

Egils Saga

As an Introduction to
the Old Norse World

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

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THE ENIGMA OF EGILL

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



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translated by Victoria Cribb

Islandica LVII

Why Egils saga?

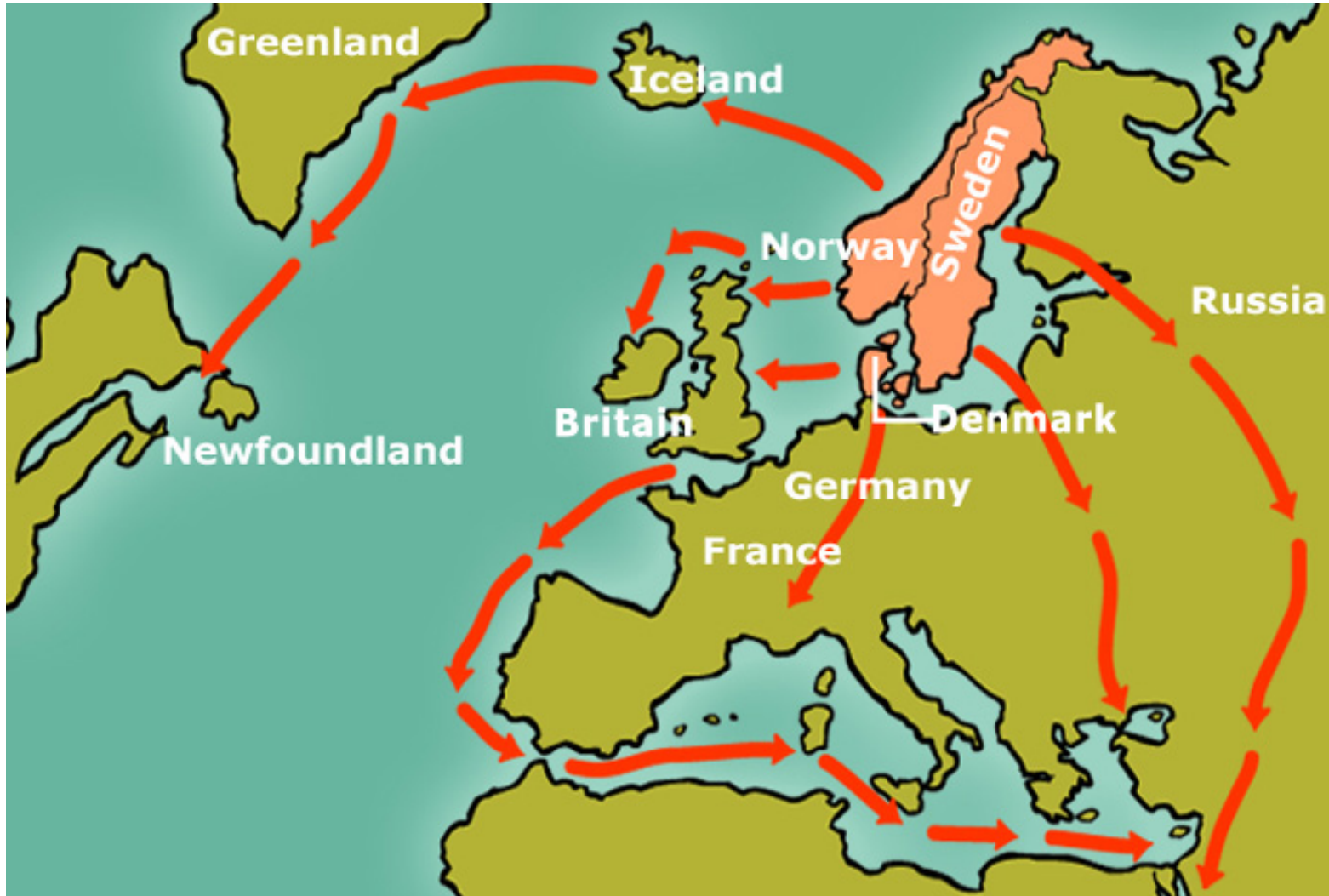
- Written in the first half of 13th century.
- About the Viking poet Egill Skalla-Grímsson who lived in the 10th century.
 - A late document.
- Nevertheless, information about:
 - Travels
 - Mythology
 - Poetry
 - Politics
 - Ethics
 - Viking life
- Living memory?



