

An Ideological Struggle: An Interpretation of *Eyrbyggja saga*

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Eyrbyggja saga is the only saga of Icelanders to have an episodic structure. It consists of episodes which are seldom narratively connected together, in the sense that one event leads to another. Nevertheless, scholars have shown that there are various links to be found between the episodes, mostly in the form of textual allusions and interlacing of narrative strands (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1935, xxxiv-xxxvi, Hollander 1959, 222-227). In addition, all the episodes tell about the life and power struggle of the main character, Snorri goði Þorgrímsson, although he is far from being presented as a standard saga-hero (Andersson 1967, 160-162, Vésteinn Ólason 1971, 6-12). The way the author has interlaced many episodes together, and by that means tightened the structure together, indicates that *Eyrbyggja* is in fact a well planned work, although the outcome is incoherent at the level of plot.

In the following paper I will discuss the structure and meaning of *Eyrbyggja saga*. I will focus mainly on the content of two episodes, the so-called Máhliðingamál and the conflict between Snorri and Arnkell, and on how these episodes relate. My conclusion is that *Eyrbyggja* is composed on an ideological premise; that the content of the saga was arranged in a thematic (ideological) manner and that every episode of the saga contributes to the principal theme of the work.

The aim of the author was to create a new kind of saga-hero, which Snorri goði stands for, and in the process of reaching that a radical change in the standard structure of the Sagas of Icelanders appeared (Andersson 1967, 3-30). In presenting a new kind of saga-hero it followed that the author had to revalue the classical saga-heroes and the ideology they represent. But this task was by no means an easy one, because the author himself was steeped in the old heroic ethos of the sagas, as his sympathy for Arnkell, Snorri's main antagonist, clearly illuminates. Thus in composing the saga of Snorri goði the author had to undertake an ideological struggle: while he argued for a new kind of saga-hero he had to re-think the whole ideology on which the portrayal of the classical saga-heroes was based. This ideological struggle shaped the narrative of *Eyrbyggja* and the result of this is an *argumentative narrative structure*, as I have chosen to call it.

Eyrbyggja can, therefore, be said to have been written on two main levels. At the level of surface structure the story tells about the life of Snorri. Here the focus is on Snorri's political career in his local district, i.e. northern Snæfellsnes. At a deeper structural level the author argues that society was in need of a different kind of leadership and that Snorri was 'the best man for the job'. Crucial to this level of the saga are the many episodes that appear to be only peripheral to the main plot and it is in these episodes the narrative becomes more argumentative rather than straightforward.

Introducing Snorri goði

Most commentators on *Eyrbyggja saga* have interpreted Snorri as the saga's main character. But despite this, scholars have also maintained that Snorri is an unusual saga-hero in comparison to characters in other sagas (Andersson 1967, 160-162, Vésteinn Ólason, 1971, 6-12). What supports Snorri's role as main character of the saga is the fact that the frame of the saga is fitted around his life: 1) The *landnámssaga* tells about his forefathers, 2) Snorri is particularly introduced to the saga, followed by a narrative about his *utanför* and how he became a chieftain, 3) he appears in all the episodes of the main saga and, 4) the epilogue tells about his last years and death and, at the end, lists his descendants.

What is, on the other hand, unusual about Snorri's position is that he seldom appears in the text as a direct participant (subject) in the conflicts. He most frequently appears in the role of *liðveizlumaðr*, i.e. an auxiliary or helper. Snorri's enemies also have identical positions, especially Arnkell, his main antagonist. From a narratological point of view, we could say that *liðveizlumenn* dominate the plot. What this means is that the focus in the narration of *Eyrbyggja* is *less* on the characters (subjects) who cause problems, or conflicts, but more on *how* conflicts are solved and it is at this point that the auxiliaries step in (Pavel 1985, 124-125). The role of the subject is played by numerous characters, but the auxiliaries are most often played by the same characters, or by Snorri and his enemies.

Snorri has an unusual position in the text, and as we are about to see, he also operates in an unusual way. When he is introduced, we notice that nothing is said about his *physical strength* or *drengskapr*, which are the two qualities which a saga-hero had to possess to be able to become 'a true hero' (Bjarni Guðnason 1990a, 37). Instead, the author places an emphasize on Snorri's temper and qualities:

Snorri var meðalmaðr á hæð ok heldr grannligr, friðr sýnum, réttleitr ok ljóslitaðr, bleikhárr ok rauðskeggjaðr; hann var hógværr hvers-dagliga; fann lítt á honum, hvárt honum þótti vel eða illa; hann var vitr maðr ok forspár um marga hluti, langrækr ok heiptúðigr, heilráðr vinum sínum, en óvinir hans þóttusk heldr kulða af kenna ráðum hans. (26)¹

From this we can conclude that Snorri is not supposed to be 'a true hero' compared to the norms we find in the other Sagas of Icelanders.

