

Scandinavian King Sagas and their Connection to Thirteenth Century Icelandic Politics

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Introduction

Scandinavian sagas are a very problematic source for historians. On one hand, they can be invaluable sources that provide insight into Scandinavian home life, politics, and society. On the other hand, sagas were often written centuries after the events that occur within them, and this drives historians to question the accuracy of the sagas. Snorri Sturluson is vital to understanding Scandinavian politics because he wrote *Heimskringla*, the history of Norwegian kings from 890 to 1184. However, it is important to note that Sturluson was not only a poet; he was also a prominent statesman in Iceland during the thirteenth century who served as Lawspeaker for 13 years.¹ Iceland was very different from the other Scandinavian countries in that their political system was not a monarchy; instead the political system was structured around chieftains (the *goðar*) who acted as representatives at regional things (*þings*) and at the Althing.² This system worked well, but as Iceland's period of settlement drew to a close and families began to establish themselves, the *goðar* positions came under the control of five prominent families.³ Snorri Sturluson's family was among these five. As Norwegian kings began to exert pressure on Iceland during Sturluson's time, it became clear that Iceland would soon change politically. Snorri Sturluson had a hand in the tumultuous political conflict as the *goðar* chose whether to accept the Norwegian king Hakon IV as their ruler and this eventually led to his murder by an ally of King Hakon. The important role Snorri Sturluson played in Icelandic politics is reflected in the sagas he wrote, specifically

Heimskringla. It is also suspected that he wrote *Egil's Saga*. Both of these sagas portray feuds and other connections with kings, and this notion of feuding and relationships between men and kings can be traced back to Sturluson's own political situation in thirteenth century Iceland. Snorri projects his thirteenth century political views into the sagas that he wrote or is presumed to have written.

The Complications Surrounding Sagas

In order to discuss sagas and to use them as sources, one must fully understand what a saga is and how it can cause problems for historians. Sagas are some of the only literary sources written by Scandinavians that we can use to connect to the Scandinavian world. Chronicles and annals shed light on Scandinavian society in a more contemporary manner since they were written around the time of the events they are recording, but often they are not written by Scandinavians. Because of this, chronicles and annals like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Annals of Ulster are biased and often reflect a Christian versus pagan dichotomy that skews the perspective of the piece. That is not to say that these types of sources are not valuable, only that they must be treated with caution. In this manner, the sagas are very similar and must be treated carefully as well.

Historians over the years have often struggled with sagas, trying to walk the fine line between being sufficiently skeptical, while also finding use for them as proper sources. This conflict arises from the nature of the sagas themselves. Prior to the late twelfth/early thirteenth centuries when the sagas were first written, they existed as oral narratives.⁴ Alexander Bugge, one of the historians of the twentieth century who has written about sagas, has great difficulty seeing them as anything

¹ Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Iclander*, Trans. by Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998): 54.

² Birgit Sawyer and Peter Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation circa 800-1500*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86-88.

³ Ólason, 54.

⁴ Alexander Bugge, "The Origin and Credibility of the Icelandic Saga," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 14 No. 2 (Jan. 1909): 249.

but grandiose (though compelling) stories. He compares them to German *märchen* quite frequently, which undermines the saga's ability to be used as source because *märchen* in German means fairy-tale.⁵ Furthermore, Bugge explicitly states that sagas developed from *märchen* because they share a variety of stylistic language and drama. He also posits that the story of Harald Fairhair (whose importance will be discussed later in the paper) is based on a *märchen* that was popular with old Norwegians and Icelanders.⁶ Bugge seems to be one of a kind, as the general consensus by more modern scholars tends to be that sagas were taken as completely true in the 18th and 19th century.

