The Goðar in Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar

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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, Þórsteinn, 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, ísländ. 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 pingmenn ("Thingleute"), die ihnen wiederum Gefolgschaft schuldeten. Die G.n (ihr Amt hieß goðorð und war vererbar, 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 in Iceland there were 36 goðar, who sat in the legislative assembly of the Alþingi, from 985 there were 39. The goðar had a certain protective function towards their pingmenn 'ping 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.

attached to the godi's office. If, as generally believed,3 Snorri came to possess the Myramannagoðorð, 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 Borgarfjörður district.

The Myramenn 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 impossibly named Borg ('The Stronghold'; cf. the neighbouring Ánabrekka, Þursstaðir, etc.).5 But Skalla-Grímr is never described as a godi or said to have a godorð, 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 godi. At the local várping, we read in chapter 81 (p. 283), that Þorsteinn 'réð þar pingskópum mest, því at svá hafði verit, meðan Egill fór með godorð ok mannaforráði' (Þorsteinn 'had the greatest say in the conduct of the assembly, for so it had been, while Egill held the godorð and the authority'). The saga does not indicate when or where Egill obtained the godorð: there is no mention of it when he takes over 'fjárforraða 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, lándum 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 godorð on his behalf. Indeed, there seems no mention of his godorð at all before it comes into the hands of Þorsteinn. Seggewiðs 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 godi,6 but one must doubt that whenever a saga provides a character with such a búð it intends to imply that he controls a godorð. During the famous fight at the Alþingi in Brennu-Njáls

5Chapter 28, pp. 73-74. Unless otherwise indicated, all saga references are to the Íslensk Forntlit edition of Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar. (English translations are my own.) See also Magnus Olsen, Farms and Ænes of Ancient Norway, translated by Th. Gleditsch (Oslo, 1928), pp. 82-83, 86-87, 91-92.
saga Skapti Þóroddsson is dragged 'f búa sverðskriða nýkkurs'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 Lagbergsganga 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 lýzk mér á þik, Þrándr, . . . sem eigi sé sýnt, hversu mikils þú metr goðorð þorsteinsi, ef þit sjáízk rveir a' (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 felicitious. 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 pingmenn to lend him support:

Þorsteinn Egilsson fjárlmennti mjók til vártings ok kom þar nót fyrir en aðrir menn, ok tjólduðu búðir sínar, ok pingmenn hans, er þar áttu búaðir. Ók er þer hofðu um búað, þá létt þorsteinn ganga til pingmanalið sitt, ok gerðu þar búðarveggi miklah. (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 pingmenn who had booths there. And when they had completed this, Þorsteinn had his band of pingmenn 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 ping, Þorsteinn clearly is a force to be reckoned with in his own right:

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 mannaforrða, — ’ok mun þá eigi kostr brottferðar’. En Steinarr bjó færð sínna út á Snæfellsströnd, ok þar setti hann bú saman, er heitir at Eðła, 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 Leirulækkr to tell Steinarr 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’. Steinarr made preparations for a journey out to Snæfellsströnd, and established a farm at a place called Eðlá, 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 goðar is in safe hands.

Two other men identified as goðar play a role in the saga. Steinarr Þnundarson seeks the support of both in his dispute with Þorsteinn Egilsson, and in each case he offers payment. Einarr from Stafaholt, whom Steinarr approaches first, is introduced without the usual mention of his father’s name, but we are told immediately that ’hann var goðorðsmáðr’ (ch. 81, p. 282; ’he was a man with a goðorð’). Presumably this is why Steinarr has approached him. Einarr does in fact bring a large force to the várping, but he has earlier told Steinarr: ’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 Steinarr 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 várþing (ch. 81, p. 283). But it is only in the very last reference to him, after Þorsteinn has finally triumphed over Steinarr, that we are directly told he is a goði:

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8Friedrich Boden, Die isländische Regierungsgewalt in der freistaatlichen Zeit, Untersuchungen zur deutschen Staats- und Rechts-geschichte, 78 (Breslau, 1905), 91–93.
Oddr was then a leading man in Borgarfjörður south of the Hvitá; he was a hofsgoði and controlled the hof ('cult centre') to which everyone this side of Skardsheidið 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, síðan er mál þeira Steinars hofðu verit' (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 Óláfsdóttir (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 lagsögumaðr. (ch. 77, p. 241)

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

Qzurr Eyvindarson, bróðir Þórodds í Qlfusi, fekk Beru, döttur 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 lagsögumenn.
It is also in a genealogical listing that the saga makes its only mention of Jqurndr goði Hrafnsson. He marries the daughter of Hrafn Hængsson, who is a kinsman of the Mýramenn and Iceland’s first lágsgumaðr (ch. 23, pp. 57–60). The Sturlubók version of Landnámabók mentions Jqurndr 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 landnámamandaðr 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-Grímr’s grandson; Þóroddr goði’s brother marries Þorsteinn’s sister; Þórhallr goði is the husband of Bergþóra, Þorsteinn’s niece; Jórungr goði is the husband of Þórlaug, granddaughter of the landnámamandaðr Ketill høngr (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).

9Landnámabók, edited by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk 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.