Outline of today's talk

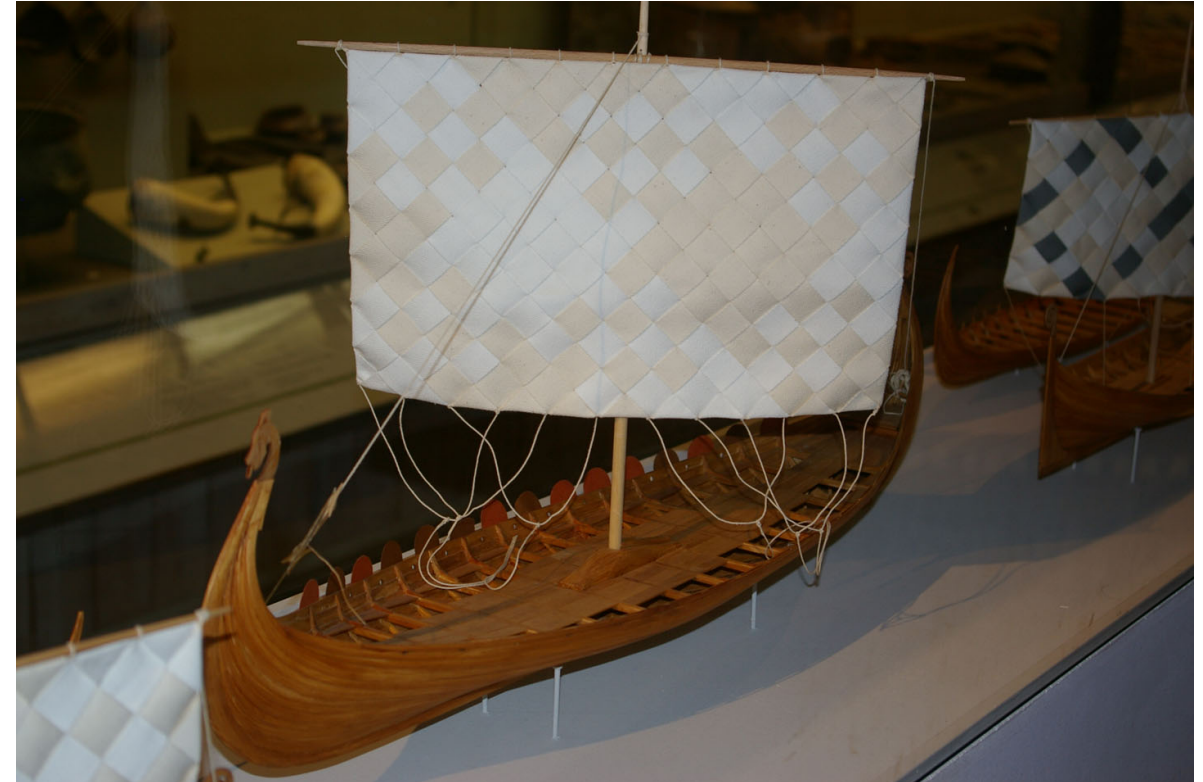
1. Vikings: general information
2. Viking diaspora
3. Egils saga as a witness to collective memory of the Viking diaspora.
4. The saga as a product of its times
5. The saga and its relationship to Snorri Sturluson

The Viking Expansion ca. 793-1066



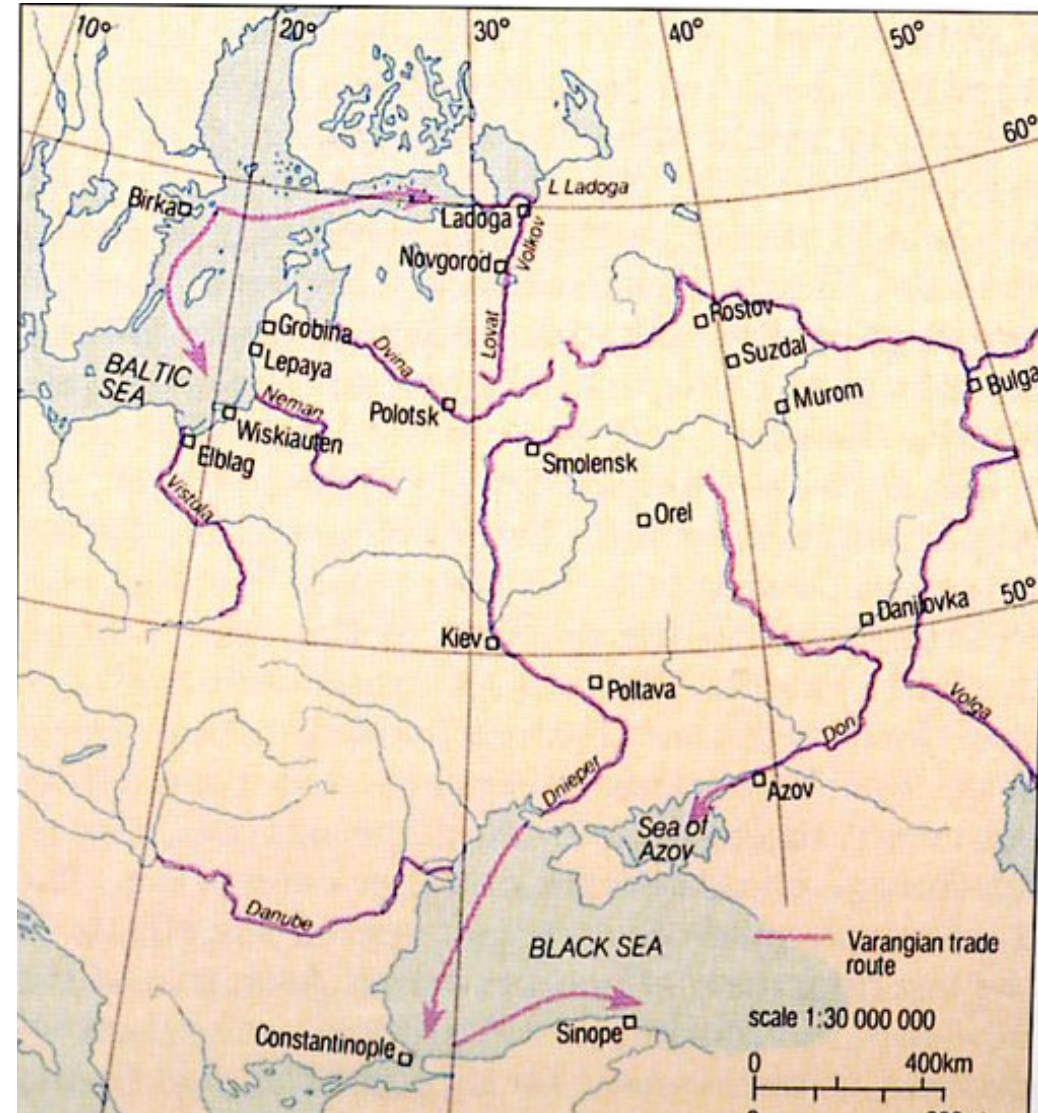
The Vikings: Raiders and traders...

