



SAGAS AND POLITICS IN 13TH-CENTURY BORGARFJÖRÐUR

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Why did the Icelanders write so much more than almost everybody else in the Middle Ages? This is an old problem that has still not been solved to everyone's satisfaction. The present author has put forward an idea about what may have lain behind the phenomenon, and the purpose of the current paper is to test how this theory works for a specific district in Iceland and the sagas that originated there. The district in question is Borgarfjörður, the location of the „Sagas and Societies“ conference.

First a few general words about the theory.¹ A survey of family sagas presumably written before 1262, when the Commonwealth was abolished as Iceland became a part of the Norwegian kingdom, shows that they were distributed very unevenly throughout the country, and there is a remarkable correlation between saga-writing and new or weak political units.² As far as we know, the old established principalities produced no family sagas. This requires further explanation.

The constitution of the Icelandic Commonwealth was very unusual.³ There was no central authority or executive power. Households belonged to one of 39 *goðorð* or chieftaincies (although their original number may have been higher).⁴ These were not territorial units as one might assume, but sorts of alliances based on personal bonds between the heads of households and the *goði* or chieftain, the local leader. Consequently, members of several different chieftaincies were often intermingled with each other. Furthermore, householders had the legal right to change alliances, and it follows that the chieftaincies were constantly in a state of flux. By the middle of the 12th century this system of chieftaincies had been replaced, in some areas, by the so-called *riki*, here translated as principalities. These were territorial units where the chieftain had been replaced by a prince (*höfðingi*) who wielded much stronger authority than his predecessor, the principality constituting something like a medieval petty-state. Until about 1200 there were only four principalities, and the rest of the country was still divided between chieftaincies. But in the first two decades of the 13th century, new principalities cropped up like mushrooms, so that by 1220 there were only a handful of chieftaincies left,



and these were feeble political units that played an insignificant role in the ensuing power struggle.

As the survey of family sagas showed that they completely bypassed the four old principalities but were abundant almost everywhere else, a connection was made and a theory put forward explaining the proliferation of family sagas by the need of new principalities and the old feeble chieftaincies to enhance solidarity and a sense of common identity within them. This could be done, as it has frequently been done everywhere in the world, by emphasizing common history and legends, for example by the writing of sagas. This was important in times of war like the 13th century was in Iceland, and could be crucial to the survival of a chieftaincy or principality. The only political units that didn't need sagas to enhance solidarity were the old established principalities, which were inherently stronger than any old-style chieftaincy and already had some tradition behind them and had by now developed a sense of identity.

