Njáls saga and its Christian background
Hamer, A.J.

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2008

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

Copyright
Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Take-down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): http://www.rug.nl/research/portal. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.
Introduction

0.1 The Íslendingasögur: convention and creativity

The wealth of vernacular literature that was produced in Iceland during the medieval period included skaldic and eddaic poetry and an enormous corpus of prose in several genres: kings’, saints’ and bishops’ lives, sagas of chivalry, contemporary histories, heroic legend, adventure stories, and the Íslendingasögur (‘sagas of Icelanders’, also sometimes referred to as the Family Sagas)\(^1\). In the last of these groups there are about forty sagas, of which the earliest ‘were written about 1200 or at the outset of the thirteenth century’\(^2\), and the latest in the early part of the fourteenth century, when Grettis saga, in its extant form, was written\(^3\). The action of the Íslendingasögur mainly takes place in Iceland in the period between ca. 930 and ca. 1030, the so-called ‘Saga Age’\(^4\), the Íslendingasögur being fictionalised histories of Icelanders of that time.

The Íslendingasögur, of which Njáls saga is universally acknowledged to be the greatest and most complex, are a conventional literature: the narratives are constructed using conventionalised characters (for example: the woman who incites a man to take vengeance for the killing of a member of her family; ‘peddlers and beggars … wandering from farm to farm bearing both gossip and goods’); conventionalised actions (for example: journeys abroad; journeys to the Alþingi); conventionalised language (for example: proverbial expressions such as kóld eru kyvenna ráð - ‘women’s counsels are cold’; character descriptions such as stilltr vel – ‘of a calm temperament’); conventionalised imagery (‘tears like hailstones’)\(^5\). All of these traditional narrative elements are found in Njáls saga. The present work will argue, however, that the author of Njáls saga also incorporated into his narrative a number of elements familiar from ecclesiastical literature.

---

\(^1\) The term saga covers all these prose categories. ‘The Icelandic word saga, pl. sögur, is a derivative of the verb segja, “to speak”, “to say”; and means simply “a tale” or “a story”, long or short, old or new, true or fictitious’ (Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 17).
\(^2\) Jónas Kristjánsson, Eddas and Sagas, p. 217. Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 62, mentions ‘a general scholarly consensus that sagas of this type began to be written around or just after 1200’.
\(^3\) Jónas Kristjánsson ‘suggests a date ca. 1320-30 – perhaps a little earlier, perhaps a little later’ (Eddas and Sagas, p. 255).
\(^4\) Jónas Kristjánsson, Eddas and Sagas, p. 203; Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 18.
\(^5\) For discussions of conventionalised themes and language, see: Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, pp. 78, 93, 11-12; Lönnroth, A Critical Introduction, p. 44; Hermann Pálsson, ‘Death in Autumn’, p. 7; Miller, Bloodtaking and Peacemaking, p. 79, and references there; Guðrún Nordal, Ethics and action, pp. 48-49.
So conventionalised are the Íslendingasögur, and the society depicted in them is so apparently realistic, that it is tempting to read them as not primarily literary creations. Miller has suggested that:

Good art in the saga mode is not the art of inventiveness, it is the art of incisive description, which, with sure and brief strokes, gives so much context and standard by which to reveal the social significance of the activity being described … The strong claim I would make is that the sagas describe a real world external to themselves, a world that we can recover fairly well in those areas where the saga description is thick enough and makes sense in the light of relevant comparative data … we are at least recovering the world of the sagas and the laws.

It is questionable, however, whether there is one ‘real world’, external to the sagas, but depicted in them:

Nor, because of their antiquarian pretensions, do the sagas offer a clear insight into the thirteenth century, when they were actually written. The sagas may lie closer than other medieval literature to people’s lives, but we do not know whether the “reality” they reflect is the reality of the settlement period, or the writing period, or some period in between, or all of these periods in a syncretic combination – or whether indeed it is “reality” at all, or some imaginative version of their pagan past to which the medieval Icelanders collectively subscribed. The documents that appear at first glance to be such a rich source of social history thus end up, on consideration of the scholarly problems, seeming hopelessly intractable.

A safer course may well be to look beyond the conventionalised nature of the sagas, and to treat them individually, rather than ‘collectively’:

the sagas were written over a period of more than two hundred years, during a time in which Icelandic society underwent dramatic structural changes and therefore it is likely that the authors had different views on the society they were depicting, even though the structure of that society may adhere to similar rules in many sagas.