The episode (ch. XIII) that tells about Snorri's *utanför* also supports the view that Snorri is not a 'a true hero'. The narrative about the journey of Snorri and his foster-brothers, the Þorbrandssynir, to Norway is rather short, and nothing is told about Snorri passing the usual heroic tests of the traditional Travel Pattern (Lönnroth 1976, 71-76). On the other hand, much more is said about his homecoming and its aftermath. The homecoming of the saga-hero is often an impressive sight in the sagas; the saga-hero is usually dressed in an elegant attire which symbolizes that he has done his stipulated heroic deeds – or *unnit frækilig afrek*. Snorri's attire is on the other hand very different; the people at Helgafell even laugh at him:

... en Snorri var í svartri kápu ok reið svörtu merhrossi góðu; hann hafði fornan trogsöðul ok vápn lítt til fegrðar búin; ... (23).

¹ All citations of *Eyrbyggja saga* are taken from Einar Ól. Sveinsson's edition in *Íslensk fornrit* IV (1935).

Here we could perhaps think that the author is playing with the symbolism related to *utanför*-episodes by showing us that Snorri was not an ordinary saga-hero. But I think we have to read this citation in a more prosaic manner when we consider the hidden agenda Snorri had in this 'scene': That is to conceal from his uncle and stepfather, Börkr digri, the fact that he had indeed *aflat fjár*. Snorri subsequently uses the money to buy the land of Helgafell – his ancestral farm-stead – from Börkr. Börkr is taken by surprise and is then forced to leave Helgafell. Snorri takes over the farm and, as the saga tells us, he becomes *höfðingi mikill* (27).

Snorri thus uses his shrewdness to reach the status of a chieftain. However the way he achieves his goal seems to be extremely unusual in saga society. Indeed the author seems to have considered it necessary to make the following remarks about how Snorri's neighbours responded to his rapid rise:

Hann varðveitti þá hof; var hann þá kallaðr Snorri goði; hann gerðisk þá höfðingi mikill, en ríki hans var mjök öfundsamt, því at fleir váru margir, er eigi þóttusk til minna um kommir fyrir ættar sakar, en áttu meira undir sér fyrir *afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi*. (27, italics are mine.)

This remark reveals what type of demands were made of those who wanted to become chieftains; they should belong to a good family, be physically strong and have proved their physical strength. It is hardly a coincidence that the words *prófuð harðfengi* are used here, because they recall Snorri's *utanför*, in which he didn't prove his physical strength – and that is what he is now being criticized for. This remark tells us also that society ranked heroism highly and it was through heroic deeds that men were able to come to power. But Snorri ignores these demands; instead of using physical strength he uses his shrewdness to gain his goal.

From this we can draw the conclusion that the 'heroic' picture presented of Snorri contradicts the accepted ideology (or heroism). The question then remains why the author wanted to introduce a new type of saga-hero while he at the same time challenges the foundation of the classical saga ethos? The answer must be that the author thought that the society was *in need of* a different kind of leadership and therefore also a new kind of social structure; in this case a district-leadership in the hands of only one person (*héraðs-höfðingi*) who had the power and responsibility to protect the inhabitants from disturbers of the peace, thus securing peace and harmony. In showing us this the author uses more of an argumentative narrative – rather than a straightforward narrative of Snorri's life – to lead us step by step to an understanding that Snorri had the qualities which fitted him for that kind of leadership.

Where the evil forces dominates ... and the sad story of Þórarinn svartí

In the first episode of the main saga, *Máhlíðingamál*, we are exposed to a world of evil forces (or *forneskja*) and it is the women who dominate this sphere of life (Vésteinn Ólason 1989, 100-102). The witch Katla in Holt causes the conflict by riding the son of Þorbjörn digri, Gunnlaugr. He is later found unconscious and badly injured. Katla then lets her son, Oddr, spread the rumour that it was not her but Geirriðr in Mávahlið who had ridden Gunnlaugr. Based on this rumour, Þorbjörn then accuses Geirriðr of being a *kveldriða* (29) and of having caused his son's injuries.

Þorbjörn digri's accusation against Geirriður, and also later against her son, Þórarinn svartí, is based on a sorceress' rumour. Nevertheless, nothing stops Þorbjörn in his groundless attacks against the people of Mávahlíð.