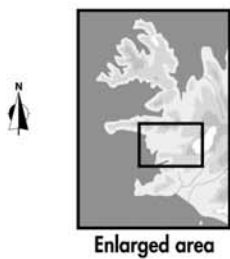
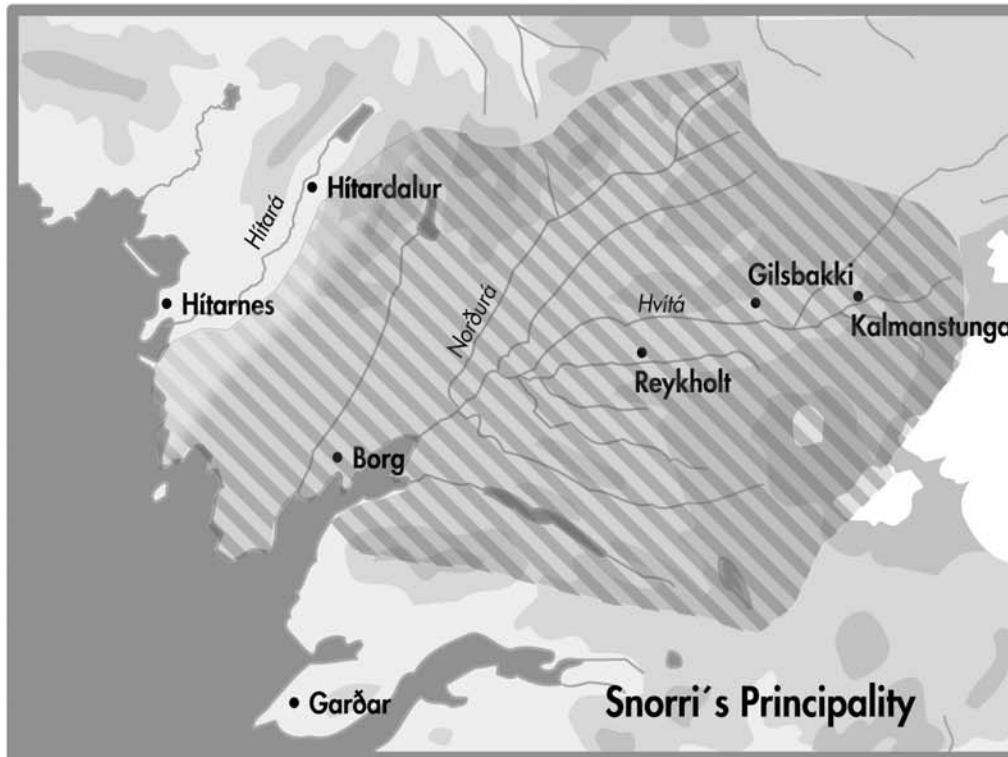
The use of history or sagas to strengthen political solidarity was, of course, nothing new or limited to Iceland. Chronicles of Kings, such as those compiled by Saxo Grammaticus or Geoffrey of Monmouth, abounded in the Middle Ages and probably served a much similar purpose. The difference in Iceland was that it was divided into a large number of autonomous political units, all requiring some means to help them survive in a hostile environment. One of the means they employed was the writing of sagas and this, I believe, is the reason Iceland produced so much literature in the Middle Ages.

THE PRINCIPALITY OF BORGARFJÖRÐUR

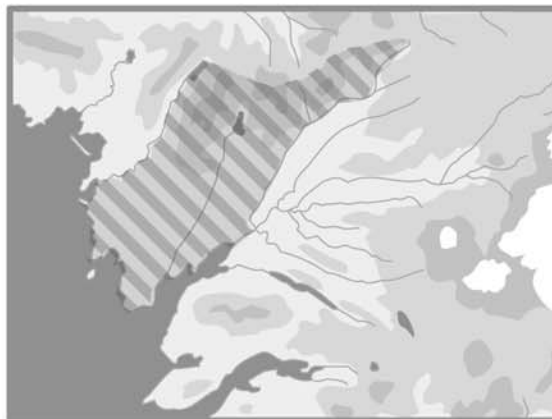
One of the new principalities was formed in the district of Borgarfjörður at the beginning of the 13th century. At the turn of the century there were five or perhaps six chieftaincies in the area, whereas by 1210 there was one principality.⁵ It was formed under the leadership of none other than Snorri Sturluson, the famous author of *Heimskringla* (Chronicle of the Kings of Norway) and the Prose-Edda. Snorri began accumulating power around 1202 and during the next few years most other chieftaincies in the area disappeared, leaving only two apart from Snorri's principality. One of these was *Lundarmannagoðorð* (Chieftaincy of the Men of Lundur), jointly owned by Snorri and his kinsman from Garðar on Akranes (see fig. 1). Snorri's western boundary abutted on the chieftaincy of the Hítðælir, probably around Hítará (fig. 1).



