

Medieval Romances in Iceland: Old Norse Translations from Old French

University of Victoria

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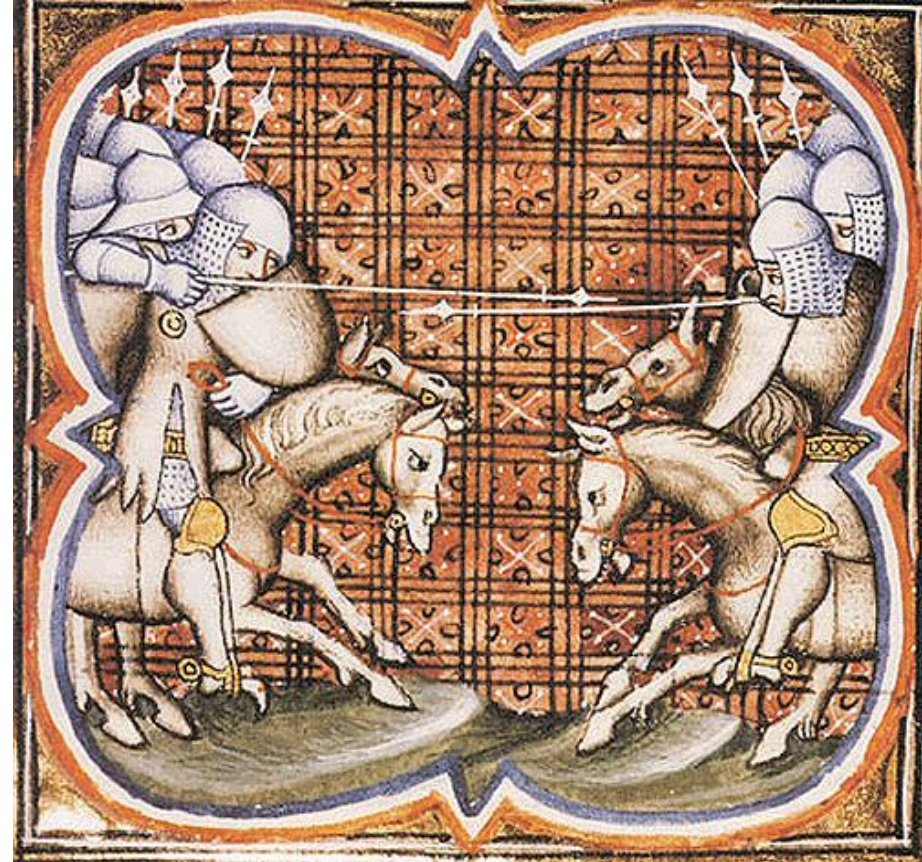
There's more to Old Norse-Icelandic literature than Eddas and Sagas



- Laws
- Treatises on grammar and rhetoric
- Religious literature: homilies, saint's lives, poetry, etc.
- Translations:
 - Scientific literature.
 - Historical literature.
 - Religious literature.
 - Romance.

Romance in medieval Europe

- The rise of the vernacular languages
- Poetry: troubadour lyric
 - Courtly love.
- The three “matières”
 - Rome
 - France
 - Bretagne
- Chansons de geste
- Romans courtois
 - Romans antiques
 - Romans arthuriens
- “matiere, sen, conjointure”
- From verse to prose: 13th century.



Literature in the vernacular: a defining aspect of medieval culture

- France and Norman England
- Italy
- Spain
- Germany
- Scandinavia

- ==> Translations, adaptations, inventions
- ==> Vehicle for the ideology of chivalry



Translations in Iceland and Norway

- From Latin
 - *Alexandreis* by Walter of Châtillon (meistari Galterus) ==> *Alexanders saga* (mid-thirteenth century).
- From German (possibly)
 - *Piðreks saga af Bern*
- From French
 - *Chansons de geste*
 - *Karlamagnús saga*
 - *Partalópa saga*
 - Romance
 - *Tristrams saga*
 - Three romances by Chrétien de Troyes
 - *Strengleikar* (the *Lais* of Marie de France).