More modern scholars expand upon this idea of sagas as unrealistic, though we begin to see the projection that sagas are useful but must be studied carefully. Marlene Ciklamini, writing in 1971, argues that in both the Sagas of the Icelanders and the Kings' Sagas there exists "the same blend of fact and fancy."⁷ This is a marked divergence from Bugge, who argued that sagas were merely fantastical stories, as it endows sagas with bits of fact embedded within fanciful elements. Ciklamini discusses the importance of sagas including long and "usually accurate" genealogies written in *The Book of Settlements*, arguing that the reasons for ensuring that these genealogies were accurate stemmed from economic and social motivations. One reason was to ensure the line of succession to gain control of land, and another was related to how political and social power was gained via personal achievement and illustrious ancestors.⁸ At the same time that she is arguing this point, she still says that: "the Sagas of the Icelanders were works of fiction."⁹ She defends this with a discussion of *Njal's Saga*, where factual evidence (like the amount of time it takes to journey to a specific place) is mixed with presentist issues. The author, writing in a time far removed from when *Njal's Saga* was set, completely copies their contemporary law into the saga and causes a multitude of problems in doing so.¹⁰

Birgit and Peter Sawyer, authors of *Medieval Scandinavia*, go one-step further than Ciklamini. They argue that Icelandic family sagas and king

sagas "cannot be dismissed as fiction" because although certain events, like political and military events, or individual achievements and family histories, may be unreliable, the pictures sagas present of everyday life is valuable.¹¹ This statement points to a greater development in historiography; Sawyers' book was written in 1993 and one could argue that how historians thought about sagas changed since Ciklamini's article in 1971. It appears to still be a very skeptical look at sagas, but the Sawyers attempt to reconcile this skepticism in a way that does not completely disregard sagas as a whole. In this fashion, scholars can examine sagas for indicators about Scandinavian social structure, values, beliefs, and other traditional elements. One way that scholars can do this, the Sawyers argue, is to "look for distinguishing features of oral transmission", that is, repetition.¹² The Sawyers conclude their argument about sagas and looking for traditional elements by cautioning that even if traditional elements can be found, they may not be any older than the texts, but that some traditional elements may date from the distant past or pre-Christian Scandinavia.¹³ This concept is very different from what Bugge and Ciklamini present, as it finally seems to argue that there is a way to be skeptical of sagas but still find use in them in a manner that makes them valuable sources about Scandinavian culture. It points to a synthesis of ideas regarding the issues of sagas; the sagas are not rejected entirely as fiction, and are still placed within a narrative context, yet are also allowed to be examined as a more functional source despite being literary in nature. Sagas are in essence flawed, but for the purposes of this paper, they must be able to be treated as a somewhat reliable source. In order to analyze them the reader must recognize the inherent flaws of sagas but, as the Sawyers present, be able to disregard the less certain aspects to find the more plausible ones that they want to discuss.

Thirteenth Century Icelandic Society and Politics

In order to understand the political issues of thirteenth century Iceland, it is important to have a basic knowledge of Icelandic society and political structure prior to this. In doing so, it is easier to see why the changes in Icelandic politics during the

⁵ Ibid., 251.

⁶ Ibid., 252.

⁷ Marlene Ciklamini, "Old Norse Epic and Historical Tradition," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* Vol. 8 No. 2/3 Special Issue: Folklore and Traditional History (Aug.-Dec. 1971), 98.

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁰ Ibid., 98-99.

¹¹ Sawyer and Sawyer, 23.

¹² Ibid., 23-24

¹³ Ibid., 24.

thirteenth century were so different from the past and even traumatic in the years leading up to the end of the Commonwealth.

Iceland was the only area that was colonized but not raided. This fundamental difference allowed for a different type of political structure to develop. Instead of having a monarchy, the Icelanders organized themselves in a more democratic fashion that was centered on regional and national meetings where nominated representatives (*goðar*) dealt with legal and judicial issues.¹⁴ The Althing, the annual thing that all the *goðar* across the island had to attend, was the meeting where the law was read. The Lawspeaker (who recited the memorized laws at the Althing) was an esteemed position but he was chosen from the *goðar* by the *goðar*.¹⁵ In this way the *goðar* held the vast majority of the power in medieval Iceland, as they were often the most prominent men in their area and this corresponded with wealth and followers, but also because they had a direct hand in determining the law and how the law would develop over time.