- Light and shallow ships which enabled them to come ashore at diverse locations.
- Opportunistic: if they could trade, they did, but...
- Famous raids:
 - Lindisfarne Abbey AD 793
 - Noirmoutiers AD 799
 - The Atlantic Coast of Galicia and Portugal.
 - Into the Mediterranean in the 9th century.



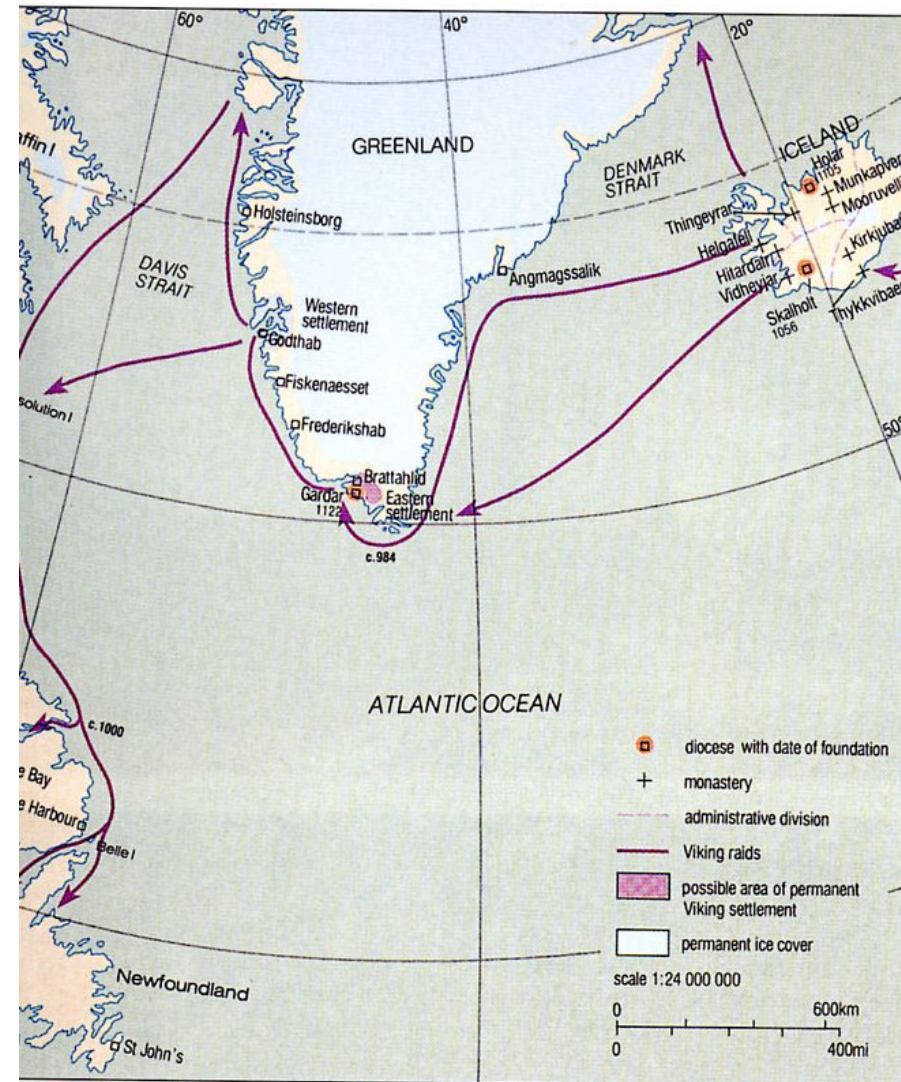
Explorers, settlers, mercenaries...

- Vikings in the East
 - Go up the rivers.
 - All the way to Constantinople:
 - Trade
 - Mercenaries: Varangian guard.
 - Settle on the way back:
 - Kiev
 - Novgorod