The point Guðrún Nordal makes here concerning the long period of time over which the sagas were written is an important one, not least for the reader of Njáls saga, written between ca. 1270 and 1295, and therefore a late example of the genre. The author of Njáls saga used all of the narrative conventions listed above, but he used

---

6 Bloodtaking and Peacemaking, p. 76.
8 Guðrún Nordal, Ethics and action, p. 22.
9 See 0.5 below.
them creatively\textsuperscript{10}, and may indeed have viewed them and the narrative tradition they represent as inadequate for his purposes, as has been suggested by Andersson:

By the time the author of \textit{Njáls saga} went to work, the Icelandic past had become seriously problematical ... Many of the sequences read like parodies of traditional narrative conventions ... The total effect of \textit{Njáls saga} is to problematise the whole tradition of saga writing during the preceding century\textsuperscript{11}.

\textbf{0.2 The question of origins}

These issues of conventionalised narrative elements and saga writers’ creativity cannot be separated from wider questions concerning the origins of the \textit{Íslendingasögur}:

The paucity of hard evidence about the genesis of the sagas obliges us, like it or not, to operate in terms of theories. It will not do to strike, as some people seem inclined to do, a know-nothing stance (“because the problem of origins is so vexed, and the theories so problematic, this essay will simply ignore the issue”). Every critical statement about the sagas – every statement, that is, beyond the purely descriptive – implies a theory of origins, whether it is acknowledged or not.\textsuperscript{12}

Clover’s words challenge future critics, and at the same time recognise why the history of saga criticism has been so bound up with debate about the origins of the sagas. The debate has centred around the issue of the extent to which the sagas can be shown to have been composed from oral, as opposed to written, sources, and can be said to have begun with the publication in 1871 of Konrad Maurer’s \textit{Ueber die Haensa-Þóris Saga}, which concluded that ‘the saga in its original form was written on the basis of oral traditions ... sometime between 1200 and 1245’\textsuperscript{13}.

A strong version of the view that the \textit{Íslendingasögur} are based on oral tradition, the so-called ‘freeprose theory’:

postulates a period of highly developed oral saga telling preceding the period of writing ... The relationship of the saga writer to his material was that of an editor rather than a creator. He enjoyed the same freedom as any previous teller in addition to specifically

\textsuperscript{10} ‘The reader often feels that the author of \textit{Njáls saga} is intent on doing everything better and with greater panache than previous \textit{Íslendingasögur} authors’ (Vésteinn Ólason, \textit{Dialogues}, pp. 118-19).

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Growth}, p. 208.

\textsuperscript{12} Carol Clover, ‘The Long Prose Form’, pp. 36-37.

\textsuperscript{13} Andersson, \textit{Problem}, p. 40. Andersson’s discussion of the connected debates concerning saga origins and the creativity of saga writers (\textit{ibid.}, pp. 39-50; 65-81) is the source for the summary remarks in this section.
literary prerogatives denied the oral sagaman, but he was always bound by his oral source or sources.\textsuperscript{14}

This view, that the role of the saga writer was to be an ‘editor’ of orally transmitted material, rather than a creative ‘author’ of a new and unique narrative, was rejected by the so-called ‘bookprose theorists’, who asserted that each saga should be treated as an independent literary creation: ‘the decisive moment in the birth of a saga was not the decision to transcribe tradition but the active intervention of an author’\textsuperscript{15}.

Andersson points out (p. 69) that it would be wrong not to recognise individual differences among the proponents of the bookprose theory. What they do share in common, however, is a sense of the importance for saga writers of written sources, while at the same time they do not deny the existence of an oral tradition which must have contributed to providing the sagas with a framework of historical events and characters. The \textit{Íslendingasögur} may not simply be works of history, transcribed by editors from traditional accounts (nor did the freeprose theorists assert that they were), but these sagas do ‘claim to be history … an axiom on which most scholars can agree’\textsuperscript{16}. As far as any study of \textit{Njáls saga} is concerned, it is relevant that:

it has certainly been of no small consequence for his [the writer’s] handling of the story that Njáll was not his invention, but a historical person who had lived at a certain place and time and suffered a certain fate, and that the writer wanted his public to accept his Saga as history (\textit{Problem}, p. 50).

\textbf{0.3 Early vernacular prose in Iceland}

It is notable that even those \textit{Íslendingasögur} that are thought to be early (that is to say, written before ca.1240) show something of the strongly developed characterisation, complexity of plot, and stylistic control that are so typical of later sagas. An important area of debate, therefore, has been the issue of where the authors of these \textit{Íslendingasögur} might have acquired their skills in writing vernacular prose narrative.

Vernacular sagas of the Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson were being written during the century between ca.1130 and ca.1230\textsuperscript{17}, and it is possible that these sagas, with their focus on action, provided models for writing about

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Andersson, \textit{Problem}, p. 65.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Andersson, \textit{Problem}, p. 72.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Andersson, \textit{Problem}, p. 50.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Andersson, ‘Kings’ Sagas’, p. 197. This period saw the writing of both Latin and Norse kings’ sagas.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
politics, conflicts, and important historical events\textsuperscript{18}. On the other hand, the authors of the kings’ sagas apparently did not feel it important to develop the characters of their heroes, their principal aim being to emphasise the deeds of the kings:

In his preface to Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar written in Latin in the late twelfth century (but extant only in Icelandic translation), the monk Oddr Snorrason urges the telling of sagas about Christian kings to praise their works and glorify God.\textsuperscript{19}

It therefore seems unlikely that these sagas provided models for the vigorous characterisation found in many of the Íslendingasögur. Furthermore, one of the unique defining characteristics of the Íslendingasögur, their focus upon events that (according to the particular saga, at least) took place in Iceland, could not have been derived from the kings’ sagas, the authors of which were primarily interested in developments in Norway.

