NORTH ATLANTIC ISLANDS AND A COMPLICATED WEDDING IN EGILS SAGA

AS ILHAS DO ATLÂNTICO NORTE E UM CASAMENTO COMPLICADO NA SAGA DE EGILL

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of the Northern Islands in an episode of Egils saga, a medieval Icelandic text written during the first half of the thirteenth century. The episode focuses on the complexities of a wedding in which the involved groups do not have an initial agreement, developing into a conflictive situation spanning into several lands and agents. The resolution of said conflict, which involves some of the major characters in the saga, leads to a discussion of the concept of "liminality". Its possibilities and limits for the analysis of Norse societies are here assessed through this case study.

KEYWORDS: ICELAND; SAGAS; LIMINALITY; NORTH ATLANTIC.

RESUMO

O artigo investiga o papel das ilhas do Atlântico Norte num episódio da Saga de Egill, texto medieval islandês composto na primeira metade do século XIII. Este episódio centra-se nas complexidades de um casamento, em que as diferentes partes não partem de um acordo inicial, envolvendo portanto diferentes atores e territórios habitualmente ausentes na aliança conjugal. A resolução do conflito, protagonizada por dois personagens centrais da saga, leva-nos a refletir sobre a categoria de "liminaridade", avaliando as suas potencialidades e limitações para compreender as sociedades medievais do norte a partir deste estudo de caso.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ISLÂNDIA; SAGAS; LIMINALIDADE; ATLÂNTICO NORTE.

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Egils saga, composed in Iceland c. 1220-1240, is one of the best known examples of the medieval saga genre. It is formally anonymous, even if there is a tradition of scholarship that associates it with the learned milieu associated with the author and magnate Snorri Sturluson.2 While in many aspects it is possesses the traits typical of the Íslendingasögur (often known as the "family sagas" or "sagas about early Icelanders") subgenre, it is exceptional in the large number of geographical locations in which the action takes place. Rather than focusing only in Iceland (and Norway), its setting extends to eastern Scandinavia, the Baltic, the British Isles and the lands near the White Sea in modern day Finland and Russia.

The Northern Isles play a significant role in one episode of the saga, centred on the events surrounding the marriage between two important characters, Bjǫrn Brynjólfsson and Þóra Hróaldsdóttir. In most editions, this story develops between chapters thirty-two to thirty-five of the saga.3 The episodes involve several actors beyond the married couple: The heads of three families play a prominent role in the story, as does the Norwegian king. The narrative begins in Norway, climaxes in three insular settings (Orkney, the Shetlands and Iceland) and finally returns to Norway. We will argue that those insular settings appear as spaces of conflict and tension, while the mainland is contrastingly depicted as a place of order. We will briefly describe the events before attempting to analyse them.

When their story begins in chapter thirty-two, it introduces Bjǫrn, a hersir ríkr from Sogn in Norway; these words indicate a powerful and wealthy (ríkr) landowning aristocrat (hersir). He has a son and heir named Brynjólfr, who in turn has two young sons: Bjǫrn and Þórðr. The younger Bjǫrn is said to be a great traveller, a fact that will have noticeable impact in the narrative. He attends a summer feast and meets Þóra, the sister of another hersir, Þórir Hróalðsson. He asks for her hand in marriage, but her brother, Þórir, refuses.

But the following autumn, Bjǫrn kidnaps her (the saga does not inform if she agrees or is taken forcefully) and brings her back home. They intend to marry; Brynjólfr rejects this, as he finds svívirðing (dishonour) in the actions of his son, who breaks the friendship between him and Þórir, a risky move in a social world bound by ties of friendship as a core language for political ties.4

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2 A thorough and recent defence of this thesis is TORFI TULINIUS. *The Enigma of Egill: The Saga, the Viking Poet, and Snorri Sturluson*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. All references to Icelandic authors follow the standard pattern of given name and patronymic, while all others follow the usual surname, given name style.
3 I follow the standard edition, SIGURÐUR NORDAL (ed). *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Íslenzk Fornrit 2. Reykjavík, Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933. All references to *Egils saga* here refer to this edition and are listed by chapter and page number. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
4 JÓN VIÐAR SIGURÐSSON. *Den Vennlige Vikingen: Vennskapets makt i Norge og på Island 900-1300*. Oslo, Pax, 2010.