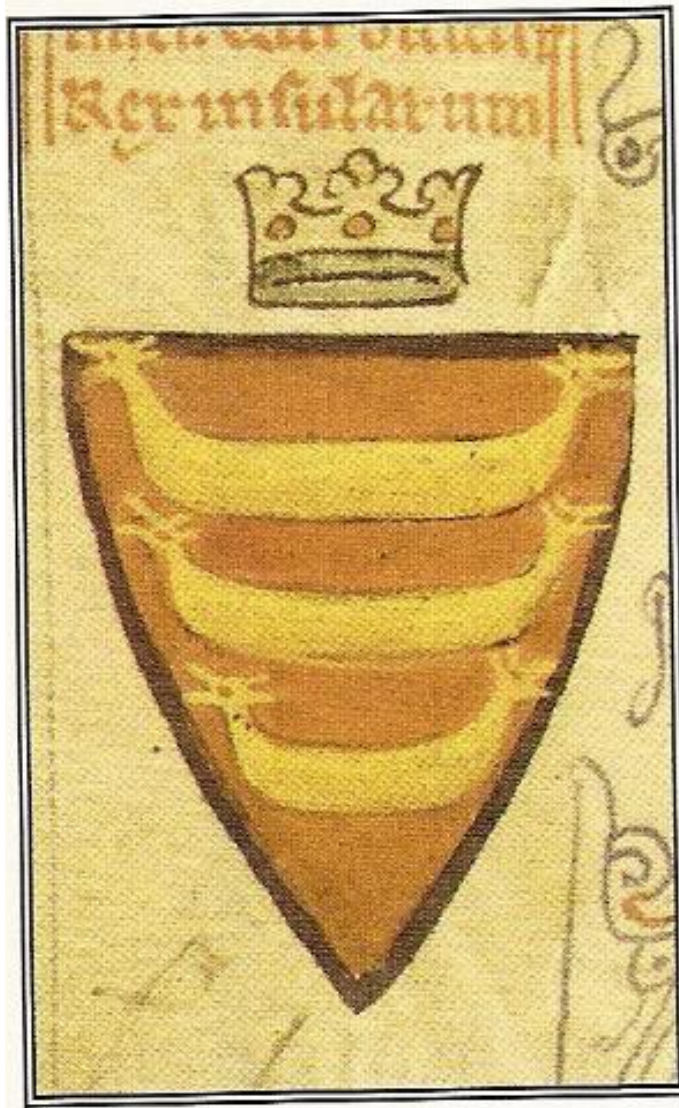


Nordic kingdoms and royal ideology

- Christianity
- Influence from England and France
- Problem of controlling nobility
- Cultural models



King Hákon Hákonarson



- Hákon IV
 - 1204-1263
- Puts an end to a century-long civil war in Norway.
 - 1240 Slaying of Duke Skúli Bárðarson
- First king of Iceland
 - 1262
- European policy
 - Marries one of his daughters to a Spanish prince
- Crowned by papal envoy
 - 1247: Cardinal William of Sabina
- Translations?

Tristrams saga

- A rather faithful translation of a 12th century French version of the *Roman de Tristan*
 - Thomas (a more courtly version)
 - Only preserved in fragments
 - Another fragment was found in the 90's: the Carlisle fragment



Prologue to *Tristrams saga*

Hér skrifaz sagan af Tristram ok Ísönd drottningu, í hvorri talað verðr um óbærilega ást er þau höfðu sín á millum.

Var þá liðit frá hingatburði Kristi 1226 ár er þessi saga var á norrœnu skrifut eftir befalningu og skipan virðulegs herra Hákonar kongs. En bróðir Róbert efnaði og uppskrifaði, eftir sinni kunnáttu, með þessum orðtökum sem eftir fylgir í sögunni og nú skal frá segja.”

Here is written the saga of Tristram and of Queen Isond, in which is told of the intolerable love they shared. 1,226 years had passed from the birth of Christ when this saga was translated into Norse at the instigation and decree of the noble lord King Hakon. Brother Robert carried it out and wrote it down in the words which follow in the saga; and now it shall be told.

Should we trust this?

- Most scholars do.
- Other prologues say more or less the same (without dates).
- Sverrir Tómasson is the “doubting Thomas”.
 - “Hvenær var Tristrams sögu snúið?” (*Gripla* 1977)
 - 17th century manuscript
 - Topos
 - Wrong reading: 1256?