There is one other body of literature which might conceivably have provided narrative models for writers in the vernacular: translations of Latin homilies, saints’ lives, and instructional works of theology, including Scriptural exegesis. By the time that the Íslendingasögur were being written, Icelandic authors who had little or no Latin might nevertheless have had access to a considerable range of ecclesiastical literature in vernacular translation. It is therefore quite possible that this literature was influential in the development of the Íslendingasögur – indeed, this view was considered uncontroversial at one time:

It is unlikely that the sagas of kings and of Icelanders … would have developed as they did unless several generations of Icelanders had first been trained in hagiographic narrative.\textsuperscript{20}

This point of view is nowadays considered to be ‘far from self-evident’, however\textsuperscript{21}. Chesnutt has suggested that, although ‘Latin models were an indispensable component’ in the process of development of a flexible prose style, it is doubtful whether there was any transference of ‘content’ to the Íslendingasögur from this Christian literature\textsuperscript{22}. It might be borne in mind, however, that the interest in psychology which is evident in saints’ lives, where the heroes frequently have to make difficult moral or spiritual choices, may have supplied models for characterisation that could not be found.

\textsuperscript{18} Vésteinn Ólason points to ‘considerable overlap in material between the kings’ sagas and the Íslendingasögur’ (Dialogues, p. 215).

\textsuperscript{19} Quinn, ‘From orality to literacy’, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{20} Turville-Petre, Origins, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{21} Gíslí Sigurðsson, The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition, p. 22.

\textsuperscript{22} ‘Popular and Learned Elements’, p. 36.
in the kings’ sagas.

0.4 The oral background

The issue of whether, and to what extent, this ecclesiastical literature influenced authors of the Íslendingasögur is an ongoing debate to which, it is hoped, the present study will contribute. By contrast, there is now general agreement that behind the writing of these sagas lay a powerful and living oral tradition, which generated narratives, and structured and refined them. Clover’s concept of ‘performance integrity’ encompasses works of a length that can comfortably be performed by a teller at one sitting ‘or in discontinuous but consecutive segments from beginning to end’[23]. She estimates that the maximum length of a work with ‘performance integrity’ would have been about eighty pages, and would therefore have included ‘all of the Icelandic þættir and a number of sagas’ (p. 29).

The text of Njáls saga occupies four hundred and thirty-four pages in the Íslenzk Fornrit edition, and that of Laxdœla saga two hundred and forty. Sagas such as these are among those that Clover believes ‘existed in oral tradition only as parts, not wholes’ (p. 30). She suggests that oral performers knew the ‘whole’, but performed the mentalised ‘immanent saga’ only in ‘parts’; long written sagas fall into the size range of works ‘designated as contrived by virtue of the fact that they existed in performance as randomly ordered episodes and were realised as wholes only at the editing table or in solicited and hence artificial performances’ (p. 35).

Andersson approves of this theory in large part, although he has one criticism:

What Clover’s theory does not explain quite so well is how and why the first literary realisations of the “immanent saga” were so successful. If the first saga writers had no models in the prior tradition, how did they achieve such satisfactory wholes as Egils saga, Gísla saga, or Laxdœla saga on their first attempt?[24]

In an attempt to answer this question, Andersson has compared the narrative control of three authors, all of whom, he suggests, wrote their sagas around the year 1220, but who wrote about historical events that occurred at different times through the preceding century[25]. Sturlu saga is concerned with events in the life of Sturla Dóðarson, who died in 1183; the eponymous hero of Guðmundur saga dýra had only

---

recently died (in 1212) when the saga was written, so the author was writing very close to the events he describes; the narrative of Þorgils saga ok Hafliða is set in the years around 1120, that is to say about a century before the saga was written.

Andersson points out (p. 394) that the narrative of Sturlu saga often ‘gives the appearance of starting all over again’, when a new chapter opens, and ‘the narrative details of the conflict may strike the reader as both disconnected and repetitive’. The narrative of Guðmundar saga dýra also suffers from ‘a less effectively organised sequence of conflicts’, with a good deal of only tangentially relevant material (p. 398). Both these sagas were written within living memory of the events they describe, and give the impression of having been put together by a compiler.