Þórarinn svartí becomes the main victim of Þorbjörn digri's violent behaviour. Þórarinn is a peaceful man, a skald, who had always avoided taking part in conflicts. The saga tells us that he was *svá ... óhlutdeilinn, at óvinir hans mæltu, at hann hefði eigi síðr kvenna skap en karla*. (27). But being a peaceful man is of course not an accepted attitude in saga society, as indeed the introduction of Þórarinn indicates. And this is what the story of Þórarinn will show us; that men in this society were not able to live in peace and quiet, they were simply forced to tolerate abuse from others because no one protected them. Here again, we see the ideology of heroism at work; society required that individuals should be able to take up arms and defend themselves physically – physical strength was all you needed to survive.

As the conflict progresses in Máhliðingamál, it is in fact Þórarinn's mother, Geirriður, who eggs her son on to take up arms and defend himself against Þorbjörn. This is what Geirriður does when Þorbjörn has confronted her son with the *duradómr* (35) and accused him of having stolen his horses. When Geirriður realizes that her son is not going to defend himself she has had enough and eggs him on by accusing him of *kvenna skap* (36). Þórarinn is then forced to take up arms against Þorbjörn, which leads to a confrontation between them in which Þórarinn kills Þorbjörn and a number of his men. Þórarinn's conduct in these battles shows us that it wasn't his physical strength that prevented him from taking part in battles, but rather his peaceful mind. But as his story shows us he is, nevertheless, forced to take up arms, not least to defend himself against public opinion. His ideology is not accepted by the society and his mother's lament shows us that society possessed a powerful weapon to force people into violence. Therefore, Þórarinn has no choice and has to respond to the demands of society.

Arnkell goði, Þórarinn's uncle, defends him in the law-suit regarding Þorbjörn's killing. He advises Þórarinn to leave the country, first and foremost to prevent more violence in this conflict, which could lead to Þórarinn's death. Þórarinn is, therefore, forced to leave the country, and is thus out of the saga, and no further information is provided about him or his family. From this sudden end of Þórarinn's story we must conclude that his story is supposed to convey a meaning within the wider context of the saga.

What we learn from the sad story of Þórarinn svartí is that society is dominated by chaotic forces; both in terms of evil forces (Vésteinn Ólason 1989; 193-194) and people, like Þorbjörn digri, who use them to damage other people (Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir 2000, 146-151). In addition, people like Þorbjörn digri do not hesitate to do whatever they like because no one has the responsibility to stop them. At a deeper level, we can say that the story of Þórarinn demonstrates that this society lacks an element of governance or, indeed, an alternative kind of leadership. In this case, it is necessary to compare the picture of society as it is represented in Máhliðingamál with the society presented in the *landnámssaga*. By this comparison we are able to realize what kind of changes had taken place in society.

From the time Snorri's forefather, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, settled in Snæfellsnes, he and his descendants, the Þórsnesingar, monopolised power in the district.

The story of Þórólfr also tells us about the nature of the power he built, i.e. that he combined both religious and secular power. In the last part of the pre-history (ch. IX-X) the power of the Þórsnesingar is threatened by the Kjalleklingar. At that time, the Kjalleklingar had so *margir ættmenn ... at engi frændbálkr var þá jafmikill í Breiðafirði*. (13). They now refuse to concede precedence to the Þórsnesingar and wish to gain power equal to them. The Kjalleklingar make this demand in a memorable way when they threaten to defecate at the assembly and by this act both disrespect the assembly and the legacy of Þórólfr Mostraskeggr. The result of this conflict is that the Kjalleklingar achieve equal power-status with fiórsnesingar. This conflict therefore leads to changes in how the district is governed and how power is distributed in the sense that it moves from one family to more than one.

This kind of governance has become reality in the main saga of *Eyrbyggja saga* and, as we have seen, the author gives us a very negative picture of it; the district no longer has a single chieftain leading it – as Þórólfr Mostraskeggr did before – and as the main saga shows us, the distribution of power has led to a power struggle between the leading families in the district. In this context, *Máhlíðingamál*, the episode which opens the main saga, demonstrates the impact of this new governance on individuals in the region. They prove to be defenceless against abuses because no one has the responsibility to protect them.

At a deeper level, *Máhlíðingamál* also shows us what kind of governance society was in need of, i.e. a single leading chieftain rather than many; in effect, a new social structure. This model is illuminated by Þórólfr Mostraskeggr's position of power and how he built up the society. The powerful chieftain the author looks to in this context is Snorri goði, as the reader will be shown in the course of the story. But at this point in the saga, on the other hand, we have another candidate, Snorri's main antagonist, Arnkell goði, who is also a formidable alternative.