Stylistic features

“ Stundu síðan liðinni, sem hún vitkast við, faðmaði hún hann og kyssti oft, svo mælandi: “Hinn sætasti unnasti!” með tárur sínum vætandi andlit sitt. En hann þegar í því angri og meinlæti sinna sorga faðmaði hana með ástarþokka svo að í sorg sinnar ástar fékk sú hin fríða frú getnað.

Í svo miklum harms meinlætum – hún í sorg en hann í sárum – voru þau þar það barn getandi er síðar var lifandi, og allir hans vinir harmandi, en þessa sögu hefjandi.”

What did the translators do?

- Faithful?
- Adaptators
 - Why adapt?
 - How do they adapt?
 - Marianne Kalinke
 - Geraldine Barnes
 - Gerd W. Weber
 - Recent research

Other texts

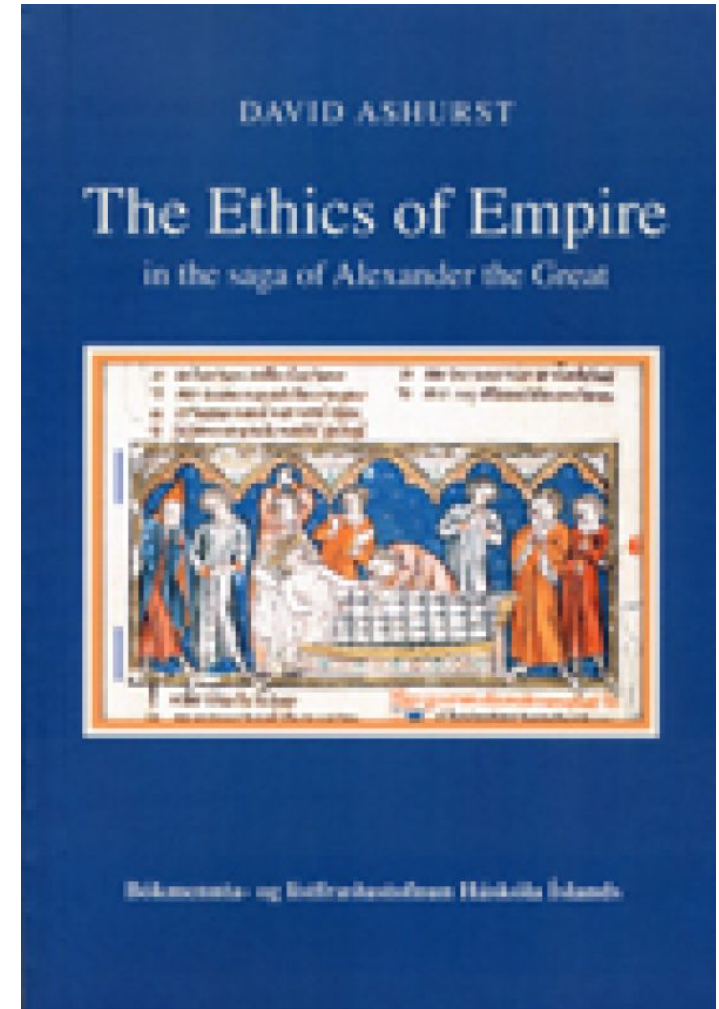
- *Strengleikar*
 - Carol J. Clover: “The missing lai of Marie de France”
- *Alexanders saga*
 - David Ashurst: *The Ethics of Empire*
- *Þiðriks saga af Bern*
 - T.M. Andersson
 - Susanne Kramarz-Bein
- *Partalópa saga*
 - Stefka Eriksen

