrative settings.

II. REMEMBERING ENGLAND

This thesis proposed three questions at its outset: 1. To what extent do *Íslendingasögur* narratives preserve something of the history or social contexts of tenth- to eleventh-century England? 2. What processes of cultural contact informed the transmission of accounts of Anglo-Scandinavian interaction in the Viking/Saga Age? 3. To what extent did Icelandic cultural values in the Age of Saga Writing permeate and alter Icelandic cultural memory of Æthelstan, Æthelred and Knútr as kings of England? The answers to these questions have a degree of variation between each text. After all, *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* were all authored at different times by different authors with different values and aims. Yet there is also demonstrable intertextuality between the three texts—manifest, explicit and implicit—driven by the narrative expectations and formulae of the *skáldasögur*, by the unique character-type of the Icelandic *skáld*, and by the regional connections of the three *Mýramenn*. The central example of this for the purposes of this discussion has been the English court trope, its component parts repeated in each Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn's audiences with the kings of England. Such commonalities allow some broad conclusions to be drawn in relation to *Íslendingasögur* portrayals of England and their historicity.

The sagas are quite clearly conscious of the political and social contexts of their Saga Age setting, if not necessarily sensitive to them. The three *skáld* do not operate in a world that exists only in reference to Iceland; all three men travel throughout the North Atlantic and Baltic, visiting regional landholders, earls, and kings. Only a very few of these figures have no identifiable historical basis and, even if at times the chronologies of their reigns depart from the accepted historical timeline, it is never so egregious as to be entirely inexplicable. There is an obvious awareness of the political leaders of the Saga Age, even if the saga authors are not always capable of putting them in the right order. There is, moreover, a broad consciousness that England was a part of the Scandinavian world. And this is not surprising. The archaeological evidence surveyed here demonstrates not only that Scandinavians were

resident in England as settlers, raiders, and mercenaries, but that artifacts such as coinage traversed back to Scandinavia. In the case of Æthelred's coinage, this was almost certainly in the company of some of those raiders and mercenaries, men who also undoubtedly brought with them stories about the island across the North Sea. Perhaps there were Icelanders among such men. The Norwegian origins of the Icelanders, their frequent journeys to Norway, the regular references to Icelandic *viking* in the *Íslendingasögur*, and the very careers of Egill, Gunnlaugr, and Björn recommend this to be more likely than not. Equally, as Fjalldal argues, such stories as circulated about England and its kings, about Anglo-Scandinavian interaction on its shores, may have entered the Icelandic storehouse of experience via Norwegian intermediaries.⁴ Certainly, first-hand knowledge is not necessary to the creation of cultural memory. Indeed, that is one of its defining features.

Cultural memory is mediated memory—in the case of the *Íslendingasögur*, recorded many centuries after the events they describe, necessarily many times over. Carried with the mnemonic verses, so often authentic to their setting, were narratives of Iceland's saga age heroes, legacies passed from generation to generation. As media of 'cultural remembrance', these stories were rewritten in each retelling,⁵ and this was no less the case as Iceland transitioned from orality to literacy, as Icelandic society began to codify its cultural memory. It is difficult to overstate the influence of the political and intellectual cultures of the Age of Saga Writing on the surviving *Íslendingasögur* narratives. Received stories were made to conform to cultural knowledge, as observed in *Bjarnar saga's* erroneous chronology; they were deliberately imbued with political commentary, as seen in *Gunnlaugs saga's* hierarchy of kingship; they were adapted with reference to external sources, as observed in *Egils saga's* probable use of an English source for its Vinheiðr passages. In this, the *Íslendingasögur* exemplify those intrinsic characteristics of cultural memory; they are stories that are communal, trans-generational, retrospective, and tangible.

There are layers of interpretation that need to be peeled away in order access any remnant historicity in the *Íslendingasögur*. This makes the sagas difficult as sources of history

⁴ Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 124.

⁵ Erll and Rigney, 'Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory', p. 112.

for the narratives they present. And it is clear that, in the imagination of the *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* authors, England was to some degree an extension of Scandinavia. Viking Age England was a useful setting through which to communicate meaning, a place of familiarity and alterity. Here familiar customs and societal structures existed alongside kings and monsters; here an Icelandic hero could find both welcome and dragons to slay. In short, the depictions of England and its kings found in *Bjarnar saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and *Egils saga* are fundamentally literary products of late thirteenth-century Iceland. They are infused with the cultural nostalgia and political and ideological values of that time. Despite this, there can be little doubt that some historical knowledge underlies these depictions of England and its kings, that the *Íslendingasögur* preserve some memory of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact in the Saga Age. But, as ever, it remains that this can only be identified when illuminated by the historical and archaeological records of Viking Age England. The *Íslendingasögur* only shed light on English history when read in the light of English history.

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