The last of these sagas, Þorgils saga ok Hafliða, is structured much more like a classical saga than the other two. A century of oral development had produced a narrative ‘very much in the economic and dramatic style of the classical sagas’ (p. 411). Among Andersson’s conclusions, therefore, is the suggestion that oral retellings of sagas shaped and refined them into the larger rhetorical patterns that typify the classical written sagas, with devices such as foreshadowing (portents, predictions, premonitions), intensification of conflict, and manipulation of narrative pace. As a result, they might well have been quite lengthy.

This theory of a process of oral retellings leaves open the issue of the point at which some ‘author’ or ‘compiler’ intervened to shape the narrative into the classical written saga that has been preserved (the process which Clover sees as occurring ‘at the editing table’). Writing more than fifty years ago, Turville-Petre was assured of the originality of each of the Íslendingasögur, but a more recent view would see the relative proportions of ‘compiling’ and ‘creating’ as shifting through the thirteenth century. Andersson is clear that Njáls saga, written towards the end of the century, is largely the product of one creative individual:

The position I take … is that after the ungainly beginning in the Olaf biographies, the sagas consistently combine tradition with novel writing, but the proportions shift over time. The role of tradition diminishes, and the formative role of the authors grows. The Olaf sagas are predominantly records of tradition, but it is perhaps not too much to say that Njáls saga is predominantly a novel.

26 ‘It is therefore not impossible that oral tellings may have been equivalent to a forty- or fifty-page written saga’ (‘The Long Prose Form in Medieval Iceland’, p. 407).
27 ‘Every family saga, if studied in detail, seems to bear the individual stamp of an author; it shows something of the author’s personal interests and of his artistic taste’ (Origins, p. 233).
28 Andersson, Growth, p. 209.
The saga’s closing words certainly suggest an author who felt he had stamped an individual mark upon the narrative: *ok lýk ek / lúku vérm*29 *par Brennu-Njáls sogu* (‘and there I / we end the saga of Njáll of the burning’). The personalised construction marks a break in syntax and tone from the impersonal, formulaic ‘objectivity’ with which the anonymous authors of the Íslendingasögur typically end their works: *Ok lýkr þar nú sogunní* (‘And [it] now ends there for the saga’, *Gunnlaugs saga*; *Laxdæla saga*: manuscript AM 309, 4to); *Ok lýkr þar frá Hrafnkeli at segja* (‘And [it] ceases there to speak about Hrafnkell’, *Hrafnkels saga*); *Lýkr hér sogu Grettis Ásmundarsonar* (‘Here [it] ends for the saga of Grettir Ásmundarson’); *Ok lýkr þar sogu Þórsnesinga, Eyribyggja ok Álptfirðinga* (‘And there [it] ends for the saga of the people of Thorsnes, Eyri and Alftafjord’, *Eyribyggja saga*); *Ok lýkr hér sogunní* (‘And [it] ends here for the saga’, *Bandamanna saga*).

The principal aim of the present study will be to investigate whether *Njáls saga* is indeed ‘predominantly a novel’, as Andersson claims, by looking for Christian narrative elements within the saga. Christian elements are chosen for study, in part to assess the extent of their occurrence, in part to examine their narrative function, and in part because they either go back direct to identifiable written texts or to tradition based on those texts. It follows from this that the appearance of such Christian elements in the saga must disqualify an oral background for the passage in which they are found, so that their presence may be seen as an aid in the assessment of the author’s ‘originality’.

0.5 Njáls saga

The writing of *Njáls saga* can be dated ‘with more certainty than many other sagas’ to the years ca.1275-9530. The author of *Njáls saga* remains anonymous, and very little about him is known for certain. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has suggested that he was most familiar with the South-East of Iceland31; it is quite possible, too, that he was connected with the Svínfelling dynasty, who took their name from the farm in the South-East that had belonged to Flosi Þórðarson, and who were particularly powerful in that

29 *Ok lýku vérm* is the reading of manuscripts of the ‘X-group’, which includes *Reykjabók* and *Kálfaekjarbók*, both written ca. 1300: see ÍF 12, pp. cxlix – cl; p. 464, n. 1.
30 Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 191; Sverrir Tómasson suggests a date ‘probably’ between 1270 and 1290 (*Njáls saga*, p. 231).
31 ÍF 12, pp. lxxxiv-c.
area and in the East. But these are only hypotheses, based on reasoned inferences which have their foundation in details present in the narrative: there are very few facts. It simply is not known, for example, whether the author was a layman or a cleric, and if the latter, whether he was of the secular clergy or a religious. Lönnroth has suggested that the author had what he calls a ‘clerical mind’, but this does not answer the question of whether the author was priest or layman, as Lönnroth himself admits:

Some sagawriters were better educated than others. To the extent that they were well versed in foreign literature and theological concepts, they probably had received some formal clerical training; but this does not necessarily mean that they were priests or monks. Even a layman in thirteenth-century Iceland may have had a “clerical mind” in the broad sense we are using it in this chapter: a mind formed by the Christian culture of medieval Europe.