Aiming to amend the mistake of his son, Brynjólfr sends an emissary to Þóra's brother, who wants her to return to their home, instead of accepting compensation and letting the marriage happen. Stubbornly, Bjǫrn refuses to let her go, and instead asks his father for a warship and a crew. Brynjólfr refuses, fearing that his son will cause more trouble, and instead gives him a merchant ship and orders him to head for Dublin to trade. He accepts, but (against his father's will) he brings Þóra with him to the sea. During the expedition they have bad weather, so the ship becomes damaged, and the traders stranded in Shetland with their cargo.

In the following chapter, the saga then tells that a ship came from Orkney with a message from king Haraldr for jarl Sigurðr of Orkney. It says that Bjǫrn Brynjólfsson was made an outlaw in Norway and that he must be killed;[5] the saga tells he also sent the same message to "the southern islands even up to Dublin". While in Shetland, Bjǫrn finally marries Þóra. They spend the winter there, but as soon as spring arrives, he prepares to leave, seemingly aiming for the newly-discovered Iceland, which was beyond the rule of the Norwegian king. The country is described as almost virgin and uninhabited.[6] Bjǫrn arrives at Borg and meets by chance the wealthy settler Skalla-Grímr ("Grímr the bald"), who happens to know his father Brynjólfr. Skalla-Grímr offers the group residence and help, and they stay there.

At the beginning of chapter thirty-four, the news of Bjǫrn's deeds reach Iceland. Questioned by Skalla-Grímr, Bjǫrn finally confesses he has married Þóra without her brother's agreement; the farmer becomes furious, reminding the newly wed man of his close friendship with Þórir. But his son, Þórólfr, and other people in the farm intercede, saying it is unfair to treat the guest in such a way. Somewhat appeased, Skalla-Grímr tells Þórólfr to deal with Bjǫrn himself.

Chapter thirty-five tells that during the summer, Þóra bears a daughter, Ásgerðr (who would be a central character in the later part of the saga).[7] Meanwhile, Þórólfr and Bjǫrn become good friends, and Skalla-Grímr's son persuades his father to send an offer of compensation to Þórir, and the farmer yields. Brynjólfr joins the offer Þórir agrees and pardons Bjǫrn. After another winter, Bjǫrn leaves for Norway with Þórólfr and Þóra, but they leave Ásgerðr to be fostered at Borg. The narrative ends with full reconciliation between Brýnjólfr, his son, and Þórir hersir.

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[5] Full outlawry was a most severe punishment in the Norse legal world. On the matter, see WALGENBACH, Elizabeth. *Excommunication and Outlawry in the Legal World of Medieval Iceland.* Leiden, Brill, 2021, and POILVEZ, Marion. "Outlaws of the Northern Seas: a comparison in the Norse corpus" in *Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea: Seascapes and Dreamscapes*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 97-112.

[6] *Sá þar til lands inn ekki nema boða eina og hafnleysur. Egils saga*, ch. 33, p. 86.

[7] On her role in the saga, see BRYNJA ÞORGEIRSDÓTTIR, "Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in Egils saga" in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2020, pp. 147–63, in particular pp. 155-159.

It can be seen that the plot of the episode is rather simple. Conflict arises in Norway due to Bjǫrn's rejection of the will of both his father and (future) brother-in-law, who would normally have a say in the wedding of younger kin under their care.8 Bjǫrn moves against the established rules of kinship and escapes the country with Þóra, angering both his own father and Þórir. They arrive in Shetland, where they do what they were unable to in Norway, this is, getting married. Threatened by the representatives of the Norwegian king as a law-breaker, Bjǫrn escapes further away to Iceland. Due to his kinship ties Skalla-Grímr both welcomes him and is infuriated by his actions, who risk draggin him into the conflict. But friendship from Þórólfr and the local opinion saves Bjǫrn, making Skalla-Grímr change his mind and support a settlement. By the combined efforts of the Icelanders and Brynjólfr, Þórir accepts and order is re-established, bringing back stable kinship and friendship ties between three families.

DIVERSE GEOGRAPHIES AROUND THE NORTHERN SEA

Spatiality is defined geographically, and it is threefold: Norway is at the same time where order exists and breaks down (and also, where is finally re-created). Shetland (and indirectly Orkney) appear as a place of both conflict and of actions against the established order. Finally, Iceland is an undefined, ambiguous place, a frontier of potential solutions but also of uncertain conditions. This is coherent with the first mention of these places in the saga:

> "And because of this tyranny [King Haraldr's] many men left the country and settled in many places, both east in Jamtland and Helsingland and Vestland, the Hebrides, Dublin shire, Ireland, Normandy in France, Caithness in Scotland, Orkney and Shetland, the Faeroes. And at that time, Iceland was found."[9]

The episode discussed here mentions several of these places: Iceland, the Hebrides, Shetland, Orkney and Dublin. All are presented as places of resettlement for Norse people, but only Iceland is presented as a completely new space.

