

The *Goðar* in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*

John Kennedy

Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar is unusual among the *Íslendingasögur* in setting most of its action outside Iceland. Its eponymous central figure lives quietly when at home in south-west Iceland: he does not generally meddle in local affairs, and few are anxious to challenge him. The saga might, therefore, seem an unpromising source for a student of the *goðar*: Icelandic sources very rarely portray *goðar* exercising their authority outside that country; and the powers and responsibilities of the Icelandic *goðar* naturally impinged most on those who actively involved themselves in the life of the community.¹

Yet the saga is, in part, the story of the establishment, in their new country, of a powerful and prosperous Icelandic family, the *Mýramenn*, and both Egill and his son, Þorsteinn, are *goðar*. If, as has often been suggested,² *Egils saga* was written by the famous author and statesman Snorri Sturluson (1178/79–1241), it is the work of a man who was a descendant of the early *Mýramenn*, a *goði* himself, and a leading participant in the thirteenth-century power struggle whose protagonists strove, *inter alia*, to accumulate *goðorð* ('Chieftainship'), the rights and powers

¹In their recently published *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur* (Stuttgart, 1987), Rudolph Simek and Hermann Pálsson provide what in most respects is the traditional scholarly view of the *goðar*: Gode, isländ. goði m. (pl. goðar), Häuptlinge im ma. Island, die in heidn. Zeit auch Priesterfunktion gehabt hatten; ab 930 gab es in Island 36 G.n, die in der legislativen Versammlung des Althing saßen, ab 985 [sic, 965?] waren es 39. Die G.n hatten eine gewisse Schutzfunktion für ihre þingmenn ("Thingleute"), die ihnen wiederum Gefolgschaft schuldeten. Die G.n (ihr Amt hieß goðorð und war vererbbar, konnte aber auch verkauft werden) waren üblicherweise reichere und bedeutendere Bauern, weshalb wohl in den Isländersagas trotz ihrer geringen Zahl relativ häufig G.n als Protagonisten vorkommen.

(Gode, Icelandic goði, m. (pl. goðar), chieftains in medieval Iceland, who in the heathen period also had a priestly function; from 930 there were 36 goðar in Iceland, who sat in the legislative assembly of the Alþingi, from 985 there were 39. The goðar had a certain protective function towards their þingmenn 'þing followers', who in return owed them allegiance. The goðar (their official position was called a goðorð and was inheritable but could also be sold) were usually wealthier and more prominent farmers, on account of which, despite their small number, they appear fairly frequently as protagonists in the *Íslendingasögur*.)

Several major details of the traditional picture seem open to serious question. I have attempted to explore the matter in my 1985 thesis, 'The *Goðar*: Their Role in the Society and Literature of Mediaeval Iceland', prepared at the University of Sydney under the supervision of Professor H. L. Rogers.

²See *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, edited by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk Fornrit, 2 (Reykjavík, 1933), lxx–xcv; Gunnar Benediktsson, 'Staðhæfing gegn staðhæfingu', *Timarit Máls og menningar*, 26 (1965), 187; Ralph West, 'Snorri Sturluson and *Egils saga*: Statistics of Style', *Scandinavian Studies*, 52 (1980), 163.

attached to the *goði*'s office. If, as generally believed,³ Snorri came to possess the *Mýramannagoðorð*, one might expect him to take a shrewd interest in its ninth- and tenth-century origins,⁴ and perhaps even to present it in a way which subtly bolstered his own claims to authority in the Borgarfjarðir district.

The *Mýramenn* are established in Iceland by Skalla-Grímr Kveld-Úlfsson, Egill's father. He comes from a distinguished Norwegian family, and his *landnám* in the new country is large and impressive. He distributes land freely to his companions on the voyage and to later arrivals, himself settling at the imposingly named Borg ('The Stronghold'; cf. the neighbouring *Ánabrekka*, *Þursstaðir*, etc.).⁵ But Skalla-Grímr is never described as a *goði* or said to have a *goðorð*, and no one in the saga is said to be a *þingmaðr* of his.