The *goðar* were extremely important in Icelandic society for a variety of reasons. These men were often men of wealth (which usually referred to property) who used their status to influence other farmers, often taking them on as thingmen. This social structure was important because it provided protection for thingmen, but also because it provided the *goðar* with supporters should they need support at an assembly.¹⁶ This importance continued, and it is a possibility that the role of the *goðar* increases as Iceland nears conversion to Christianity.

At first glance it would not seem that the political structure would be tied to the struggles of conversion, but it is. Robert Ferguson argues that after 100 years of relative stability, that the conversion of Iceland from paganism to Christianity triggered a “period of violent chaos” in the middle of the twelfth century.¹⁷ This “Sturlung Age” was characterized by violent power struggles between chieftains; something that Ferguson says was caused by “the half-hearted abandonment of one set of cultural mores and values, and the imperfect and unconvinced adoption of another.”¹⁸ This idea is not completely inaccurate, but there seems to be a plethora of ideas as to how Icelandic society

changed from a mostly peaceful system to one that was completely unstable. Jesse Byock argues that this change was brought on by the *goðar* gaining more power as society became more stratified, as well as the number of *goðar* decreasing and what few there were left being part of six prominent families.¹⁹ This era of political consolidation under the *goðar*, as well as a stratifying society, was the time that Snorri Sturluson was born into; the Sturlung Age of sagas refers to the sagas that chart the growing prominence of his family. As such, we cannot distance him from these events and must place him within this greater political context.

Political consolidation is a key concept if one wishes to understand the political upheaval in thirteenth century Iceland. Prior to the thirteenth century the *goðar* were simply men chosen to become chieftains over an area, but the definition of *goðar* began to change over time. The Sturluson family, like the other important families, sought to gather all of the *goðar* positions in vast geographical areas that eventually resulted in a swath of land being under the family’s control.²⁰ This consolidation of political power by prominent families caused a shift in the political structure, and eventually led to conflicts and almost to all-out civil war.²¹ Political consolidation was not just an issue within Iceland but also outside of it. King Hakon of Norway wanted to expand his rule westward, and Iceland was a logical territory for consolidating his rule. Iceland continued to have close contact with Norway during this period, both in terms of kinship and in terms of trade.²² Hakon was also in the position to use these connections to his advantage, up to and including forbidding ships to sail from Iceland to Norway, shutting down a major trade route. Other than Norway (that is, Hakon’s political brawn), it is also important to note that Icelandic *goðar* wanted to gain favor from the Norwegian king and that this period of political instability within Iceland meant that they were prepared to seek help externally.²³ This seeking approval and assistance led to the assimilation of these Icelandic *goðar* into the king’s court, and after this there was little question that at some point Iceland would come under Norwegian control and that their society would almost certainly change forever as a result.

¹⁴ Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120-122.

¹⁷ Robert Ferguson, *The Vikings* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), 323.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Byock, 341.

²⁰ Ólason, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*,

²² *Ibid.*,

²³ *Ibid.*,

Thirteenth century Iceland did not exist in some sort of controlled environment where their political system was not influenced by other countries. Their status as trading partners with Norway was especially important, because as Norway grew stronger politically they sought to expand. Naturally, the Norwegian king saw Iceland as the perfect target for political expansion. This privileged status that Norway had within Iceland was further heightened as political consolidation in Iceland began to occur. The six prominent families of Iceland that came to political power took over large chunks of land, and this led to political turmoil and conflict in Iceland. This is the period that Snorri Sturluson lived in and in which he wrote *Heimskringla*. It is reasonable to say that there might be a projection of the political situation (especially in regards to kings) given the tumultuous political climate in Iceland.

Interactions between Royalty and Non-Royalty in *Egil's Saga*

According to Snorri Sturluson, the consolidation of power under Harald Fairhair was the reason for the formation of Iceland. Snorri presents the idea that Harald Fairhair "took over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited, and even the sea and lakes" and goes on to say that he was vigilant in keeping an eye on the people he thought rebellious, and forced everyone to pay him tribute.²⁴ This sets Harald Fairhair up as a tyrant, provides a reason for the discovering of Iceland, and an answer for the reason people left Norway to settle elsewhere. This idea was reaffirmed in *The Saga of Harald Fairhair*, part of the *Heimskringla*. In it Harald is presented as a great warrior but not as a tyrant, and the settlers as "antagonists" of Harald who became outlaws when they left Norway.²⁵ This is important so that we can understand some of why Egil's family moves to Iceland; in some ways they fit the model of the family fleeing the tyrant, but in others the feud that results between Harald's family and Egil's family is more personal.