By contrast, the Northern Isles, if ambiguous and uncertain, appear at least nominally as an extension of the Norwegian domain. It is hard to say how effective royal power was in them at the

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[8] BANDLIEN, Bjørn. *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Medieval Iceland and Norway*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005, in particular pp. 3-5. Further discussion of marriage in AGNES ARNÓRSDÓTTIR. *Property and virginity: The Christianization of Marriage in Medieval Iceland 1200-1600.* Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2010 and FRANK, Roberta. "Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland", *Viator* 4, 1973, pp. 473-484.

[9] *En af þessi áþján flýðu margir menn af landi á brott ok byggðusk þá margar auðnir víða, bæði austr í Jamtaland ok Helsingjaland ok Vestrlǫnd, Suðreyjar, Dyflinnar skíði, Írland, Normandí á Vallandi, Katanes á Skotlandi, Orkneyjar ok Hjaltland, Færeyjar. Ok í þann tíma fannsk Ísland. Egils saga,* ch. 4, p. 12.

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time of composition of *Egla*, as sources for Orkney are scarce for the period between the years 1195 and 1267.[10] It is possible to imagine that the earl and bishop in Orkney were able to partly oppose and counterbalance the power of the royally-appointed sheriff, who was the main figure of authority in Shetland, which was under direct rule by the king. In any case, in *Egils saga*, the Northern Isles are a much less defined space than either monarchical Norway or the "new society" Iceland. They appear as a territory for adventure, even while not as clearly foreign as the lands in the Baltic or the Far North, but as more unpredictable and blurry than the rest of Britain, which is depicted as a land of kings and commerce. Finally, the sea serves as the narrative bridge and threshold, both connecting and dividing these geographical settings and their distinctive social and narrative possibilities, but it remains itself undefined.

LIMINALITY AND ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL ROOTS

While undoubtedly this narrative is first and foremost a literary construction one of the many well-crafted pieces in a coherently structured saga, which can be understood as two separated, if parallel stories each focusing on a different generation of the same family[11]. I intend to analyse an episode in the first part (the "saga of Þórólfr") , relying primarily on anthropological theory.

 In particular, I will assess the utility of the concept of liminality to understand the spatial and social dynamics of this scene. This concept, originally coined by the Dutch theorist Arnold Van Gennep in his work about the rites of passage, has to be understood as part of the broader effort of the Durkheimian sociological school to understand the roots of social order, especially in its links with religion. In its basic meaning, liminality refers to the state in which something (more frequently: someone) is in a transitional stage, after the separation from a certain institution/structure and before its reintegration into it. Moreover, it should be noted that Van Gennep was an odd figure in this milieu, as he was both in dialogue and holding some fundamental differences with the core members of Durkheim's circle, in particular by his refusal to adhere to a rigidly holistic social theory; which in some ways anticipate a subtler revaluation of individual agency by Mauss.[12]

The notion, as other notions coined by the French sociological school became foundational for social anthropology, in France, Britain and beyond. Their pioneering studies have strongly shaped

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[10] WÆRDAHL, Randi. *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm c. 1195-1397*. Leiden, Brill, 2011, p. 78.
[11] SØRENSEN, Jan. "Komposition og Værdiunivers i Egils saga", *Gripla* 4, 1980, pp. 260-272.
[12] See THOMASSEN, Bjørn. "The Hidden Battle that Shaped the History of Sociology: Arnold van Gennep contra Emile Durkheim". *The Journal of Classical Sociology* 16.2, 2016, pp. 173-195.

the study of such diverse topics as the division of labour, the sacred, sacrifice, and collective memory.[13] Durkheim and his disciples, as well as other functionalists, have been often criticised for a lack of interest in social conflict as a constitutive element of social order. The appropriation of the notions of the sociological school by later anthropologists applies also to the concept of liminality, which was adopted by the Mancunian anthropologist Victor Turner. The Manchester school is well-known for their emphasis in the analysis of situations of tension and conflict, and therefore the choice of the less-rigid anthropology of Van Gennep allows for a renewed appreciation of uncertainty and agency over pure function and determination.

In his classical *The Ritual Process*, discussed the main traits of liminality and identifies four main steps, building on Van Gennep's original characterization:[14]

1) Stripping off of pre-liminal and post-liminal attributes

2) Submissiveness and silence

3) "The neophyte in liminality must be a *tabula rasa,* a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status

4) Sexual continence, derived from a status of undifferentiation.