Skalla-Grímr's son, Egill, dominates much of the saga, but it is only towards the end, during the dispute between his son, Þorsteinn, and Steinarr Qnundarson, that he is unequivocally revealed as having been a *goði*. At the local *várþing*, we read in chapter 81 (p. 283), that Þorsteinn 'réð þar þingskqum mest, því at svá hafði verit, meðan Egill fór með goðorð ok mannaforráð' (Þorsteinn 'had the greatest say in the conduct of the assembly, for so it had been, while Egill held the *goðorð* and the authority'). The saga does not indicate when or where Egill obtained the *goðorð*: there is no mention of it when he takes over 'fjárforráða ok bús varðveizlu' (ch. 57, p. 173; 'supervision of the property and management of the farm') while his father is still alive; or when, on Skalla-Grímr's death, 'Egill tók þar við arfi, lqndum ok lausum aurum' (ch. 58, p. 175; 'Egill received the inheritance there — the lands and the movable property'). Egill makes two long journeys abroad after this, but there is no suggestion that he arranged for a substitute to control his *goðorð* on his behalf. Indeed, there seems no mention of his *goðorð* at all before it comes into the hands of Þorsteinn. Seggewiß does suggest that a passing reference in chapter 78 (p. 268) to Egill's *búð* ('booth') at the *Alþingi* is evidence that he is a *goði*,⁶ but one must doubt that whenever a saga provides a character with such a *búð* it intends to imply that he controls a *goðorð*. During the famous fight at the *Alþingi* in *Brennu-Njáls*

³See Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, translated by Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg, 1974), p. 234; Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*, 3 vols (Egilsstaðir, 1986–87), II, 401–02, III, 62–63.

⁴See Andre Bley, *Eigla-studien* (Ghent, 1909), pp. 144ff; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'The Icelandic Family Sagas and the Period in which their Authors Lived', translated by E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Acta Philologica Scandinavia*, 12 (1937), 84–85.

⁵Chapter 28, pp. 73–74. Unless otherwise indicated, all saga references are to the Íslenzk Fornrit edition of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. (English translations are my own.) See also Magnus Olsen, *Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway*, translated by Th. Gleditsch (Oslo, 1928), pp. 82–83, 86–87, 91–92.

⁶Hermann-Josef Seggewiß, *Goði und Hofþingi: Die literarische Darstellung und Funktion von Gode und Húpting in den Isländersagas* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1978), p. 73.

saga Skapti Þóroddsson is dragged 'í búð sverðskriða nökkurs'⁷ ('into some swordgrinder's booth').

An explanation for the saga's tardiness in revealing that Egill is a *goði* is provided by his avoidance of becoming involved in disputes at home in Iceland (ch. 66, p. 211; ch. 78, p. 257). This is a bit surprising, in view both of the rather 'unretiring' nature Egill reveals abroad, and of what we learn from other sagas and *Grágás* of the *goði*'s role in society. One is inclined to believe either that the writer of this saga was not interested in most of Egill's exploits at home, or that he had little information about the doings of the adult Egill in Iceland. He certainly seems to have had little interest in stressing Egill's *goðorð*.

The passage from chapter 81 quoted above is not the first indication that Þorsteinn Egilsson has a *goðorð*. In chapter 79 (p. 274) there is mention of his participation in the Lqgbergsganga at the Alþingi which, however, involved the judges as well as the *goðar*. The matter is mentioned primarily to help define the relationship between Egill and Þorsteinn, who has surreptitiously borrowed his father's silk gown for the occasion. In chapter 80, Steinarr Qnundarson incites a thrall to defy Þorsteinn, saying: 'Svá lízk mér á þik, Þrándr, . . . sem eigi sé sýnt, hversu mikils þú metr goðorð Þorsteins, ef þit sjáizk tveir á' (p. 279; 'It seems to me in your case, Þrándr, . . . that it won't be shown how greatly you esteem Þorsteinn's *goðorð*, if you two fight it out'). As a first clear mention of the *goðorð* belonging to the Mýramenn, this may seem unceremonious, but from a literary viewpoint the treatment is quite felicitous. On the surface Steinarr is displaying contempt and urging Þrándr to be contemptuous, but the very fact that he mentions Þorsteinn's *goðorð* hints that it looms large in his thinking.

At the *várping* Þorsteinn is very much the *goði* with a band of *þingmenn* to lend him support:

Þorsteinn Egilsson fjqlmennti mjök til várpings ok kom þar nótt fyrr en aðrir menn, ok tjölduðu búðir sínar, ok þingmenn hans, er þar áttu búðir. Ok er þeir hqfðu um búizk, þá lét Þorsteinn ganga til þingmannalið sitt, ok gerðu þar búðarveggi mikla. (ch. 81, pp. 282–83)
Þorsteinn Egilsson brought a very large band of men to the spring assembly and arrived there a night before the others; he roofed his booths, as did those of his *þingmenn* who had booths there. And when they had completed this, Þorsteinn had his band of *þingmenn* set to, and they built large booth walls there.

Though it is Egill's rather devious arbitration that wins the day for him at this *þing*, Þorsteinn clearly is a force to be reckoned with in his own right:

⁷*Brennu-Njáls saga*, edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fomrit, 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), ch. 145, p. 407.