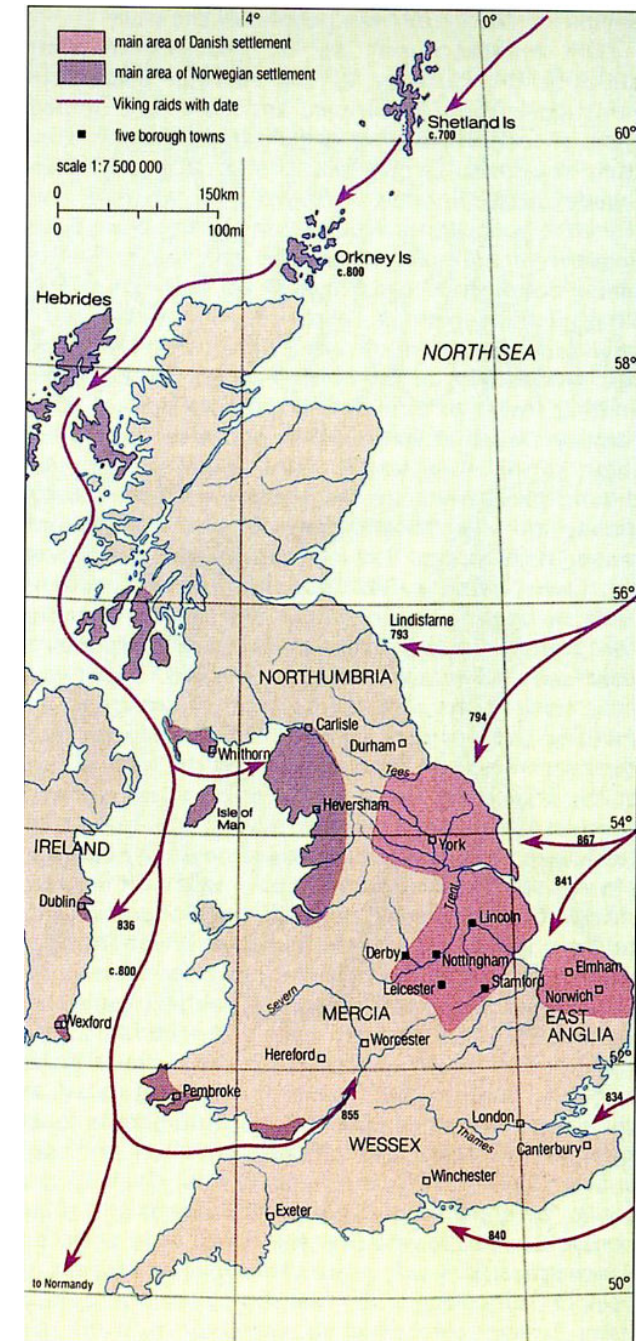
Exploration and settlement to North-West

- Faroe Islands
- Iceland
- Greenland
- Vinland



Conquerers...

- Establishment of petty kingdoms or domains:
 - Ireland
 - Orkney and Shetland.
 - Caithness and the Hebrides
 - Normandy AD 911
- Cnut the Great conquers England in 1016 before becoming king of Denmark and Norway: builder of a short-lived empire.
- Battle of Stamford Bridge 1066: end of the Viking era?



AD 800 to 1100: establishment of a Viking diaspora

- Common language and to some extent culture
 - Runes
 - Myths
 - Skaldic poetry
- Geographical conditions:
 - The sea is the means of communication.
- Iceland cultivates the memory of this Diaspora.



Social specificity

- Free farmers
 - Lead by chieftains or petty kings.
- Assemblies
- Rule of some kind of law



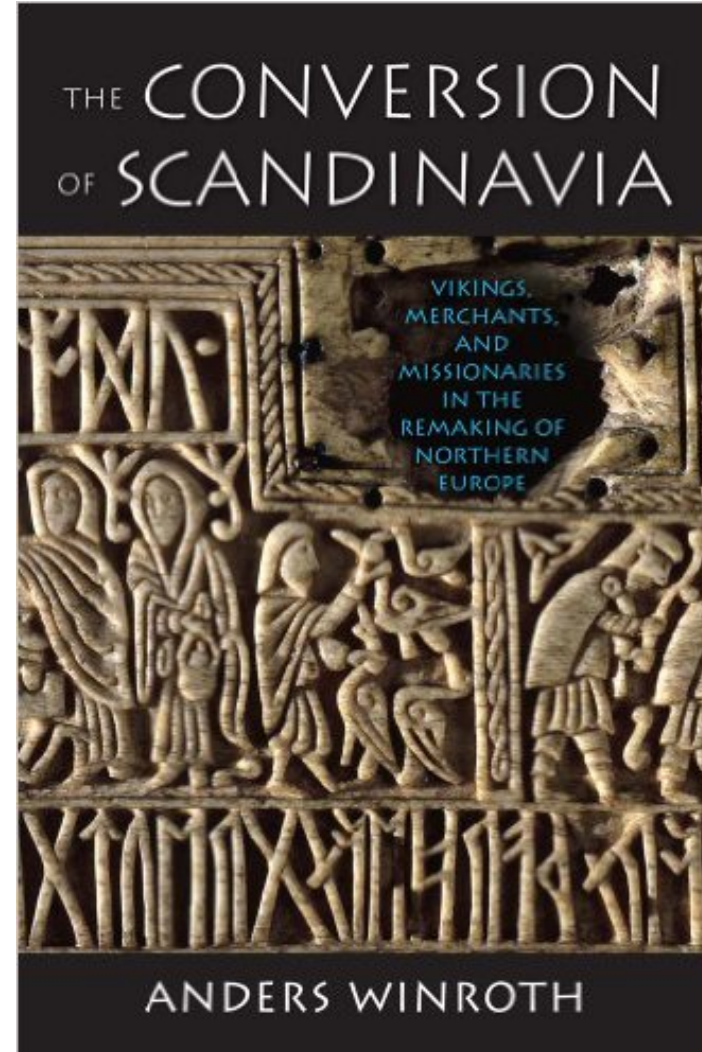
Cultural specificity

- North Germanic:
 - Linguistic divide from the other Germanic languages sometime in the first millennium BC.
 - Article added at the end.
 - Initial „j“ disappears: year, jahr becomes „ár“ or „aar“, jung, young becomes „ung“.
 - Other aspects.
 - Must have been diverse but also
- Shared myths and beliefs?