In other words, a person in a state of liminality is undefined and formless, yet it is ready to be inscribed with the new structural marks of existence during his or her reaggregation into the social structure. Liminality is not simple ambiguity, but it is a defined box of a lack of defining features in which someone is in a state of what Turner calls by the somewhat elusive notion of *communitas:*

> "the spontaneous, immediate, concrete nature of *communitas*, as opposed to the norm-governed, institutionalized, abstract nature of the social structure. Yet, *communitas* is made evident or accessible, so to speak, only through its juxtaposition to, or hybridization with, aspects of social structure."[15]

The limited, the transitional nature of liminality is thus constitutive of its character: "In rites de passage, men are released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized

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[13] BESNARD, Philippe. *The Sociological Domain: The Durkheimians and the Founding of French Sociology.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
[14] TURNER, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York, Aldine, 1995 [1969], pp. 102-104.
[15] *Ibíd*, p. 127.

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by their experience of *communitas*".[16] In short, the concept refers to "a state of equality, comradeship, and common humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles, and hierarchies".[17].

LIMINALITY, *COMMUNITAS* AND OLD NORSE LITERATURE

Liminality has appeared somewhat frequently in Old Norse studies during the last few years,[18] much in the same way the aforementioned notions of collective memory and gift-giving did.[19] While indeed the concept is attractive, it should be noted that some studies does not use it in its technical sense but instead as a broad synonym for "marginal" and/or "ambiguous", in the (etymologically correct) sense of something "at the border". Moreover, it can be pointed out that Turner himself did not use it at all in his own analysis about Icelandic sagas.[20] I suspect that this suggests that liminal (in the sense of Turner-Van Gennep) does not apply easily to the saga world, at least without some important modification.

A core problem is that Turner was mostly thinking through his fieldwork in a structurally very different society, the Zambian Ndembu. They are a matrilineal hunter-gatherer village society, while medieval Iceland was an agrarian-pastoral society based on isolated farmsteads, with kinship defined bilaterally. Both kinship and economic ties thus work in very different ways in both groups. These traits are crucial for the episode under analysis, which focuses on the issues of a ritual of kinship through alliance, but where also certain economic ties (like trade and monetary atonement) play a significant role.

Moreover, a crucial element in liminal situations, *communitas*, seems to be absent in the saga world, and the four traits listed above do not seem to be common in ritualised behaviour present in the sagas. For example, the transition from (juvenile) single to (adult) married life was indeed

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[16] *Ibid*, p. 129.

[17] OLAVESON, Tim. "Collective Effervescence and Communitas: Processual Models of Ritual and Society in Emile Durkheim and Victor Turner", *Dialectical Anthropology* 26, 2001, pp. 89–124, at p.93.

[18] Some recent examples are: SCHJØDT, Jens Peter. "Wilderness, Liminality, and the Other in Old Norse Myth and Cosmology", in *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion. Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies and Ideas of Wild Nature*, Boston-Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 183-204; COLE, Richard. "Towards a Typology of Absence in Old Norse Literature", *Exemplaria* 28, 2016, pp. 137-160, and WOLF, Allison. "The Liminality of Loki", *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 27, 2020, pp. 107-113.

[19] Maussian gift-theory is in the background of studies such as VIÐAR PÁLSSON. *Language of Power: Feasting and Gift-Giving in Medieval Iceland and Its Sagas*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2017, and JÓN VIÐAR SIGURÐSSON, op. cit. Halbwachsian theory is similarly important for the very recent wave of studies on memory, including a massive handbook (GLAUSER, Jürg, HERMANN, Pernille and MITCHELL, Stephen (eds.) *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019), and a dossier in a specialised journal (see NYGAARD, Simon and TIROSH, Yoav, "Old Norse Studies and Collective Memory: An Introduction", *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 28, 2021, 25-35.)