What can confidently be said about the author is that he had an independent approach to saga-writing. It was pointed out at 0.4 above that generic conventions are broken in the closing words of Njáls saga, and the author opens the narrative just as originally. A few introductory remarks about Mórar gígja and his daughter Unnr are followed by an abrupt change of scene: ‘Now the saga shifts to Breiðafjarðardalir’. In no other Íslendingasaga is there anything like this. For Clover, it is a result of the author’s ‘baroque propensities, and ... must have seemed [to the audience] a flamboyant touch indeed,’ while Andersson sees the author as consciously breaking with hallowed tradition. The originality of the start of the narrative has led to different critics picking out different aspects for comment: Gottzmann sees a marriage dissolving into legal dispute; for Heinrichs, the saga opens with riddles; Vésteinn Ólason sees the opening up of a vast picture. It would appear that, from the very opening of the narrative, the saga’s complexity and originality have resulted in disagreement among critics.

---

33 If 12, pp. cii-ciii.
34 For a discussion of the term see A Critical Introduction, pp. 104-64.
36The Medieval Saga, p. 77. See also Finnur Jónsson: ‘Noget lignende kendes ikke i andre sagaer, og at dette er en bearbejders (kejtede) arbejdsnæde er på forhånd det sandsynligste’ (Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie II, p. 525).
37 Growth, p. 183: ‘We may note first of all that Njáls saga dispenses with a historical prelude recounting the settlement in Iceland of an ancestral clan … By the time Njáls saga was written, the historical prelude was so ubiquitous in the classical sagas that it was virtually de rigueur’.
38 Rechtsproblematik, p. 16: ‘Die Njáls saga beginnt mit einem Ehrechtskonflikt’.
40 Dialogues, p. 199: ‘we may say that the saga opens on the first page with a wide-ranging overview of
On one point, however, there has been considerable agreement. Heinemann has referred to *Njáls saga* as ‘a largely bleak saga of thirteenth-century Iceland’\(^{41}\), while Andersson has described *Njála* as ‘at once the best and bleakest of the sagas’\(^{42}\). For Andersson, the ‘bleakness’ comes from the author’s ‘jaundiced vision of Icelandic institutions and the underlying assumptions’. Vésteinn Ólason agrees, pointing to the weakness of institutions such as marriage and law:

*Njáls saga* is also much concerned with evil, with unconquerable fate and with how men confront these forces, but the saga lays great emphasis on settlements, laws, and judgements which seem to represent man’s only hope of defeating evil, for all that it is a hope which is ultimately dashed.

The saga’s first section tells of three marriages, each of which turns out badly … When we consider that marriage was the most important of the events designed to ensure that families flourish and society progresses, such incidents hardly bode well.\(^{43}\)

Complexity and originality combine again in the author’s development of good and evil characters:

Many sagas make use of the occasional villain to incite trouble, but *Njáls saga* has an unparalleled gallery of evildoers.\(^{44}\)

On the other hand:

*Njáls saga* reveals more clearly than any other *Íslendingasaga* that good men in the old society were willing to spare no effort in order to establish a secure and lasting peace.\(^{45}\)

Part of what makes *Njáls saga* such a tragic narrative is the fact that so many of the efforts of these good men come to nothing. It is as if a systemic fault within Icelandic social institutions allows wicked individuals to thrive. Fox claims that Iceland at the start of *Njáls saga* is:

a land where the individual is all-important and where constant self-assertion is necessary for honourable survival. The main principle of order is the bond of kinship or of friendship between men, but even this bond, with the duty of revenge that it entails, leads often to violence … This world has implicit in it a number of problems, and the rest of the saga is concerned with these problems. There is the problem of the law … there is the problem, ultimately a related one, of the validity of

\(^{41}\) *A Reader’s View*, p. 12.

\(^{42}\) *Growth*, p. 208.

\(^{43}\) *Dialogues*, pp. 171, 199.

\(^{44}\) Andersson, *Growth*, p. 201.

\(^{45}\) Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues*, p. 201.
paganism. But the most general and most important problem is how man should act in such a world – whether it is possible for him to maintain in every sense his honour and his individuality, and at the same time to live a peaceful and prosperous life.\footnote{‘Western Literary Tradition’, p. 296.}

This early society is characterised by a tense linking of duty and violence, and is a dangerous one, if ‘honourable survival’ is the most that an individual may hope for. The author of \textit{Njáls saga} certainly examines the causes and consequences of many violent deeds in his narrative: the ambush and killing of an innocent man, feuds and revenge killings, and battles large and small. But, superficially at least, Iceland is a peaceful society at the start of the saga; the first battle (ch. 5) takes place far away and at sea, off the coast of Denmark. Among the subjects to be examined in this study will be the relevance of this battle account to the wider saga narrative.