In Egil's saga, the patriarch of the family Kveldulf does not trust Harald, and warns his son Thorolf that he should not trust Harald either. Despite his father's warnings, Thorolf swears allegiance to the king and makes a name for himself

as a raider and as a confidante of the king, eventually becoming so successful that other men close to the king are jealous. They plot to destroy Thorolf by slandering him to the king, and although the king forgives Thorolf at first the other men are able to convince him that Thorolf cannot be allowed to live and must be killed for stealing money from the king.²⁶ Thorolf is eventually killed and this is the underpinning of the feud between the two families, leading to Egil's grandfather and father leaving Norway with their families to settle in Iceland.²⁷

Thorolf's murder is important for a number of reasons: first, he was betrayed and falsely accused of stealing money from Harald Fairhair, and second, he was murdered and his family was not offered what they considered proper compensation for his death. The concept of *mansbot* or *wergild* was important to Scandinavian society and was one way to prevent unlawful or excessive feuding; by paying the offended family money for their deceased family member, the feud could be ended and more killing prevented.²⁸ The fact that Egil's father Grim did not accept Harald Fairhair's offer to become one of his court like his brother Thorolf was very offensive; however, Grim felt that he could not trust the man who allowed his brother to be killed and was not happy that there would be no reparations for his death.²⁹ The family's honor had been diminished, and because Harald had sought to rub salt into the wound by being condescending about offering Grim a position so soon after Thorolf's death.

To understand why the feud continued for so long--and indeed intensified when Egil was grown--one must understand the importance of honor in Scandinavian society. Honor came from deeds and actions, and Thorolf was as honorable as a man could get. He was "a cheerful, generous man, energetic and very eager to prove his worth" and in practice he was a very generous to the men who gathered around him.³⁰ Thorolf is in essence the ideal Scandinavian man--generous, ambitious, and eager to make something of himself. With Thorolf's death his family lost a great deal of status that came from being associated with him, who had become very rich and powerful prior to his death. Honor appears to be directly linked to land and wealth, especially when examining Thorolf. Actions also

²⁴ Bernard Scudder, trans., "Egil's Saga," *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pg. 11.

²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. by Lee M. Hollander (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1964), 76.

²⁶ Ibid., 12-37.

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁸ Sawyer and Sawyer, 166-167.

²⁹ Scudder, 42.

³⁰ Ibid., 9.

factor into the ability to be well liked and revered by other men, which made a person more honorable since they were worthy of being emulated. Because Thorolf was just and charismatic, he “made friends with all the local men of rank” and this was another way he was powerful—followers directly correlated to one’s status and rank.³¹

Egil is more like his father Grim; he is in essence the anti-Thorolf of the story in regards to looks since he is ugly and almost troll-like and in personality. Egil is also hotheaded, and this particular trait is what gets him in trouble with Eirik Bloodaxe, son of Harald Fairhair and king of Norway. He kills a variety of people close to Eirik, including his son Prince Rognvald, and this does not help with putting the feud to rest. Egil’s very personality offended the king, and his actions as well as his words—as Egil is a gifted poet—all seemed to further inflame the feud that might have otherwise died with Harald Fairhair. For Egil, the notion of honor seems to be tied in with land as well—specifically land that Eirik Bloodaxe wants and thinks he owns. Egil fights and kills Ljot the Pale in a duel and as the victor Ljot’s property and land should belong to him. By this time Eirik has been forced out of Norway and his brother Hakon is king now, and Egil wants the money he should have received when he killed Ljot the Pale. Hakon responds by telling him no via his best friend Arinbjorn, who he cautions to “not value foreigners more highly than myself and my words.”³² When Hakon classifies Egil as a foreigner he is invoking the classic model of “one of us” versus “one of them”—by declaring Egil as foreign and “one of them” he is saying he is unworthy of the money he won because he is not the right kind of person. This is just about the worst thing Hakon can do, especially because he puts Arinbjorn in a very tough place: he can either join the foreigners and in doing so become foreign, or he can stay with Hakon and reject his best friend.