Shrewdness versus *harðfengi*

In the first episodes of the main saga, from *Máhlíðingamál* to the berserk-episode, Snorri and Arnkell participate in these conflicts as *liðveizlumenn*, i.e. mostly by supporting people in litigation. In these conflicts their different strengths (qualities) are openly and secretly highlighted. In *Máhlíðingamál* it is Arnkell who comes out on top in the law-suit revolving around Þorbjörn's killing, which Snorri prosecutes. In the conflict between Vigfúss í Drápuhlíð and Snorri, Arnkell proves to be the chieftain in the district that is superior in litigation, as the search for help undertaken by Þorgerðr, Vigfúss's widow, is meant to indicate (Elin Bára Magnúsdóttir 2000, 157). In the berserk-episode we learn, on the other hand, where Snorri's superiority lies; in their problems with the two berserks, Vermundr mjóvi and Styrr ask both Arnkell and Snorri for support. It is Snorri, however, who proves to be the one who knows how to get rid of the dangerous berserks. Snorri's qualities are highlighted here and these involve giving a good and well-planned advice, as testified by the killing of the berserks.²

² The berserk-episode can also be interpreted as Snorri's late 'heroic' test (see my article 2000, 161-62).

On the other hand Snorri's advice, well-planned as it may be, does not help him when his fight with Arnkell begins. The conflict starts between Arnkell and his father, Þórólfr bægifótr, and the Þorbrandssynir and Snorri are later dragged into it. The conflict is about illegal expropriation (Byock 1990, 187-200), but because of his *harðfengi*, Arnkell manages to appropriate wrongfully the land and money of the freedmen of the Þorbrandssynir. The Þorbrandssynir try on two occasions to procure support from Snorri, but he refuses to interfere in this conflict. The reason for Snorri's decision is that he knows that his fosterbrothers will meet an overwhelming force and for them this is a no-win situation. As Snorri puts it when he tries to explain his position:

ok munu þeir þau [löndin] hafa, sem *handsterkari* eru.' (90, my italics)

In the dispute between Snorri and Arnkell about Krákunesskógr, Arnkell again manages to come out on top because of his *harðfengi*; he takes timber from the woods, which Snorri's men had been working in; he kills one of Snorri's followers, Haukr, and then wins the law-suit regarding Haukr's killing against Snorri. Snorri has no advice to offer and finds no way to deal with Arnkell, and he is forced into inactivity in their unsolved conflict. The status quo becomes embarrassing for Snorri, however, and he finally agrees to kill Arnkell after Þorleifr kimbí, his foster-brother, eggs him on to do so.

The heroic death of Arnkell

As Arnkell's conduct in the saga has shown us, he is a man of physical strength and wisdom and is therefore able to achieve his goals. When the moment of his death approaches we are left in no doubt about Arnkell's heroic courage and, accordingly, his role in the saga. Snorri along with fifteen men attacks Arnkell when he is working in the field with his slaves. His slaves show such lack of courage that they run away to get 'help'. But for Arnkell this is not an option, he has to defend himself: '*... því at mér flykkir þat betra en renna.*' (101) Arnkell defends himself in a valorous manner but he is finally overwhelmed by Snorri's men. His death is followed by a eulogy – as was appropriate when eminent men had lost their lives (Bjarni Guðnason, 1990b, 101):

... ok var hann öllum mönnum harmdauði, því at hann hefir verit allra manna best at sér um alla hluti í fornum síð ok manna vitrastr, vel skapi farinn, hjartaprúðr ok hverjum manni djarfari, einarör ok allvel stilltr; hafði hann ok jafnan inn hæra hlut í málaferlum, við hverja sem skipta var; fékk hann af því ófundsamt, sem nú kom fram. (103).³

The conflict between Snorri and Arnkell is in many ways very interesting, especially in regard to their roles in the saga, i.e. as the protagonist and main antagonist respectively. In their conflict these roles are reversed; Arnkell becomes the real hero of the saga and he is the character towards whom the author is most sympathetic. Snorri, on the other hand, is not a classical saga-hero, as they are defined in the Sagas of Icelanders, and he even has to stand in the shadow of Arnkell during their power

³ This text is not to be found in all the manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga* (see Scott 2003, 13*-14*). But nevertheless, it sums up all that Arnkell stands for and is therefore an important text for the understanding of the saga.

struggle. The question therefore remains why the author treats Snorri's antagonist in such a positive manner and lets Snorri suffer defeat at his hands again and again – it is after all Snorri who is the main character of the saga and the one who emerges victorious at the end of the saga.