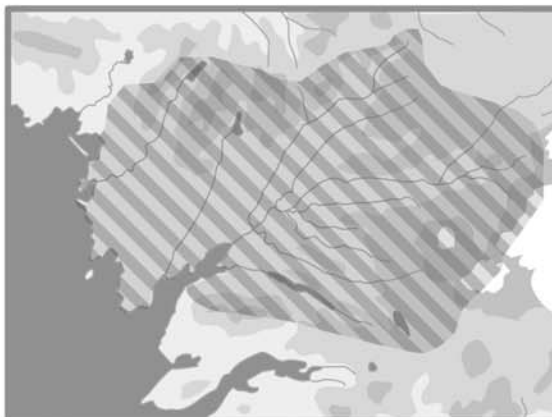
Fig. 1. Skallagrímur's land-taking and Snorri's principality



Skallagrímur's land-taking according to Early Landnáma (as presented in Þórðarbók).



Skallagrímur's land-taking according to Late Landnáma (Sturlubók).





Snorri's principality was only a part of his domain. He also had authority or influence in the north (Húnavatnþing), southwest (in cooperation with his kinsmen from Garðar), the Dalir and the Westfjords, but his principality in Borgarfjörður was his core area and his home. He played a political game, not only in Iceland but also in Norway, where he befriended Earl (later Duke) Skúli, a pretender to the crown and eventually a rebel. Although we know that Snorri had great political ambitions, he was not very warlike and his political ideas are not known for certain. It is probably safe to say that he aspired to become Skúli's earl in Iceland.⁶ He certainly had a wider political horizon than most contemporary Icelandic lords and was perhaps the first to realize that Iceland's future lay in a union with Norway.

Icelanders are often displeased when, as happens, Norwegians appropriate Snorri as their own. But Snorri apparently wanted to make Iceland a part of the Norwegian kingdom; he was the King's courtier, a lenderman (baron) of the King and even a secret Earl (of Skúli). Perhaps Snorri saw himself as a Norwegian no less than as an Icelander.

EGILS SAGA SKALLAGRÍMSSONAR

The first family saga to be considered here is *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (*Egla*). Although never conclusively proven, *Egla* is usually assumed to have been written by Snorri Sturluson or on his behalf and I shall concur with this.⁷ *Egla* can be seen as reflecting Snorri's politics, it has a wider horizon than many other sagas, and much of it takes place in Norway and deals with the relationship between the aristocrats and their King. Snorri's position towards the King, as reflected in *Heimskringla* and *Egla*, is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand he admires kingship or is even captivated by it, but royal authority should not be too strong. His position is that of an aristocrat who acknowledges and accepts the necessity and dignity of kingship but does not want it to encroach on the aristocracy.⁸ This is the conflict: The King wants more power but the aristocrats must restrain him without destroying the kingdom. *Egla* is largely about Egill's family's relationship with Norwegian royalty and may very well have been written after Snorri had gained his own experience of similar dealings - an experience that was not entirely positive.

Egla is one of the earliest family sagas, probably written between 1225 and 1240.⁹ It bears some resemblance to the Kings' sagas, an earlier genre, at least some of which were meant to enhance solidarity within the kingdom. Snorri's own *Heimskringla* fits this idea quite well, and its Norwegian manuscripts indicate that it was in use and circulation over there.¹⁰ Snorri



must have been familiar with the possibility of using literature to enhance solidarity and strengthen political units. From here, it is only a short step for Snorri to adapt this principle for his own needs in Iceland. This may well be the origin of the Icelandic family sagas, that they were Kings' sagas adapted to Icelandic circumstances.

Snorri himself was a descendant of his hero Egill Skallagrímsson, who is the central character of the saga. His claim to power in Borgarfjörður was partly based on this. Egill was the son of Skallagrímur, the first settler in the district, and they both lived at Borg, the manor that gave its name to the fjord and the district. Snorri's own career began at Borg, and this connection was a living memory in the 13th century. When Snorri decided to move from Borg to Reykholt (fig. 1), Egill Skallagrímsson is said to have appeared in a dream to one of his descendants living with Snorri at Borg and expressed his displeasure that Snorri "our kinsman" was leaving the place.¹¹

Snorri's principality in Borgarfjörður was a new one and consequently had some inherent weaknesses. It had no political history, no tradition of regional solidarity or common identity. This had the potential to be dangerous in the imminent struggle for power. I would suggest that by writing *Egla*, Snorri wanted to remedy this. He was trying to enhance the common identity of the people of Borgarfjörður by making Egill, the ancient hero, their symbol of unity. It would help, of course, that Snorri had a direct link to him as his descendant.