\subsection*{0.6 Njáls saga and its sources}

Defining the relationship of \textit{Njáls saga} to other \textit{Íslendingasögur} has proved contentious. The saga is late, so the author might have known many other sagas; he was expert at using the narrative conventions of the genre, and it seems likely, therefore, that he was familiar with several: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson lists the following sagas among the sources he believes were known to the author - \textit{Laxdæla saga}, \textit{Heiðarvíga saga}, \textit{Eyrbyggja saga}, \textit{Droplaugarsona saga}, \textit{Gunnars þattra Þiðrandabana}, \textit{Hænsa-Póris saga}, \textit{Egils saga}, \textit{Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar}, and \textit{Ásbjarnar þattra Selsbana}\footnote{Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, \textit{Um Njálu}, p. 301. But see Andersson, \textit{Problem}, pp. 96-103.}. However, and leaving \textit{Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar} aside as not being an \textit{Íslendingasaga}, closer comparison of these sagas with \textit{Njáls saga} has shown no borrowing of content ‘from written family sagas’\footnote{Andersson, \textit{Problem}, p. 103.}.

In fact, the question of the relationship of \textit{Njáls saga} to written sources in general has proved difficult. The saga quotes passages from \textit{Grágás}, the lawcode from the Commonwealth era, and the author seems also to have been influenced by the later codes, \textit{Járnsíða} and \textit{Jónsbók}\footnote{For \textit{Járnsíða} see IF 12, p. lxxxiv; for \textit{Járnsíða} and \textit{Grágás}, see \textit{A Critical Introduction}, pp. 145-46; for \textit{Jónsbók} see Berger, ‘Law in \textit{Njáls saga}’, pp. 82-87.}, but he neither quotes them directly nor provides verbal echo\footnote{Sverrir Tómasson, ‘\textit{Njáls saga}’, p. 231, writes of ‘Hinweise’.}. He may have used written genealogies\footnote{IF 12, p. xlix.}, although this is not
certain; in addition, two written, but now lost, narratives, *Kristni þáttr* and *Brjáns saga*, have been suggested as sources (for the Conversion and Clontarf episodes). Lönroth has argued strongly that the evidence in favour of a lost *Kristni þáttr* ‘is negligible’, and that both the Conversion chapters and the episode of the battle of Clontarf were, in the form in which they are found in *Njáls saga*, the work of the author himself. This is not to say that there is not clear evidence that the author did in fact use written sources when he composed the Conversion and Clontarf episodes, but rather to admit that there is no easily definable relationship between the saga and any particular written source.

The problem of source identification stems primarily from the fact that the author’s knowledge is usually fully assimilated into the rhetorical tone and ideology of the saga. Something of the author’s abilities and methods when using sources can be seen from the following example. In chapter 133 of *Njáls saga*, Flosi has a dream in which the mountain peak at Lómagnúpr opens up and a man comes out, wearing a goatskin and carrying an iron staff. This man then calls out a number of names, of men who are shortly to die. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson identified a learned, literary source for this dream in a passage from Gregory’s *Dialogues*. He also recognised, however, that the author of *Njáls saga* built his dream narrative, not only from the story in Gregory, but also out of Icelandic tales about giants who live among the mountains (*úr íslenzkum bergbúasögum* – p. lxii). The native tradition about mountains opening, in order to allow those possessed of supernatural powers to pass in or out, is found elsewhere in *Njáls saga*: Hallgerðr’s maternal uncle, Svanr, who is described as being ‘very skilled in witchcraft’ (ch. 10), was thought by some not to have died, but to have entered a mountain (ch. 14).

The author’s skilful assimilation here of written Latin and oral vernacular sources, so that the learned origins of the story are hidden, may be compared with unassimilated borrowings of the type exemplified in this passage from *Fóstbrœðra saga*.

Qll bein hans skulfu, þau sem í váru hans líkama, en þat váru tvau hundruð beina ok fjórtán bein. Tennr hans nötruðu, þær váru þrír tigir.

---

52 *ÍF* 12, pp. xliii-xliv.
53 *ÍF* 12, pp. xlv-xlx.
55 See *ÍF* 12, pp. lxxi-lxxii The passage from Gregory is at PL 77, col. 185; for an English translation of the Latin, see *A Literary Masterpiece*, p. 206.
Readers of a passage such as this might well suspect a learned source, without its having been identified. If, on the other hand, the Latin source for Flosi’s dream had not been identified, the dream would presumably be thought to have been based entirely on traditional, oral sources.