Eventually Egil settled down in Iceland for good, where people speculated that the reason he stayed was because “he could not stay in Norway because of the wrongs that the king felt he had done him.”³³ This is important because it acknowledges the fact that the conflict was never resolved, and that Egil had to stay away from Norway simply because it was unsafe for him to go there. The idea of a feud that ended only when the key players had died was not new, but the longevity of the feud, as well as the

deep distrust and hatred between the two families, were somewhat remarkable.

Thirteenth Century Icelandic Politics and the Connection to *Egil’s Saga*

The conflict between Egil’s family and Harald Fairhair’s family is just one documented feud among many in Scandinavian sagas, but their feud in particular reflected common Scandinavian social values like honor, revenge, and belonging—views that could be reflective of thirteenth century Icelandic politics. In particular the conflict reflects deeply held Icelandic values such as free chieftaincy, and indeed idealizes Egil as the farmer-chieftain that had the nerve to stand up to various Norwegian kings. Egil is in fact a pretty influential chieftain, and although he might not have technically been one of the *goðar* he was of such influence that he was able to intervene in the conflicts of others in order to solve them.³⁴ In this way one can see *Egil’s Saga* as a glorification of the Free State of Iceland and the old system of *goðar* maintaining order through influence.

Egil himself can be viewed as a part of a greater allegory where he represents Iceland (the Free State) and his frequent interactions with Norwegian kings represent the historical connection between Iceland and Norway. The conflicts could indeed be an allusion to thirteenth century politics, where Norway wanted to assimilate Iceland into part of the kingdom and there was a great deal of infighting amongst the *goðar*. For all intents and purposes Egil can be described as “monarchophobic” and his actions reaffirm his deep distrust of the Norwegian royalty.³⁵ His unwillingness to submit and frequent flouting of Norwegian power are characteristics of his personality that are a focal point of the saga; indeed it could be argued that his entire family—with the exception of the Thorolfs, who chose to work with the kings to gain power—are extremely independent. Egil’s grandfather, Kveldulf, refused to muster men to support Harald Fairhair, his father Grim would not become a part of the king’s circle of men, and Egil himself was so critical of Eirik and his wife Gunnhild that they were always trying to have him killed in one way or another.³⁶ This inherent independence in Kveldulf’s family is a value that was very strong in Icelandic

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Ibid., 69.

³³ Ibid., 158.

³⁴ Scudder, 173-176.

³⁵ D.A. Miller, “Functional Operations and Oppositions in the Thought-World of the Sagas” *History of Religions* Vol. 29 No. 2 (Nov. 1989), 132.

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society, and the unwillingness to submit could also be read as a pro-Icelandic motif.

In *Heimskringla*, one can see aspects of how Snorri Sturluson being an Icelander affected how he wrote about Norwegian kings. According to Sverre Bagge, Snorri Sturluson was somewhat misguided in his writing of *Heimskringla* because he gives more power to the “mandates” than they really would have had in late twelfth/early thirteenth century Norway.³⁷ Snorri portrayed these mandates as “more popular leaders than royal servants” which was not true; in reality the mandates might have been popular leaders, but subservience to the crown was highly important.³⁸ Because of small idiosyncrasies like this, one can agree with Bagge’s argument that Snorri Sturluson, although somewhat familiar with Norwegian politics, based some of it on what he was familiar with—in this case, thirteenth century Icelandic politics, which he was more familiar with and was also one of its “most prominent members.”³⁹