[20] TURNER, Victor. "An anthropological approach to the Icelandic Saga", in *The translation of culture: Essays to E.E. Evans-Pritchard*, London, Routledge, 2001 [1971], pp. 349-374

ritualised, but it appears to work through an individual, case-by-case dynamic. This is expected in a society with ego-centred, bilateral kinship, which does not prescribe how and when people marry and who in strict way. Moreover, a major communal activity in saga literature, the feast (*veizla*), is highly structured, sexually and socially differentiated.[21] It reinforces social divisions and pre-established hierarchies in a way reminding readers of North American Potlatch or Papuan Moka,[22] rather than resembling the *communitas*-inducing levelling or inversion of the established order expected in, for example, the initiation rituals of the Ndembu or the *hain* rites of the Fuegian Selk'nam.[23]

Furthermore, in the Christian period when Egla was written, the prevalent unfocused and individualistic attitude of laymen during the main religious ritual, mass, is congruent with this lack of *communitas*, as they were expected to participate in the ritual primarily by attending physically, rather than emotionally. The emphasis on proper ritual gesture and action was sanctioned by theology, as "the liturgy had an automatic effect if it was performed in correct form**; the state of mind of those present was of secondary importance.**"[24]

Another example of the rejection of *communitas*-inducing behaviour can be clearly seen in the Eddaic poem *Hávamál*, which warns the audience of the dangers of acting improperly in feasts. For example:

> The wary guest, who comes to dine, stays silent but strains his ears: all smart men find things out for themselves.[25]

> A man shouldn´t clutch at a cup, but moderately drink his mead. He should be sparing of speech or shut up. No man will blame you if you go early to bed.[26]

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[21] See VIÐAR PÁLSSON, op. cit.

[22] The bibliography on both types of feast is very extensive. The classic reference studies for each are CODERE, Helen, *Fighting with Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlatching and Warfare*, 1792-1930, New York, J.J. Augustin, 1950 and STRATHERN, Andrew. *The Rope of Moka: Big-men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount Hagen New Guinea*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

[23] On the Hain, see CHAPMAN, Anne. *Drama and Power in a Hunting Society: The Selk'nam of Tierra Del Fuego*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 78-156.

[24] NEDKVITNE, Arnved. *Lay Belief in Norse Society 1000-1350*. Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009, p. 95-96. Emphasis is mine). Nedkvitne also compares the situation between the central middle ages and the emotional description in the late-middle ages *Laurentius saga*, where the emotional response to mass is emphasized, but affirms this is limited to clerics.

[25] *Inn vari gestr, er til verðar kømr, / þunnu hljóði þegir; / eyrum hlýðir, en augum skoðar; / svá nýsisk fróðra hverr fyrir*. The poem is quoted from JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON and VÉSTEINN ÓLASSON (eds.), "Hávamál" In *Eddukvæði*, vol. I. Reykjavík, Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014, p. 322-355. Stanza 7 at p. 323. The translations are taken from ORCHARD, Andy, *The Elder Edda*, London, Penguin, 2011.

[26] *Haldit maðr á keri, drekki þó at hófi mjǫð, / mæli þarft eða þegi; / ókynnis þess vár þik engi maðr, / at þú gangir snemma at sofa*. Ibíd., Stanza 19 at p. 325.

> He seems clever when he beats a retreat, a guest who mocks other guests; he can´t know clearly, making fun at a feast, if he is making a row among foes.[27]

It can thus be seen that feasts were not conceived as social places where rules were suspended to mark a passage between different states of being. Feasts were strictly under rules, and conviviality was highly structured and aimed (amongst other things) to reinforce established social hierarchies, as feasts tend to do in most societies where they are politically important; along those lines anthropologist Michael Dietler thus says that "feasts serve a variety of structural roles in the broader political economy. They create and maintain social relations that bind people together". [28] In my view, the inherent tension in the *veizlur* was not due to their suspension of normal social rules, but due to the competitive, ranked character of Icelandic feasting, at least as it is portrayed in the sagas.[29].

LIMINALITY AS UNCERTAINTY: THE NORTHERN ISLES

However, the aspect of chaos and uncertainty which permeates the representation of insular spaces in the analysed episode *Egils saga* is akin to an aspect of liminality, and the Northern Isles here appear literarily as transitional stages in the resolution of the case. A temporary life abroad as a place for the realization of a transitional instance (this resembles somewhat a rite of passage). The marriage between Bjǫrn and Þóra is also a source of tension and potential change of established order as much as of its reproduction, and in this it resembles Turner's idea of ritual, and specially the liminal stage, as it is creative and potentially revolutionary for the established structure: Bjǫrn simply refuses to obey the custom by which men require the agreement of the bride's closest relative (usually the father or a brother) to marry her[30]. The issue of what constitutes a legitimate marriage is of crucial importance in *Egils saga*, as illustrated by the disputes about Ásgerðr's inheritance (in the later part of the saga),[31] and the wedding of Hilðiríðr (in the earlier).[32] Moreover, it also serves in the narrative

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[27] *Fróðr þykkisk, sá er flótta tekr, /gestr at gest hæðinn; / veita gorla, sá er um verði glissir, þótt hann með grǫmum glami.* Ibíd., Stanza 31 at p. 328.