En er Þorsteinn kom heim, þá sendi hann um daginn eptir húskarl sinn út til Leirulækjar at segja Steinari, at hann færði bústað sinn um Borgarhraun, en at qðrum kosti myndi hann njóta þess við Steinar, ef hann ætti fleira mannaforráð, — 'ok mun þá eigi kostr brottferðar'. En Steinn bjó ferð sína út á Snæfellsströnd, ok þar setti hann bú saman, er heitir at Elliða, ok lýkr þar viðskiptum þeira Þorsteins Egilssonar. (ch. 84, pp. 292–93)

But the day after Þorsteinn returned home, he sent his servant out to Leirulækur to tell Steinn that he should move his farmstead across Borgarhraun, or otherwise Þorsteinn would use against him any greater authority he might have, — 'and in that case there will be no question of departure'. Steinn made preparations for a journey out to Snæfellsströnd, and established a farm at a place called Elliða, and that was the end of his dealings with Þorsteinn Egilsson.

His father may be unimpressed by him (ch. 79, p. 274), but Þorsteinn emerges as an effective leader. The *goðorð* is in safe hands.

Two other men identified as *goðar* play a role in the saga. Steinn Qundarson seeks the support of both in his dispute with Þorsteinn Egilsson, and in each case he offers payment. Einarr from Stafaholt, whom Steinn approaches first, is introduced without the usual mention of his father's name, but we are told immediately that 'hann var goðorðsmaðr' (ch. 81, p. 282; 'he was a man with a *goðorð*'). Presumably this is why Steinn has approached him. Einarr does in fact bring a large force to the *várping*, but he has earlier told Steinn: 'Þik mun litlu skipta um mína liðsemð, nema fleiri virðingamenn veiti at þessu máli' (ch. 81, p. 282; 'My help will make little difference to you, unless other prominent men support the case'). One might think that a *goði* could not afford to make such a damaging admission, but it does, of course, reflect glory on Þorsteinn and the *Mýramenn*. Writing in 1905 the legal historian Friedrich Boden included Einarr in a group of relatively powerless *goðar* he believed to have existed in early Icelandic society, and proposed on the evidence of *Egils saga* that he was the client of the mightier Tungu-Oddr.⁸ But though Tungu-Oddr does seem to take a more prominent role in the conflict with Þorsteinn, there is no convincing evidence that Einarr was his client.

When Einarr tells Steinn that he needs the support of 'fleiri virðingamenn', the latter rides to find Tungu-Oddr and pays for his assistance (ch. 81, p. 282). Tungu-Oddr brings a very large force to the *várping* (ch. 81, p. 283). But it is only in the very last reference to him, after Þorsteinn has finally triumphed over Steinn, that we are directly told he is a *goði*:

⁸Friedrich Boden, *Die isländische Regierungsgewalt in der freistaatlichen Zeit*, Untersuchungen zur deutschen Staats- und Rechts-geschichte, 78 (Breslau, 1905), 91–93.

Oddr var þá hqfðingi í Borgarfirði fyrir sunnan Hvítá; hann var hofsgoði ok réð fyrir hofi því, er allir menn guldu hofstoll til fyrir innan Skarðsheiði. (ch. 84, p. 293)

Oddr was then a leading man in Borgarfjörðr south of the Hvítá; he was a *hofsgoði* and controlled the *hof* ('cult centre') to which everyone this side of Skarðsheiðr paid *hof* tax.

It is not easy to explain why we are given this information about Tungu-Oddr at such a late stage. One might suggest that by making him seem a powerful man the saga enhances the triumph of Egill and Þorsteinn, but their victory does not, in fact, involve the discomfiture of Oddr, who withdraws from the dispute immediately his oblique but perceptive warning against trusting Egill is overruled (ch. 81, pp. 285–86).

The sentence just quoted appears only in *Möðruvallabók*. In *Wolfenbüttelbók*, a fragmentary fourteenth-century manuscript, we find instead: 'með þeim Tungu-Oddi [*i.e.* Þorsteinn and Tungu-Oddr] var fátt, siðan er mál þeira Steinars hqfðu verið' (p. 293, note: 'there was coolness between Þorsteinn and Tungu-Oddr after the lawsuit between Steinarr and Þorsteinn'), and this reading is supported by the other major *Egils saga* manuscript, *Ketilsbók*. It seems more effectively to round-off the 'Steinarr episode'.