Karlamagnús saga

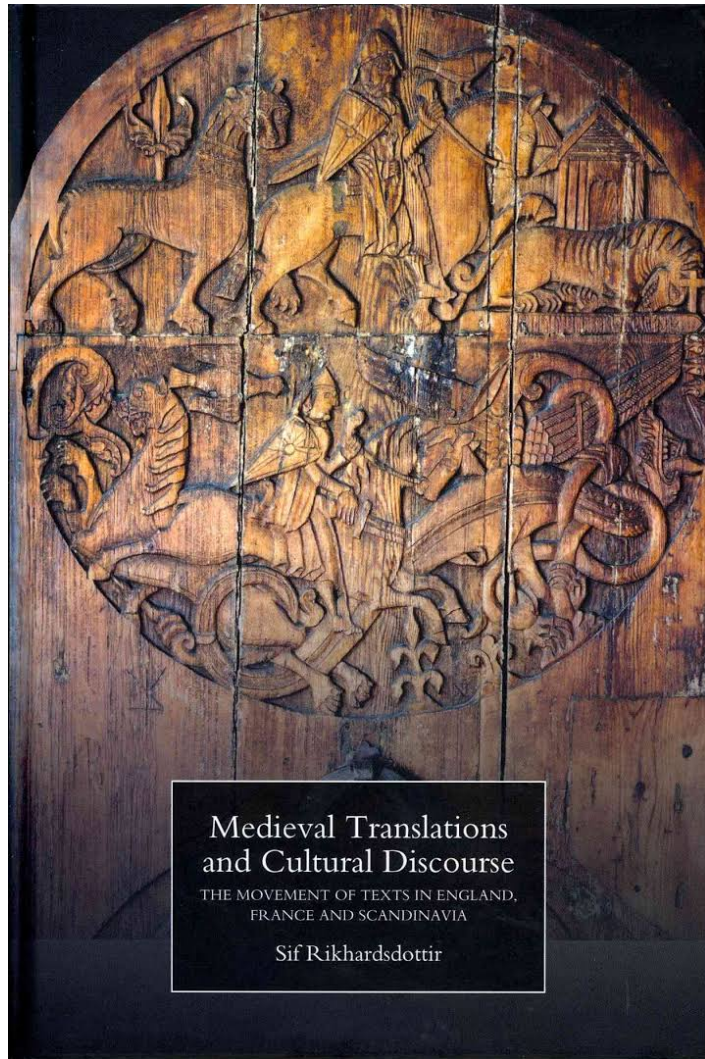
- Compilation of translations, mostly of chansons de geste.
 - Translations from different periods
 - Late 12th century to 14th.
 - Mostly 13th century and more often than not Norwegian.
 - From Anglo-Norman French.
- A complete biography of Charlemagne in ten branches.
- Typical of 14th century compilations.

Recent research: David Ashurst (2009)

- Alexander's saga, the saga of Alexander the Great.
- Its source, Walter of Chatillon's *Alexandreis*:
 - most successful Latin epic of the Middle Ages.
- Most probably presented by an Icelander as a gift to king of Norway in the winter of 1262-3.
- The Icelander, abbot Brandr Jónsson, had just been appointed bishop of Hólar by the Norwegian hierarchy.
- And 1262 was the very year in which Iceland finally succumbed to pressure and became part of the Norwegian empire.
- Underlying discourse on ethics of rulership?