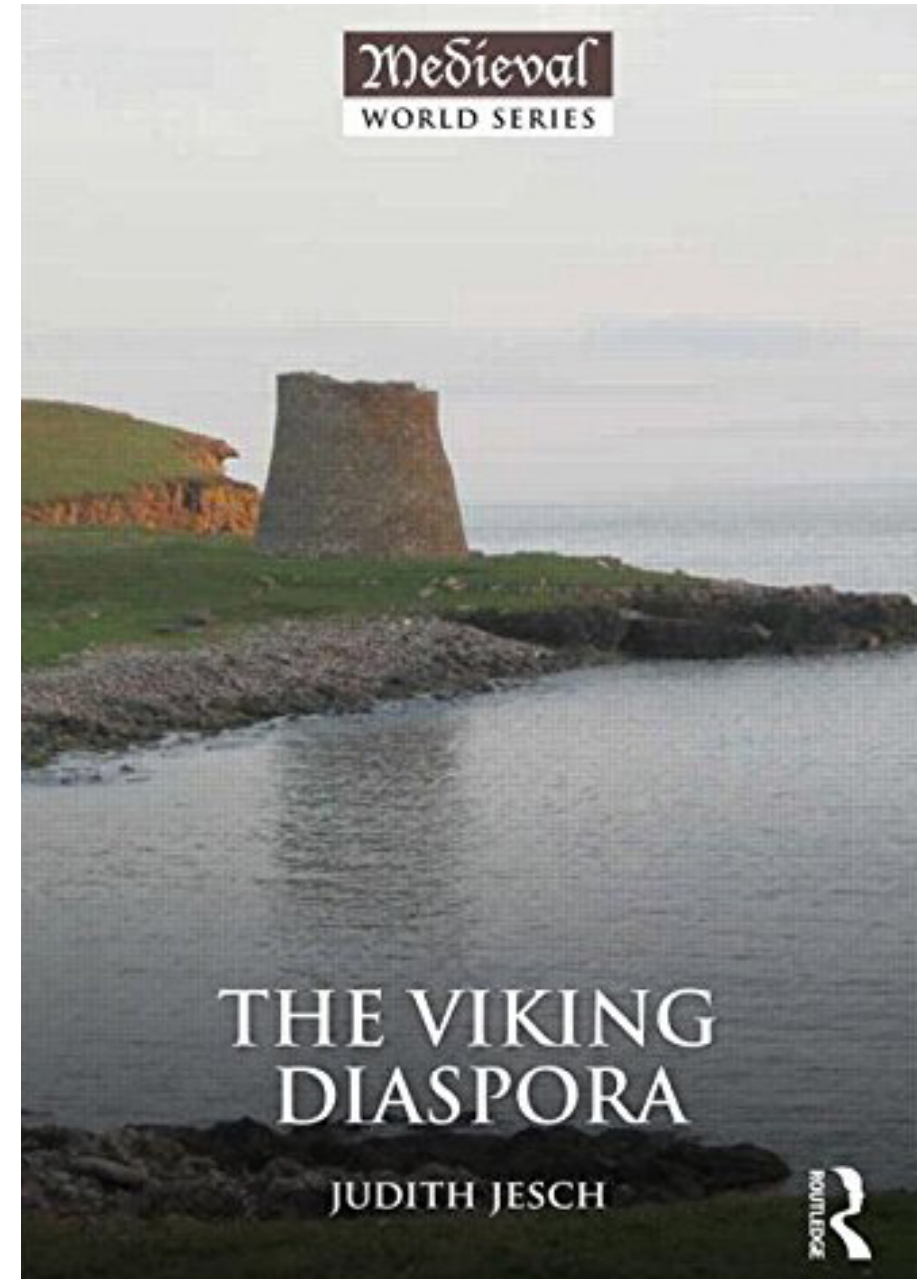
Constant interaction with Christian Europe

- Trade before the Viking Age.
- During the Viking Age:
 - Warfare but also cultural influence from Carolingian Europe.
 - Viking leaders, kings, adapt their behaviour and values.
 - Development of skaldic poetry may be due to influence from Carolingian court poetry.
- A „mutating periphery“
- By the early 12th century the Nordic countries have become part of Christian Europe.



Brand new book!

- Prof. Judith Jesch, University of Nottingham.
- The Viking Diaspora.



Iceland: the memory of the Viking Diaspora

- Discovery and settlement
- Social organization
- Chieftains and farmers
- Local assemblies
- The Althingi
- Conversion
- Establishment of bishoprics
- Learning.
- Social incentives for the writing down of history.