Snorri seems to have tried to establish a connection, in the minds of people, between his own principality and his ancestor's land-taking. Skallagrímur, Egill's father, was one of the original settlers of Iceland ca. 900 AD. *Landnámabók*, the Book of Settlement, originally seems to have allotted him only the land between Norðurá and Hítará (fig. 1). In *Egla* this has been considerably enlarged. Just how much is open to interpretation (Snorri could even have been deliberately oblique). The most natural interpretation is that Skallagrímur's land-taking stretched from Hafnarfjöll to Selalón and Borgarhraun. This is certainly how Snorri's nephew and disciple, Sturla Þórðarson, interpreted *Egla*, as this is how the land-taking appears in his late-13th-century version of *Landnámabók*.¹² These are close to the approximate boundaries of Snorri's principality as far as we know them, and it would appear that Snorri changed the limits of his ancestor's land-taking to comply with the boundaries of his own principality. The differences in the Western boundaries, however, are worth noticing. Snorri's principality never reached beyond Hítará, as in that area there still survived an independent family of chieftains



(see below about *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*). The extension of Skallagrímur's land-taking may thus reflect Snorri's ambitions rather than the actual extent of his power, and his hope to incorporate the surviving chieftaincy into his principality just like he had done with several others.

By manipulating the limits of his ancestor's land-taking, Snorri projected his principality far into the past and gave it a distinguished pedigree. Thus he would argue that he was essentially just reviving the old political unit established by Skallagrímur and in doing so restoring unity to Borgarfjörður. This way he gave the people a common history through his own family, strengthened the foundations of his power and counteracted the effects of the previous political fragmentation.

BJARNAR SAGA HÍTÐÆLAKAPPA

This saga is usually thought to have been written in the first half of the 13th century, perhaps between 1230 and 1250.¹³ The events of the saga mostly took place more than 200 years earlier, in Hítardalur, an area that lies at the very edge of Snorri's principality. On the other side there was another principality, ruled by Snorri's brother, Þórður. At this place, hemmed in between the two powerful brothers, there survived in the 13th century a small chieftaincy ruled by the respected family of the Hítðælir. At this time the Sturlungs, Snorri's and Þórður's family, were paramount in the Western part of Iceland and the Hítðælir had to be content to live in their shadow and even follow their lead. Their position was very difficult and it even appears that Snorri tried to incorporate their sphere of influence into his principality (see above).

It seems likely that the chieftain-family of the Hítðælir had something to do with the creation of the Saga of Björn Hítðælakappi. Björn's nickname, "Hítðælakappi", means champion of the Hítðælir. The term Hítðælir, in turn, can be interpreted in two different ways. It can either refer to the well-known 13th-century family of chieftains or to the people of Hítardalur in general. The latter meaning is of course the one used in the saga, but the implicit connection with the family is obvious.

The saga is about a conflict between two men over a woman, Oddný eykyndill. The one who married her is the deceitful Þórður Kolbeinsson who lived at Hítarnes, a place by the sea but within the Hítðælir's traditional sphere of influence. The other is the hero of the saga, Björn



Hítðalakappi. In the middle of the 13th century another Þórður lived at Hítarnes. His patronymic is unknown but he was nicknamed “Hítnesingur” (of Hítarnes). He was an important man in his time, an ardent follower of the Sturlungs and is thought to have written the contemporary saga of Þorgils skarði, one of the warlords of the Sturlung family, who was also his brother-in-law. It would have been difficult for the Hítðælir to have such an important man in the Sturlung faction living so close by. From their point of view, Þórður Hítnesingur was perhaps seen as a renegade and, as there were obvious similarities between the two Þórðurs, the saga’s treatment of the earlier one might very well have been intended as a barely disguised attack on the contemporary one, who may also have been the other’s descendant.¹⁴ Given the Sturlung supremacy in the area it would have been foolish to criticize them directly, but Þórður of Hítarnes would have been a safer target in the Hítðælir’s struggle to keep their chieftaincy intact.