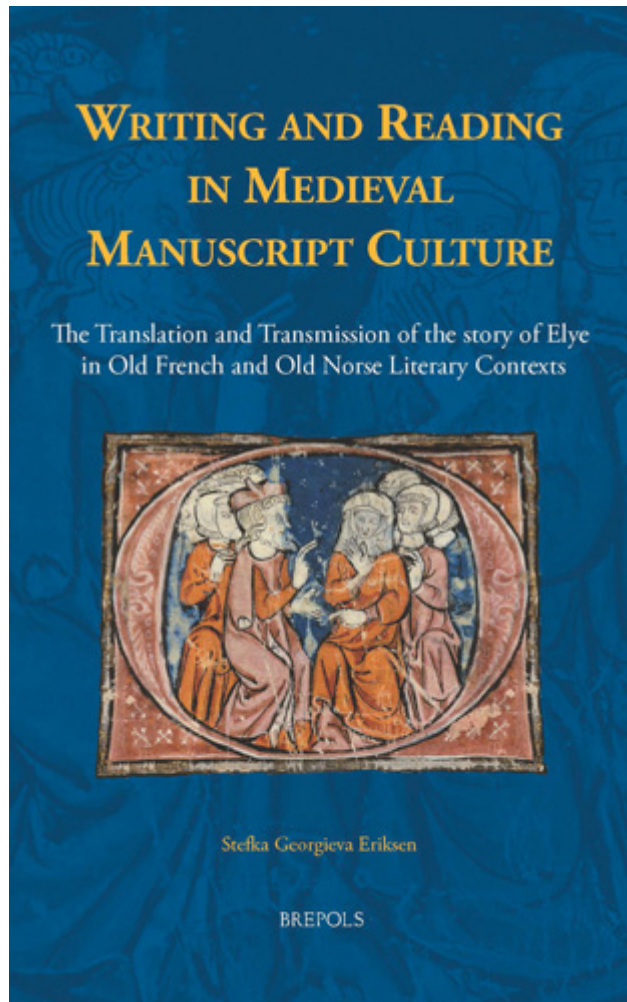


Recent research: Sif Ríkharðsdóttir (2012)



- *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia.*
- Translating a text is transforming it:
 - Adapt to the new cultures in which they appeared.
- Old French, Middle English, Old Norse
 - Yvain
 - Lais
- Such translations provide a rich opportunity to study linguistic and cultural identity.
- Close comparison of the various modifications made
- Varied critical approach ranging from post-colonial criticism to translation theory.
- The undercurrents of cultural conflict apparent in medieval textuality.

Recent research: Stefka G. Eriksen



- The writing, reading and reception of a crusade-story in medieval Flanders, Norway, and Iceland.
- The focus is on the story of the Christian knight Elye and his Saracen princess Rosamunde, which was translated into Old Norse in the thirteenth century.
- A study of three of the manuscripts in which the work is preserved: one Old French manuscript from Flanders (c. 1270) and two Old Norse manuscripts, one from Norway (c. 1270) and one from Iceland (c. 1400).
- Represent three different rhetorical and communicative situations and show how the writing and reading of the same text was conditioned by the respective cultural and political environment.
- Old Norse culture as an active respondent, participant, and thus modulator of European literary tendencies.

Icelandic romance

- Indigenous *riddarasögur*
- With some of the fornaldarsögur they can be called “Icelandic romance”.
- Part of a general European cultural phenomena.
- Particular Icelandic characteristics.
- Great number of texts.
- Persistent popularity.
- Interaction with other forms.

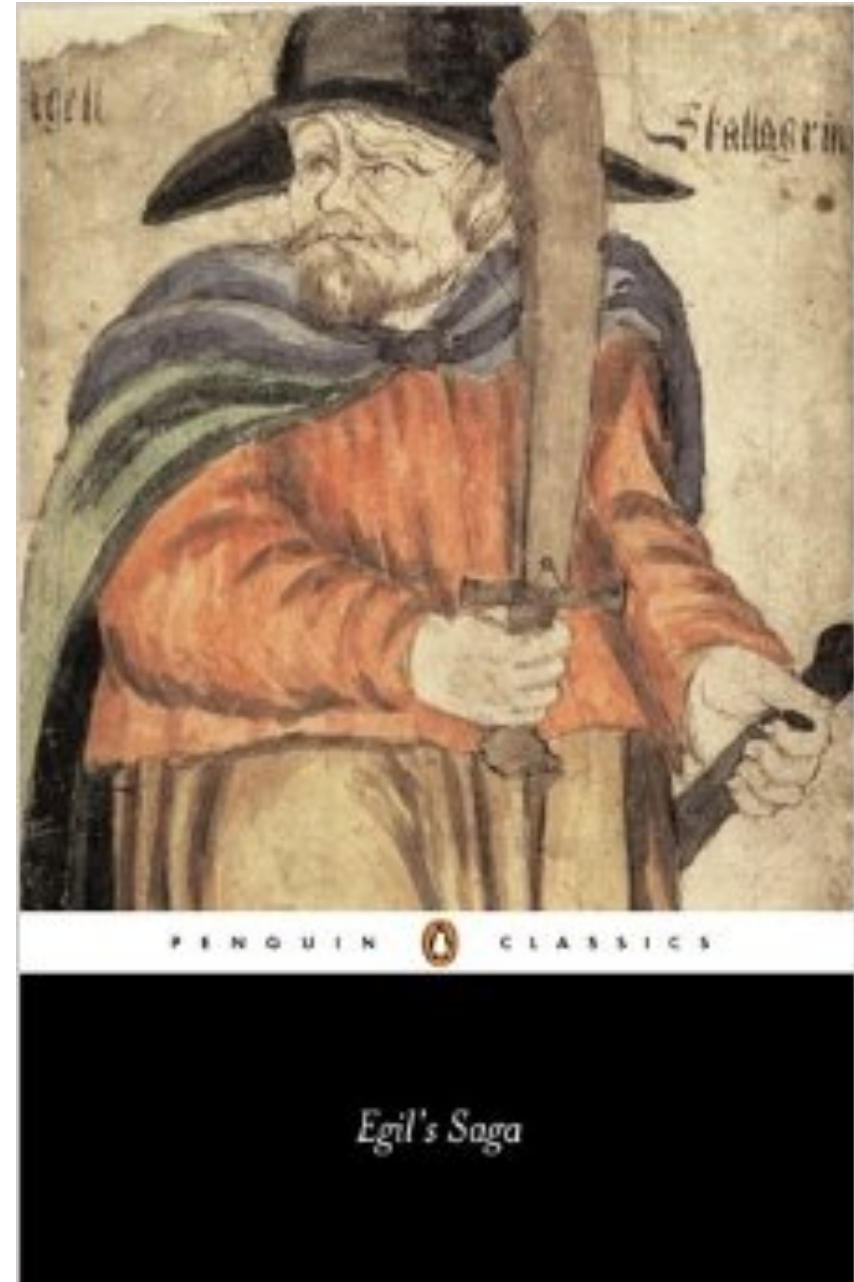
Influence of romance on *Sagas about early Icelanders*