The fact that Flosi’s dream has an origin in Christian literature fits with the wider view of the narrative. There are more Christian references, and Christian elements apparently play a larger part in *Njáls saga* than in any other *Íslendingasaga*. The action of *Njáls saga* is set during the period between approximately 960 and 1016, an interval which includes the Icelanders’ conversion to Christianity; chapters 100-105 of the saga tell of the mission which King Óláfr Tryggvason sent to Iceland, under the leadership of the priest Þangbrandr. The author’s placing of these Conversion chapters shortly after the centre of the saga might be thought, *a priori*, to suggest that he meant the Conversion to have considerable narrative importance.

On the other hand, there has been critical debate concerning the actual importance of these Christian elements, which have been held to have little effect on characters’ ethics and a detrimental effect on the narrative structure. The Clontarf and Conversion episodes have both been regarded as poorly integrated into the narrative, while the Conversion has seemed to some critics not to bring about any change in the behaviour of most of the characters. Allen, for example, is careful not to exaggerate the importance of the Conversion:

>[It] is properly emphasized and properly strikes one as a major pause because it marks a decided extension of the saga’s range of values. ... [But]... the old values of pagan Iceland (as represented in the saga) are set within a frame of new values. They are not necessarily superseded or contradicted.

Fox claims more strongly that:

---

56 Quoted from Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, p. 24 (the passage continues with the number of veins). Gísli Sigurðsson points out that the numbers of bones, teeth and veins are taken from Latin sources. *Fóstbrædra saga* is a good example of a saga whose dating is uncertain: it has been regarded as both early and late. For a summary of the arguments on both sides, and a conclusion in favour of an early date, see Andersson, *Growth*, pp. 69-70.

57 The Conversion and Clontarf episodes, which are certainly based on written, if unidentified, sources have been held to ‘constitute genuine digressions’ on the grounds of their lack of integration into the narrative (Clover, *The Medieval Saga*, p. 28).

58 *Fire and Iron*, p.117.
the Christianization of Iceland does not produce anything like a Christian community. The missionary who converts the Icelanders is simply a thug, and the Christianity which he brings supplants the system of blood revenge only very sporadically.\(^{59}\)

He also recognises, however, ‘the very genuine significance’ of the Conversion in the character of Hoðskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði\(^{60}\). Even this degree of ‘significance’ is denied by Cook\(^{61}\), who claims that the saga’s ‘characters may convert, and acquire Christian rhetoric, but they do not change their nature. Njáll is the same man after the Conversion as before, and Hallr and Hoðskuldr would have been the same as they are had there been no Conversion.’ Harris, on the other hand, sees the treatment of the conversion of Iceland in Njáls saga as ‘probably the supreme realisation of the idea of Northern history as turning on the conversion and of the implications of this idea in the lives of individuals’.\(^{62}\) Vésteinn Ólason agrees ‘in most respects … with Harris’s analysis’, despite his general unease that reading the sagas in terms of Christian ideology runs the risk of creating a ‘new story … less original and more threadbare than the old one’.\(^{63}\)

This study will attempt to determine whether the author provides a consistently Christian ethical framework within which the actions of his characters, both before and after the Conversion, may be judged. If such a framework indeed exists, the author is likely to have constructed it out of his own education and reading. Accordingly, the study will for the most part be based on an examination of the Christian literature that is known to have been available in medieval Iceland. And since it is not known whether the author’s Latinity was good, vernacular versions will be examined, wherever possible.\(^{64}\)

What may be noted at the outset is that the ecclesiastical translations mentioned at 0.3 above were of works that were standard and familiar. The Dialogues of Gregory the Great, and the Elucidarius of Honorius of Autun, were both available in Icelandic in the twelfth century.\(^{65}\) Isidore’s Etymologiae is another obvious example of an internationally familiar text. ‘Hólar and Viðey possessed copies of this work

\(^{59}\) ‘Western Literary Tradition’, pp. 301-2.
\(^{60}\) ibid., p. 302.
\(^{61}\) Njál’s Saga, p. xxxi.
\(^{62}\) Harris, ‘Saga as historical novel’, pp. 210-11.
\(^{63}\) Vésteinn Ólason, Dialogues, p. 269, n. 28, and pp. 225-27.
\(^{64}\) The one unchallenged patristic source in Njáls saga, Gregory’s Dialogues (the source for Flosi’s dream), was translated into Icelandic in the twelfth century, as noted above.
\(^{65}\) Turville-Petre, Origins, pp. 135 and 137.
when their libraries were inventoried in the 1390s, but it had been used long before that time by the authors of Þorláks saga and Rímbeoga.\textsuperscript{66} Familiar saints’ and apostles’ lives were also translated early, and the vernacular versions of the latter in particular remained popular in Iceland, being copied frequently throughout the Middle Ages, and being read aloud in church on the apostles’ feast days.\textsuperscript{67} Another, ‘profoundly influential work of early Christian literature’\textsuperscript{68}, was the \textit{Descensus ad inferos} section of the apocryphal \textit{Gospel of Nicodemus}. The \textit{Descensus}\textsuperscript{69}, which contains a supposed eye-witness account of Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, was the source for another early translation into Icelandic.\textsuperscript{70} Homilies were also translated early: many of the items in the collection of Icelandic homilies that is preserved in the Stockholm Homily Book are considerably older than that manuscript (ca.1200). Taking into account the early date of these homilies, it is perhaps not surprising that their recognised sources are, like those of the translations mentioned above, to be found in the writings of standard authorities: Jerome, Alcuin, Gregory, Bede, Paul the Deacon.\textsuperscript{71}