Like Egill Skallagrímsson in Snorri’s principality, Björn Hítðalakappi would have served as a symbol of unity in the chieftaincy of the Hítðælir, and it is especially interesting to compare him to another, more famous, symbol of unity, St. Olaf, King of Norway (1015-1028). St. Olaf was (and still is, to some extent) the national saint of Norway and their main symbol of unification, a fact reflected in the size and volume of the sagas written about his life.¹⁵ By connecting the two, Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa seems to transfer some of St. Olaf’s nature to the local hero. It has Björn meeting St. Olaf and staying at his court for a while, and it tells a legend of how he received a garter from the King, a piece of clothing he constantly wore from then on and was buried with.¹⁶ According to the saga, the garter seemed to create a special bond between the two, and this is also reflected in the similar events surrounding their respective deaths. They were both killed in battle when their weapons lacked sufficient sharpness, and a man named Kálfur (not a very common name) is prominent amongst both their adversaries. One of Björn’s attackers is the disputed woman’s son, the saga strongly implying that Björn is his real father. This perhaps reflects that St. Olaf’s slayers were his subjects and thus in a symbolic sense his children, making both Olaf and Björn patricidal victims of sorts.

It seems that the author of the saga wished to compare Björn to St. Olaf so that the former was a smaller version of the latter. Björn became for the Hítðælir what St. Olaf was for the Norwegians – their symbol of unity. In spite of their difficult situation, the Hítðælir managed



to survive to the end of the Commonwealth and beyond – a fact that may to some extent be due to the influences of the saga.

POLITICS IN 13TH-CENTURY BORGARFJÖRÐUR

The two remaining sagas to be considered here were probably written in the latter half of the 13th century, even towards its close and by that time many things had changed in the district. Snorri Sturluson had been killed in 1241 and his principality then began to disintegrate. The area remained firmly within the Sturlung faction, but no longer as a stable principality. Some Sturlung leaders tried to re-establish it, but with varying degrees of success.

After the end of the Commonwealth in 1262, Iceland was governed by sheriffs. There were usually only two or four of them in the whole country during the remaining years of the 13th century, but they had local deputies, many of whom were probably short-term.¹⁷

The period from 1241 to the first half of the 14th century is characterized by large and not very stable political units – at first due to the varying fortunes of war and later because of the nature of the administration, and this may have posed a problem for the population. The new units were large and hard to identify with, and it would be difficult to feel secure under the protection of a distant and unfamiliar prince or sheriff.

This situation would have provided opportunities for local leaders of the gentry. Such men appear in Borgarfjörður after Snorri's death, and it seems likely that they grew in importance and became informal substitutes for chieftains or princes. Such men would lead the local community and guarantee security and safety to the best of their abilities.¹⁸

Perhaps the last two sagas, considered here, reflect these changes.

HÆNSA-PÓRIS SAGA

This saga is now usually dated to 1280-1300, but sometimes considered to be from the period 1250-1270.¹⁹ Like other family sagas, it takes place in the “saga-period” (approximately 930-1030), and deals with the appropriation of hay from the unpopular and stingy Hænsa-Pórir and the resulting feud between ambitious local leaders. It has been suggested that a man called Egill Sölmundarson wrote the saga or was instrumental in its creation.²⁰ This Egill was the son of Snorri Sturluson's sister and his Norwegian friend or retainer. As a young man Egill himself served as a retainer to his Sturlung kinsmen, but by 1252 he lived at Reykholt,



previously Snorri's residence, which he must have acquired through inheritance. He became an influential man, not nearly on a par with his uncle but rather as one of the leaders of the gentry in Borgarfjörður.