- The example of *Egils saga*:
 - Borrows from Yvain
 - Not only the same structure
 - An important milestone on the hero's road to redemption.
- Part of what makes *Egla* a personal work.
- Also a „writing strategy“?
- Is the skald the „chevalier“ of the North.



Egils Saga: Supposed age

- The oldest manuscript fragment ca. 1250
- A copy
- 1220-1240?
- Fits well with Snorri's life and what we know of his authorship.
- Impossible to prove.
- Egils Saga (transl. by B. Scudder, Penguin Classics, 2004)



The Enigma of Egill. The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson.

- Cornell University Library, Islandica 57, Ithaca NY 2014.
- Open access:
<http://cip.cornell.edu/DPubS?service=UI&version=1.0&verb=Display&handle=cul.isl/1438346536>

THE ENIGMA OF EGILL

*The Saga, the Viking Poet, and
Snorri Sturluson*



TORFI H. TULINIUS

translated by Victoria Cribb

Islandica LVII

Egils saga and Yvain

- *Egla*: earliest manuscript fragment 1250.
- Latest thinking: 1220-1240.
- Snorri or his milieu.
- Proximity with *Heimskringla* (or some of the texts in what we now call *Hkr.*).
- *Yvain* second half of 12th century. Translated as *Ívents saga* (earliest manuscript 15th century)
- Translation activities associated with King Hákon's court (1226?)
- Borrowings do not necessarily imply existing translations.

Harpin de la Montagne



The duel with Ljótr inn bleiki (ch. 66)