Following this vein of thought, Snorri Sturluson is widely accepted as the most probable author of *Egil’s Saga*. Stylistically *Egil’s Saga* and *Heimskringla* are very similar, which has led people to associate Snorri Sturluson with *Egil’s Saga*. Another important factor that adds legitimacy to this claim is that Snorri Sturluson’s status as a descendant of Egil Skallagrimsson.⁴⁰ If Snorri Sturluson was the author of *Egil’s Saga* and this was determined based on the style of his writing, then one can assume that the same habit of basing Norwegian politics—which do occur rather frequently in *Egil’s Saga*, but not as much in depth as in *Heimskringla*—on Icelandic politics of his time would also occur. It is also true that the conquest of Norway by Harald Fairhair follows essentially the same format in both sagas, which lends itself to the theory that Snorri Sturluson is the author of *Egil’s Saga*.

This makes the idea that Egil was a symbol for the Free State much more believable; if Snorri Sturluson was basing his Norwegian politics in *Heimskringla* on thirteenth century Icelandic politics, then it would make sense that he would also project thirteenth century Icelandic politics into *Egil’s Saga*. Where one runs into conflict with this interpretation is when we consider Snorri

Sturluson’s part in the politics of his day. If he was indeed advocating a pro-Free State outlook in *Egil’s Saga*, it would not make sense that he would have been close to the Norwegian king. Snorri Sturluson was a *goði* so it makes sense that he would want to advocate and provide a case for the power of the *goðar*, but he was known to have had close ties with the Norwegian king and had received honors from Hakon IV as a teenager.⁴¹ These ties were eventually the cause of Snorri’s downfall, as the Norwegian king determined that the Sturlusons were “unreliable partners” and allied with another *goði* who had many of the Sturlusons (including Snorri) killed.⁴² Egil as a Free State symbol can be explained by looking at the changes in Iceland and how Snorri Sturluson factored into them; if his experience with Icelandic politics were imposed in *Heimskringla* and *Egil’s Saga*, his reflections on the past could also have made their way into the sagas he wrote.

The idea of the free farmer-chieftain being valorized like Egil is in *Egil’s Saga* speaks to a long historical tradition in Icelandic society. By the time of Snorri Sturluson, the *goðar* had essentially been controlling Iceland for a few hundred years and their power was at an all-time high. Snorri himself was one of these *goðar*, but he had to have known that outward pressure from Norway would affect Iceland. By this time, Norway had been exerting more pressure than ever on Iceland, and Snorri was heavily involved promoting the interests of the Norwegian king Hakon in Iceland.⁴³ Iceland was changing, and so too the political climate was changing; *Egil’s Saga*, with its very strong *goðar* influence, is hearkening back to the more stable Free State. According to Vésteinn Ólason the strong Free State sentiment promoted by Egil and his family “might suggest that the status of such leaders, or of the society in which they live, is under threat at the time of the saga’s composition.”⁴⁴ The uncertainty of the political climate of thirteenth century Iceland meant that Snorri Sturluson could have been reflecting on the good times of the past when he wrote *Egil’s Saga*, and in doing so promoted a very strong pro-Icelandic Free State stance that was leery of the Norwegian monarchy that he may or may not have actually agreed with.

⁴¹ Ólason, 55.

⁴² Ólason, 54.

⁴³ Ólason, 55.

⁴⁴ Ólason, 195.

³⁷ Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 237.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 238.

⁴⁰ Jane Smiley et al., *The Sagas of the Icelanders: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 7.

Conclusion

The very complex and tumultuous political climate of Iceland in the thirteenth century affected many people, Snorri Sturluson among them. In his lifetime he witnessed the consolidation of the *goðar* and the change in their power as their numbers were reduced, with many conflicts occurring between the *goðar* as they fought amongst themselves for power.⁴⁵ This political change affected his writing of both *Heimskringla* and *Egil's Saga*, but it's *Egil's Saga*

that reveals his mental reflections on the Icelandic political changes via the strong anti-monarchy stance taken by Egil and his family. Snorri Sturluson was remembering the good days of the *goðar* before they had become what they were during his time, and in this way Snorri Sturluson is a presentist, as he projects views on his own political situation into the sagas that he wrote.

⁴⁵ Bagge, 239.

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