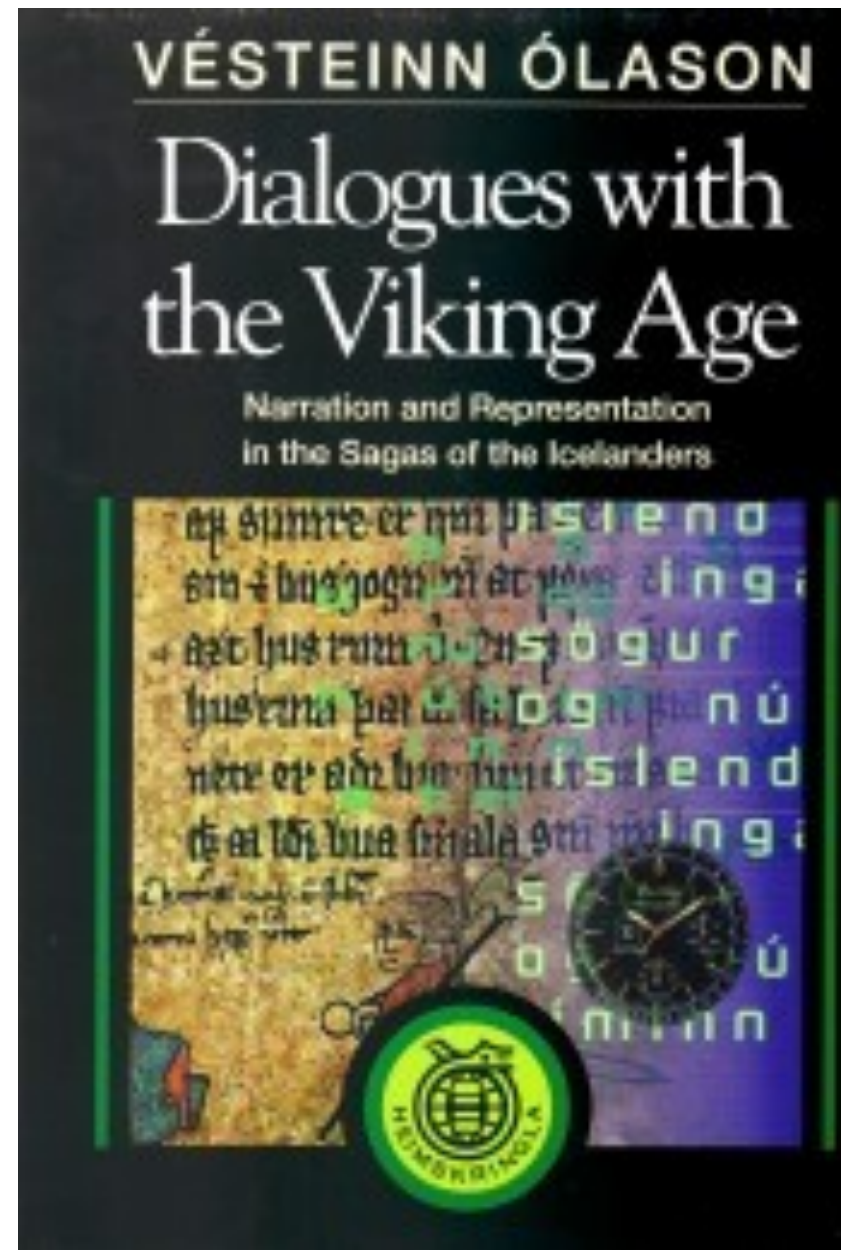


The Sagas about early Icelanders

- *Íslendingasögur*
- Family sagas
- Sagas of Icelanders
- **Sagas about early Icelanders**