Johannes Flintoe

Harpin and Ljótr

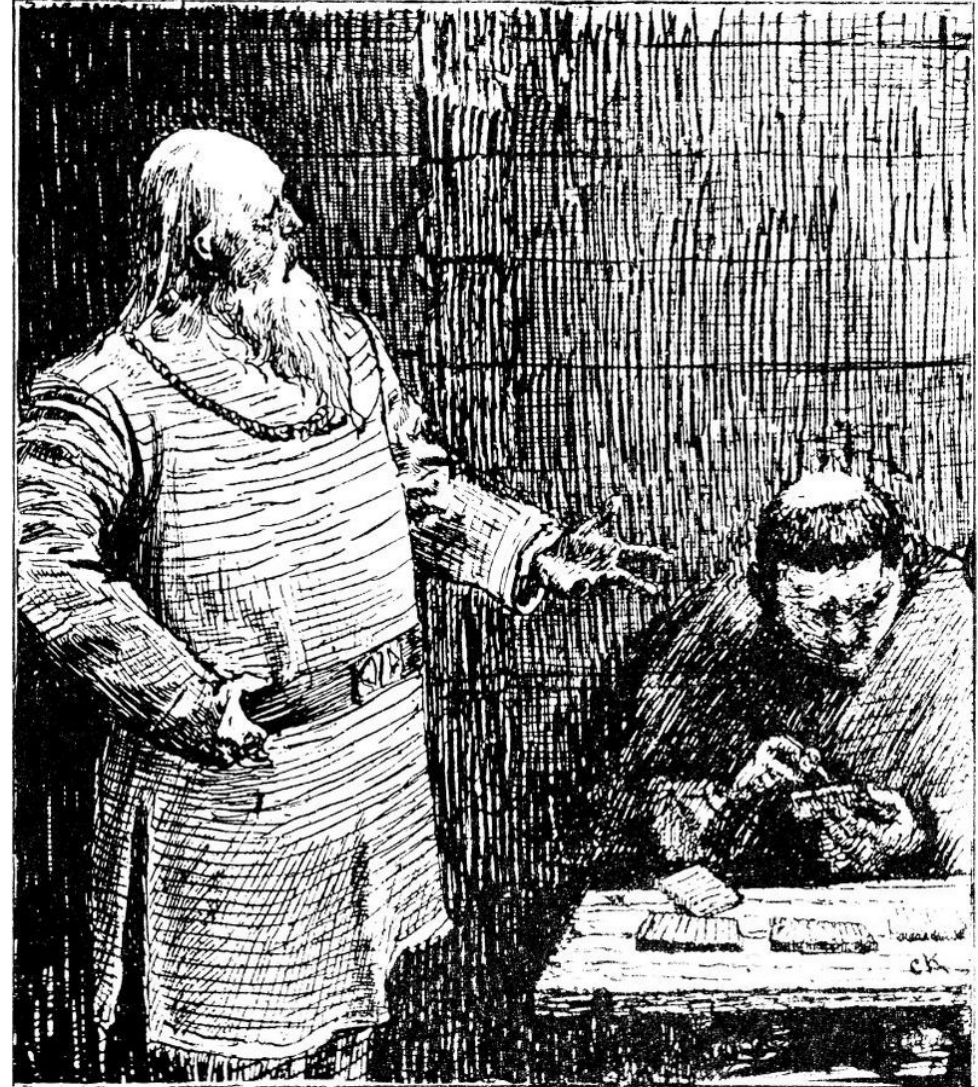
- Hero is on a journey
- Comes to a manor where he is warmly welcomed but hosts are preoccupied and sad.
- Mistress of house is sister of hero's best friend.
- A duel is to be fought the following day against an intimidating figure.
- The duel is for the hand of the daughter of the house
- The hero replaces the son of the house and kills the berserk / giant.

What kind of book is *Egils saga*?

- Highly structured
 - Internally
 - Externally
 - Unconsciously?
- Uses intertextuality to engender meaning
 - Pagan
 - Links to skaldic poetry
 - Biblical
 - Links to exegesis and medieval attitudes to sacred history

Snorri's paradox

- Political pursuits as well as literary or scholarly.
 - Doesn't fit very well with our view of these two spheres of activity.
- Sigurður Nordal seeks to find an explanation in the character (psychological):
- Torfi H. Tulinius and Kevin Wanner's is sociological: converting cultural capital into political gains.



Skaldic poetry

- Snorri's means of access to the highest circles.
 - The poem for Hákon galinn
 - The poem for Skúli and Hákon
 - Lost poems about Sverrir, for Kristín.
- Is it only the poetry or something else:
 - Snorri is playing the Norwegian political game.



In search of an audience

- Was the cultural value of skaldic poetry diminishing in Norway in the 13th century?
 - **Was its status threatened by the new translations of courtly romance?**
- Importance of relationship with Norway in understanding the development of medieval Icelandic literature.

Sagas about early Icelanders

- Is their appearance a reaction to the translation activities?
- This was Paul Rubow's idea in the 1930's.