The saga describes three other figures as *goðar*. In each case the word *goði* is attached as an epithet to the man's personal name, and all three bear the same epithet elsewhere in Old Icelandic literature (though Þórhallr goði Oddason is otherwise known only from *Laxdæla saga*). Both Þórhallr and Þóroddr goði Eyvindarson become relatives by marriage of the Mýramenn. Þórhallr is mentioned only once — in a genealogical listing, as the husband of Egill's granddaughter, Bergþóra Ólafsdóttir (ch. 78, p. 242). Þóroddr receives two mentions:

Grímr hét maðr ok var Svertingsson; hann bjó at Mosfelli fyrir neðan Heiði; hann var auðigr ok ættstórr. Rannveig var systir hans sammæðra, er átti Þóroddr goði í Qlfusi; var þeira sonr Skapti lqsgumaðr. (ch. 77, p. 241)

There was a man called Grímr Svertingsson, who lived at Mosfell below Heið; he was rich and well-born. His sister by the same mother was Rannveig, whom Þóroddr goði of Qlfus married; their son was Skapti lqsgumaðr ('lawspeaker').

Qzurr Eyvindarson, bróðir Þórodds í Qlfusi, fekk Beru, dóttur Egils. (ch. 78, p. 242)

Qzurr Eyvindarson, the brother of Þóroddr of Qlfus, married Bera, Egill's daughter.

The references to Þóroddr do not seem essential from a literary standpoint. Apparently the connexion with Þóroddr adds lustre to the Mýramenn, not least because it links them with one of the most famous *lqsgumenn*.

It is also in a genealogical listing that the saga makes its only mention of Jqrundr goði Hrafnsson. He marries the daughter of Hrafn Höengsson, who is a kinsman of the Mýramenn and Iceland's first *lqgsqgumaðr* (ch. 23, pp. 57–60). The *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók* mentions Jqrundr as one of the ancestors of the Oddaverjar and the Sturlungar,⁹ two of the most prominent families in thirteenth-century Iceland, but there is no attempt to trace his descendants in *Egils saga*.

Clearly the *goðorð* of ninth- and tenth-century Iceland were not a major concern of whoever was responsible for the creation of *Egils saga*. The references to the office of *goði* in the saga seem random and casual and can hardly be regarded as crucial to the narrative. The saga is certainly not a straightforward attempt to bolster the political position of Snorri or any other thirteenth-century magnate by demonstrating that his ancestors wielded a *goði*'s powers from the beginning of settlement in Iceland.

Yet it does emerge quite clearly that the Mýramenn have a *goðorð* and are related to other *goðar*. The relatively unobtrusive presentation of the Mýramannagoðorð is fully in keeping with what the saga reveals about the exercise of power by Egill and Þorsteinn in Iceland. Neither relies much on bombastic display, but the challenge to their position posed by Steinarr and his allies is dealt with most effectively, in a way which makes fully credible the pre-eminence enjoyed by father and son at the local *várping*.

One of the saga's seven *goðar*, Egill himself, is the son of a *landnámamaðr* but, as already noted, his *goðorð* is mentioned only after he has apparently relinquished it to his son. It is somewhat problematical in the saga how far Tungu-Oddr is removed from the generation of the first settlers. The Steinarr episode and the passing reference earlier to a dispute between 'þeir Þorsteinn ok Tungu-Oddr' (ch. 28, p. 73) would suggest he belongs to Þorsteinn Egilsson's generation; but it is recorded in chapter 79 (p. 275) that Þorsteinn's wife, Jófríðr, had previously been married to Þóroddr, the son of Tungu-Oddr. The other five *goðar* all appear two or three generations removed from the *landnámamenn*: Þorsteinn is Skalla-Grím's grandson; Þóroddr goði's brother marries Þorsteinn's sister; Þórhallr goði is the husband of Bergþóra, Þorsteinn's niece; Jórundr goði is the husband of Þórlaug, granddaughter of the *landnámamaðr* Ketill hængr (ch. 23, pp. 58–60); Einarr's family connexions cannot be traced in the saga, but he is apparently of Þorsteinn's generation (and *Landnámabók*, S50, H38, pp. 86–87, makes him the grandson of a settler).

⁹*Landnámabók*, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk Fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík, 1968), S346, p. 350. The subsequent *Landnámabók* reference is also to this edition.

Obviously the number of *goðar* is small, and, until late in the saga, much (though by no means all) of the action takes place outside Iceland. But there is a possibility that the saga author considered it inappropriate to use the word *goði* and the terminology associated with it when dealing with the first decades of settlement in Iceland. Like some scholars in later times he may have viewed the *goði* title less as a survival of the early heathen cult gatherings in the new land than as part of the developing legal and administrative structure of a society which was increasingly ordered — and increasingly uncongenial to Egill, whose splendid, incorrigible, and sometimes anarchic spirit dominates so much of the saga.