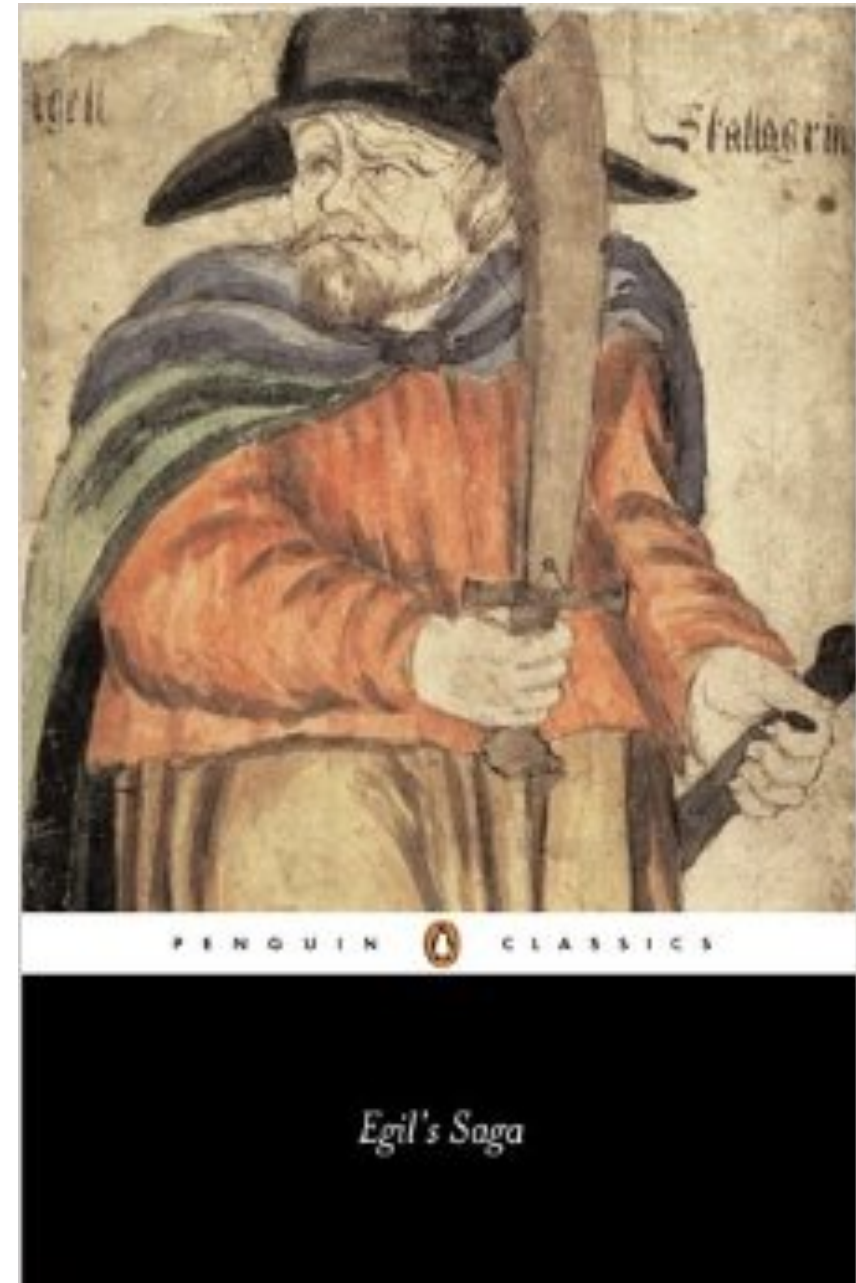
Definition

- Composed in Icelandic.
- Prose narrative (sometimes prosimetrum).
- Main characters are Icelanders.
- Some if not all of the action takes place in Iceland.
- From Settlement period to Conversion or period immediately after that.
 - Distinguished from contemporary sagas which tell of events in 12th and 13th centuries.
 - And from legendary sagas which tell of kings from mythical periods.



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)



Making use of the cultural memory of the Viking Diaspora

- Unification of Norway.
 - Resources in Norway and neighbouring lands.
- Settlement of Iceland.
 - Resources.
 - Origins of social system.
- Links to Northern Isles
- Links to the rest of North-Western Europe:
 - Danelaw of England
 - Normandy
- Pagan heritage
- Poetic heritage

Possible author: Snorri Sturluson

- No conclusive evidence
- Exaggeration of Skalla-Grímr's settlement area.
- Close links to Heimskringla: Egla's first chapter based on Haralds saga in Heimskringla
- Vocabulary:
 - Peter Hallberg
- Stylistic features in common with Heimskringla and Edda.
- The interest in skaldic poetry.
- Possible other reasons?



Who was Snorri Sturluson?



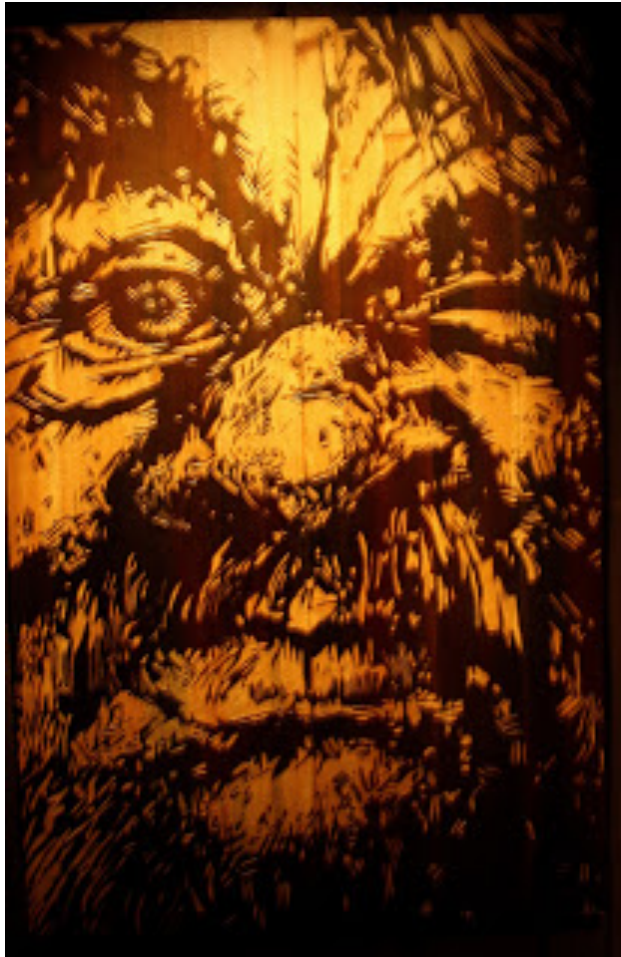
- Snorri Sturluson 1179-1241
- Chieftain
- Becomes lord over large domain
- Poet
- Historian
- Courtier
- Manipulation and conversion of all kinds of „capital“.

Snorri's circumstances

- Youngest of three brothers
- Brought up by a royal family
- Very good at being a chieftain
 - Exploits his capital: legal knowlege
- Very good at manoeuvring at court
 - Also a way of exploiting his "capital".
- Encounters scepticism among his peers.
 - Proud of his poetic abilities and achievements.
- In-fighting about becoming „earl“ of Iceland?