The heroic death of Arnkell conveys the ideology of hero-worship as it appears in the discourse of the sagas (Bjarni Guðnason 1990b, 97). Nevertheless, the message the author of *Eyrbyggja* sends us in relation to Arnkell's death is quite the opposite. In the final analysis the message seems to be: *Don't be a hero!* This is a conclusion we have to draw from the context of Arnkell's death; his death is neither the climax of the saga nor its end and the aftermath regarding his death becomes not as honourable as one might have expected for such an important man as Arnkell (Byock 1990, 201). Arnkell just dies – and what is more important is that Snorri is still alive.

The conflict between Snorri and Arnkell becomes, above all, an ideological struggle between two chieftains who use different methods in their power struggle. Arnkell represents the heroic ideals; as a classical saga-hero he builds up his power single-handedly. His heroism is his strongest weapon, and therefore he meets his destiny without fear and defends himself alone – and thus he dies with honour. Snorri, on the other hand, uses his shrewdness in making strategic plans in his power struggle. He builds up his power by making alliances with others and accordingly he enjoys a powerful following when he is forced to fight and defend himself (Helgi Þorláksson 1992, 299-302). From this we can draw the conclusion that the power struggle between Snorri and Arnkell is a 'conflict' about different ways of conducting a power struggle; between the old heroic ideals and the new ideals represented by Snorri.

The fact that Snorri emerges victorious at the end of the saga could be interpreted as an authorial message conveying the notion that heroic ideals cannot prevail. This result, however, is not as straightforward as Arnkell's conduct suggests; the heroic deeds of the old saga-heroes cannot be forgotten. Here the author represents the national romantic view of the saga-heroes as defined in the sagas' discourse. But in the end the author's admiration for the old saga-heroes has to give in to what we can perhaps call more pragmatic ways of conducting a power struggle. The death of the hero was the unescapable destiny of the saga-hero – because at that moment the hero could prove his heroic courage – but it did contain obvious limitations for the healthy development of society.

The 'heroic' picture of Snorri goði is built around this ideological struggle, i.e. between the tradition (the other sagas) and new ways of conducting a power struggle. In the conflict between Snorri and Arnkell this struggle is the main theme, but following Arnkell's death we notice that the romantic view of the saga-hero disappears and the outlook becomes more realistic. That, at least, is the case in the next two episodes of the saga; the conflict between the Þorbrandssynir and the Þorlákssynir and the last episode which deals with Björn Breiðvíkingakappi (Bibire 1973, 17).

The saga's concluding episodes – which tell of Fróðárundr and Snorri's conflict against Óspakr – describe Snorri when the period of power struggle is over and he has become the most powerful chieftain of the district. These episodes highlight Snorri's new role as a chieftain who combines religious and secular power.

Snorri participates in the christianization of the country and builds a church at Helgafell. In the episode of Fróðárundr he then contributes to the solving of the problems of the people at Fróðá through the use of his religious power. In the last episode we see Snorri in the role of society's protector. He defends the farmers and his thingmen against the abuses of Óspakr and his men and he therefore provides the people of the district with the protection they need against disturbers of the peace. This was precisely the stance called for at the beginning of the saga in relation to Máhliðingamál. At the end of the saga a balance has been struck and the region has gained a strong leader and, in a sense, a new social structure which had been lacking in the period between Þórólfr Mostraskæggr and the emergence of Snorri goði on the scene.

In the epilogue of the saga we understand that the author bids farewell to the old heroic society of the saga in a symbolic way. Two characters suddenly appear who should in fact be out of the saga: Þórólfr bægifótr and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. These two can be interpreted as representing the saga society which now belongs to the *past*; Þórólfr stands for the *forneskja* and Björn for the heroic ideals. But the days of *forneskja* and heroic courage are now over; Þórólfr materializes as the bull Glæsir, disappears under the earth and is never seen again, whereas the saga tells us that Björn will never be able to return to Iceland again. Snorri remains, however, and his destiny and that of his descendants will be to live in the *future* and inherit the country.

As a result, the aim of the author of *Eyrbyggja saga* must have been to create a saga-hero he considered society to be in need of, a strong leader who could deal with the problems it had to face. Thus, the characterization of Snorri goði is built on the qualities such a leader must possess. On the other hand, the author had also to face an obstacle, which was how the saga-heroes had been interpreted in other sagas written before his. Thus, to make his saga-hero more credible he had to revise the heroism represented in the other sagas in order to strengthen his arguments for his new saga-hero. The structure of the saga became, therefore, more argumentative than a straight-forward narrative about Snorri's power struggle in his local district.

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