[28] DIETLER, Michael. "Theorizing the Feast: Rituals of Consumption, Commensal Politics and Power in African Contexts" in *Feasts: Archæological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics and Power, Washington & London,* Smithsonian Institution Press, pp. 65-114, on pp. 68-69.

[29] A good discussion on competitive feasts, emphasizing archaeological evidence, is ZORI, David et al. "Feasting in Viking Age Iceland: sustaining a chiefly political economy in a marginal environment", *Antiquity* 87, 2013, pp. 150–165. By contrast, VIÐAR PÁLSSON, op. cit., thinks of feasts as essentially displaying and communicating pre-existing social ties, at least as depicted in most written sources. *Egils saga* shows that ranking is a major issue creating tension in feasts, and it includes several episodes of feasts degenerating into bloody conflicts.

[30] This might be historically related to the long and complex process of transition in the ideas about marriage in Iceland from family consent to individual mutual consent (as proposed by Church doctrine). See AGNES ARNÓRSDÓTTIR, op. cit., pp. 63-112.

[31] *Egils saga*, ch. 56, p. 153.

[32] *Egils saga*, ch. 9, p. 26.

to illustrate how, beyond the rule of royal authority, ritual and custom may not work as expected, at least until a new force of order emerges to restore them.

The Northern Isles appear indeed liminal in the sense of frontier-like, as they appear to be both nominally inside but practically outside of the effective reach of Norwegian political power. This might be related to the nature of kingship in Norway, which diminished drastically once the (itinerant) king was not effectively present.[33] Bjǫrn acts subvert the structure of kinship, of custom, and of law. However, he does not challenge the structure where it is strongest (in Norway), but in a place where he does not need to directly oppose the structure to succeed, simply because the structure is no longer present.

ICELAND, AND REAGGREGATION: A NEW OLD ORDER

Reaggregation, the last step of transition from liminality back to structure, is here realised by the effort of Icelanders. I have argued elsewhere that one of the core ideological messages of *Egla* is that the *mýramenn*[34]. These, the family of descendants of Skalla-Grímr is in the saga presented as a source of a new authority, both similar and distinct from the Norwegian authority structures of the *hersir*, the *lendir menn* and the monarch, grounded on the notion of "founding father" settlement.[35]

In this episode, Skalla-Grímr plays his part accordingly: in the still unstructured, "new world" of Iceland,[36] he acts (grudgingly as his personality demands). He pragmatically but authoritatively delegates the task of dealing with Bjǫrn to his son Þórólfr, and thus promotes a peaceful settlement. The agreement is enacted through a culturally accepted response to conflict: the offer of compensation and the use of friendship and kinship ties to mediate in inter-family conflicts. Therefore, the *mýramenn* ancestors here play a role very similar to that of arbitrators in a classical feud, and thus promote a brokered return to normality, towards what a Turnerian would label structure.[37] As unexpected participants in a misconducted ritual of marriage, which should have been limited to the families of groom and bride, Skalla-Grímr and his people take advantage of the uncertainties of the

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[33] ORNING, Hans Jacob. *Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages.* Leiden, Brill, 2008. The transition towards more structured Statehood is discussed in detail in BAGGE, Sverre. *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway c.900-1350.* Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2009.

[34] "Men of the swamps", referring to the area of western Iceland named *Mýrar* (meaning "moors, swampland") which is central to the settlement claimed by Skalla-Grímr.

[35] BARREIRO, Santiago. "Genealogy, Labour and Land: The Settlement of the *Mýramenn* in *Egils saga*", *Networks and Neighbours* 3.1, 2015, pp. 22-44.

[36] On the view of Iceland as a new society, see BYOCK, Jesse. *Viking Age Iceland.* London, Penguin, 2001, pp. 81-98.

[37] The best overview of Icelandic feud dynamics is HELGI ÞORLÁKSSON, "Hvað er blóðhefnd?" in *Sagnaþing: helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. Apríl 1994.* Reykjavík, Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994, pp. 389-414.

case, but also of the margin of decision-making given by their new, virgin country, to solve the transitional crisis smoothly, restoring the traditional order, but with Iceland as a source of order, rather than Norway. And, at the same time, they give a memorable backstory for one of the major feminine characters of the saga, and a main ancestral figure of the *mýramenm* themselves.