The Enigma of Egill.



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Construction in two parts

- The first part: Thorolf's story
- Political parable
 - Submitting to a king
 - Iceland's situation
 - Strengthening of royal power in Western Europe from the 12th century.
- Very realistic:
 - Geography
 - Economics.

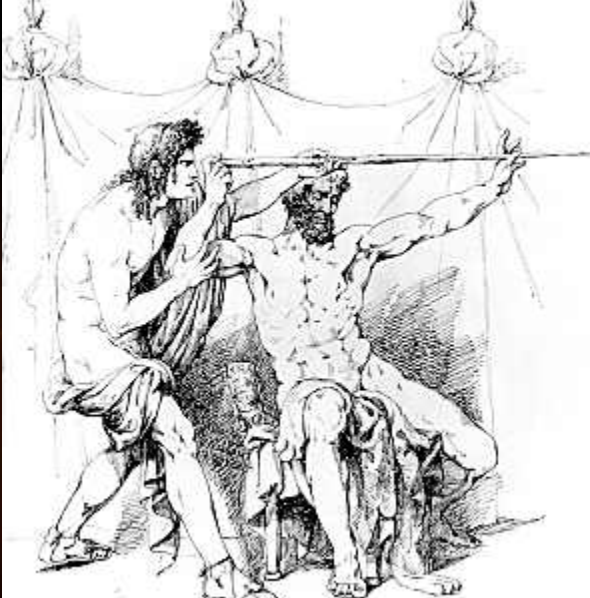
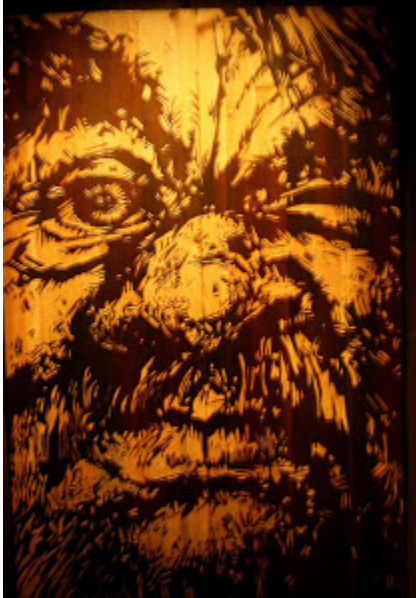
Inner logic

- Three weaknesses:
 - King is suspicious
 - Sons of Hildirid have been unjustly treated
 - Thorolf does not know his limits.

Main events

- Thorolf, his father and brother are introduced.
- The political situation
- Björgolf í Torgum
- Thorolf decides to serve the king.
- Royal service
- Good marriage
- Too successful
- Suspicion.
- Pride

The second and longer part: Egill's story



- From hero's birth to his death as an old man:
 - rare in the sagas.
- A poet and warrior.
- First generation Icelander.
- Travels to Norway.
- Conflict with King.
- Underlying conflict with brother and father.
- Biblical and mythological undertones:
 - A story of fratricide and retribution.

Structural Regularities in Egils Saga

Part One

Thorolf Kveldulfsson (ch. 1 to 22)

KETIL HÆNGR (ch. 23)

Skallagrim (ch. 24 to 30)

Part Two

Thorolf Skallagrimsson (ch. 32 to 38)

KETIL BLUNDR (ch. 39)

EGILL'S OVERSEAS JOURNEYS

Egill (ch. 40 to 57)

KETIL HÖÐR (ch. 57)

Egill (ch. 58 to 77)

EGILL RETIRES FROM TRAVELLING

KETIL GUFA (ch. 78)

Thorstein and Egill (ch. 80 to 90)

Themes repeated at key points

Part One

Thorolf Kveldulfsson goes to Harald's court against the advice of his father Kveldulf (ch. 6).

Part Two

Egill goes to a feast against the orders of his father Skallagrim (ch. 31).

Egill's two overseas journeys

Egill goes to a feast and quarrels with his father Skallagrim (ch. 59).

Egill's two overseas journeys.

Egill is forbidden to attend the assembly by Grim of Mosfell (ch. 88).

Other aspects

- Bible and intertextuality
 - Abel and Cain
 - The fallen angels
 - Egill and King David
- Hiding and showing at the same time:
 - Egill and Ásgerðr
- Egill's redemption?
 - The three burial places
 - Borrowing from *Yvain*

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
- Construction

In what circumstances could it have been written?

- Ambiguity of the political message?
 - Is it anti-royalist?
 - I don't think so.

Conflict with nephew Sturla Sighvatsson (1199-1238)

- Sólveig
- Conflicts over paternal inheritance
- Sturla drives Snorri away
- 1237-9: Snorri in Norway.
- 1238: Sturla is killed
- Bring together the Sturlungs
- Spring 1241: Snorri brings about the wedding of his nephew and that of his sister-in-law: Reconciliation.

Social conditions of literary production in Snorri's times

- We don't know very much.
- Snorri is said to have had “bóksögur” “settar saman” in Reykholt around 1230.
- Why? Export of King's sagas?
- Promoting skaldic poetry?
- Feasting however. Reykjahólar.
- My guess: Composed for the wedding of his nephew, Tumi Sighvatsson, and his sister-in-law, Þuríðr Ormsdóttir, held in Reykholt in early 1241.



Thank you