It is by no means certain that Egill Sölmundarson had anything to do with the writing of the saga, but its central character, Tungu-Oddur (rather than the villainous Hænsa-Þórir) lived at Breiðabólstaður, which is essentially the same manor as Reykholt.²¹ The scope of the saga is much more limited than, for instance, *Egils saga*. *Hænsa-Þóris saga* sees the world in much smaller units and is in this way more similar to *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*. Most of the saga involves the immediate area around Reykholt, and if Egill Sölmundarson had anything to do with it he may have been emphasizing his role as political leader on a local level, but a much smaller level than *Egla*. Egil's position was also informal rather than constitutional, but he was still a very real leader and an important man to his neighbours, but also to the would-be princes trying to gain power in Borgarfjörður towards the end of the Commonwealth.²² For them it was crucial to secure the support of the local gentry in order to be accepted.

It matters little whether the saga was written before or after 1262. For men like Egill of Reykholt, the political situation did not change much with the fall of the Commonwealth. They had no constitutional position, before or after but were important because of the lack of strong rulers in the vicinity such as Snorri had been in his principality. If Egill of Reykholt did not write the saga it was probably someone like him or working for someone like him.

GUNNLAUGS SAGA ORMSTUNGU

This saga probably dates from the last part of the 13th century and the main characters are involved with small political units. In this sense it is similar to *Hænsa-Þóris saga* although with some interesting differences. The basic plot resembles that of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* - two men fighting over a woman - but the style is different and much reminiscent of chivalric romances.

Gunnlaugur ormstunga, the hero of the saga, is of the chieftain family of Gilsbakki. His father, Illugi, is the second greatest man in Borgarfjörður after Þorsteinn of Borg, son of Egill Skallagrímsson.²³ There is a clear hierarchy here also expressed in the fact that Gunnlaugur goes to stay at Borg to study law and he then seeks to marry Helga, daughter of Þorsteinn, but gets a very lukewarm response from her father. When Illugi, Gunnlaugur's father discusses the



matter with Þorsteinn he complains that Þorsteinn is refusing to acknowledge his equal standing.²⁴ Although the saga favours the men of Gilsbakki it can not but concede their inferior status to the men of Borg even if they are both chieftains, and therefore of the same formal position. This points to a political reality similar to the one of the 13th century when the local leaders were clearly inferior to the territorial princes and the King's sheriffs.

The saga may have been written from the point of view of someone like Nikulás Oddsson. Nikulás was a man who in the latter half of the 13th century lived at Kalmanstunga, a manor close to Gilsbakki in a rather remote position up by the mountains. He was a man of obscure origins who climbed the social ladder in the service of Sturlung leaders and ended by marrying their kinswoman, a sister to Egill Sölmundarson of Reykholt, the possible author of *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, and thus acquired property and standing as a leading member of the Borgarfjörður gentry. Nikulás's position was therefore very similar to that of his brother-in-law. He even became the Norwegian King's courtier (probably sponsored by the Sturlung warlord, Þórður kakali, whom he served long and faithfully), and this is perhaps connected with the chivalric tone of the saga.²⁵

Nikulás is mentioned here, not necessarily as the author of *Gunnlaugs saga*, but rather as an example of what sort of man might have had a hand in creating it.

CONCLUSION

The four sagas of Borgarfjörður, examined briefly in this paper, are interpreted here in the light of the theory of consensus literature; literature used to build a sense of common identity and solidarity within certain political units. The ideas, discussed in this paper, are certainly not the final word about these sagas. My aim has merely been to show how the theory can be used to gain a fresh look at both sagas and the societies that produced them - how sagas not only reflect society but were also meant to have an impact on society.

It has been very difficult for historians to use the Family sagas as historical sources. They were written in or around the 13th century, but tell mostly about events from the 10th and early 11th centuries, the "saga period", about which their authors cannot possibly have had accurate information given the time gap and scarcity of written sources. The Family sagas have been thoroughly discredited as historical sources for the "saga period" but some attempts have been made to use them as sources pertaining to the social and political conditions of the 12th and



13th centuries.²⁶ The problem with this is that the Family sagas are intended to deal with the “saga period”, and their authors obviously realized that many things had changed since then. They therefore reflect ideas held by 13th-century people about the past, and cannot directly be used as sources for social and political conditions in the 13th century. The conditions described in the Family sagas may to some extent reflect conditions of the “saga period”, to some extent those of the 12th and 13th century and some of the material may be pure nonsense. The difficulty lies in discerning which is which – which sort of information we can believe as accurate for the saga period, which information reflects the times of the authors and which information we cannot believe at all. This is no easy task, and one which has not yet been properly addressed.

On the other hand, the Family sagas do tell us what their authors wanted people to believe and how they wished to influence the present by manipulating the past. This is how we can use the family sagas as historical sources for the times of their composition. The Family sagas reflect the social and political units and ideas of the 13th and 14th centuries if only we learn how to read them.

NOTES

¹ For details see: Axel Kristinsson, 2003.

² The dating of individual sagas is often controversial. The dates used here are those of *Íslensk Bókmenntasaga* (The History of Icelandic Literature) unless otherwise stated.

³ For a discussion in English on how the system worked in practice, see: Byock, 1988: 103-136.

⁴ Helgi Skúli Kjartansson. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 1993: 39-68.

⁵ The main primary source for Icelandic history of this period is *Sturlunga saga*. The relevant passages for the building of a principality in Borgarfjörður are mostly in vol. I: 240-242. See also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 1989: 63-64.

⁶ *Sturlunga Saga* 444. For a different interpretation see: Hallan.



⁷ See Sigurður Nordal's introduction to Egil's Saga in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*: lxxi-xcv. For a more recent discussion see Jónas Kristjánsson.

⁸ For example: *Heimskringla* II: 216. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*: 19-57 (the association between Þórólfur Kveld-Úlfsson and King Harald Finehair).

⁹ Jónas Kristjánsson: 103-104.

¹⁰ See *Heimskringla* III: lxxxiii-xci.

¹¹ *Sturlunga saga* I: 241.

¹² *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*: xxxiii-xxxiv, 73; Ólsen: 182, 197-201; *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*: 71.

¹³ For a different view see: Bjarni Guðnason.

¹⁴ Sigurður Nordal suggests as much in his introduction to the saga. *Borgfirðinga sögur*: xciv-xcv.

¹⁵ See. Bjarni Guðnason: 72-74.

¹⁶ *Borgfirðinga sögur*: 134.

¹⁷ Axel Kristinsson, 1998: 114-121.

¹⁸ See e.g. Gunnar Karlsson, 1972: 37-43.

¹⁹ Sigurður Nordal proposed the earlier dates (*Borgfirðinga sögur*: xxix). This was revised by Björn Sigfússon.

²⁰ *Borgfirðinga sögur*: xxxiv.

²¹ Basically a name change, see: Kálund, 1984: 236-38.

²² Like Þorgils skarði in 1252. Jón Jóhannesson et al., 1946 (II): 120-122.

²³ *Borgfirðinga sögur*: 58.

²⁴ *Borgfirðinga sögur*: 67.

²⁵ Nikulás is mentioned in several places in *Sturlunga saga*, for example Jón Jóhannesson et al., 1946 II: 7, 49-51, 82, 84, 125-127, 137, 289.

²⁶ For example by Helgi Þorláksson, 1987 and Byock, 2001: 21-24, 142-158.



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