The dependence upon mainly familiar authorities seems to have been a lasting phenomenon in Iceland. Even an author who was working at the very end of the period during which the Íslendingasögur were being written, and whose aim was to write, not a vernacular translation, but a piece of Latin hagiography, limited himself (or possibly was limited by his library) to familiar sources: Abbot Arngrímr Brandsson (d. 1361), the author of the youngest version of Guðmundar saga, ‘refers to the Bible, Gregory’s Dialogues, various saints’ lives, the \textit{Vitæ Patrum} and the \textit{Speculum Historiale}’.\textsuperscript{72} Arngrímr’s Latin text is now lost, though an Icelandic translation survives, possibly written in the years 1343-45 by Bergr Sokkason, the translator of \textit{Michaels saga} and \textit{Nikolaus saga erkibiskups}.\textsuperscript{73}

It is known that some Icelanders studied abroad, and these men would

\textsuperscript{66} Chesnutt, ‘Popular and Learned Elements’, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{67} Turville-Petre, \textit{Origins}, pp. 128-29. The earliest manuscript of Postola sögur, MS AM 645, 4to, is dated to about 1220 (ibid., p. 130).
\textsuperscript{68} Hall, ‘The \textit{Evangelium Nichodemi}’, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{69} Tischendorf, \textit{Evangelia Apocrypha}, pp. 389-432.
\textsuperscript{70} Turville-Petre, \textit{Origins}, p. 127, states that the four texts of Niðrstigningar saga printed in HMS II ‘are all to be traced to the same original translation, which must have been made in the twelfth century’.
\textsuperscript{71} Turville-Petre, \textit{Origins}, pp. 115-16.
\textsuperscript{72} Stefán Karlsson, ‘\textit{Bóklausir menn}’, pp. 282-83. \textit{Vitæ Patrum} is by Jerome, \textit{Speculum Historiale} by Vincent of Beauvais.
\textsuperscript{73} Hallberg, ‘Bergr Sokkason’, p. 300. Hallberg also suggests that Bergr ‘amplified and expanded his original’. 
presumably have had access to larger libraries elsewhere. The powerful chieftain Gizurr hvíti, a significant figure in *Njáls saga*, ‘sent his son Ísleifr to a famous monastic school in Herford, Westphalia’; Ísleifr, who was probably the first Icelander to study for the priesthood abroad, was consecrated bishop in 1056. Sæmundr Sigfússon ‘the learned’ studied in Frakkland, ‘a geographical term which then could denote much more than “France” does nowadays – for example, it could include the Rhinelands’; he returned to Iceland in 1076. Þorlákr Þórhallsson, who had received his first ecclesiastical education from Sæmundr’s son, the priest Eyjólfr, went on in the 1150s to study in both Paris and Lincoln. Þorlákr was the founder and first abbot of the Augustinian house at Þykkvibær, and in 1177 was consecrated bishop of Skálholt; he died in 1193 and was canonised in 1199. The Icelanders who had the opportunity to study elsewhere (or at least, those of that group whose names are preserved) were all well-born. It is possible that the author of *Njáls saga* was a member of this class, perhaps a member of the Svínfelling dynasty, as mentioned above. It is not known, however, whether he studied abroad. All things considered, it seems safest to limit the search for Christian sources to authors and texts that were certainly known in thirteenth-century Iceland.

This study makes reference to a number of works by Augustine, who is here treated as the principal authority: partly because of his enormous influence on the intellectual life of Iceland, owing to the fact that many of the monasteries were Augustinian, and partly in accordance with the medieval maxim: *Si Augustinus adest, sufficit ipse tibi*. Other standard authorities referred to include Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Bede; other, orthodox texts which were known in Iceland, and to which reference is made, include the *Elucidarius* of Honorius of Autun, and works by Alcuin and Hugh of St. Victor, ‘the most influential theologian of the twelfth century’. In the Middle Ages, Hugh was sometimes referred to as *Alter Augustinus*, ‘because of his great familiarity with the works of St. Augustine’.

---

74 Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, p. 144.
75 Vésteinn Olason, *Dialogues*, p. 45.
76 Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, pp 180-82.
81 He was certainly known in medieval Iceland. The Norse translation of his *Soliloquium de arhra animae* is in *Hauksbók* as *Víðrœða líkams ok sálar*.
Two less familiar authorities are quoted: the ninth-century homiliarist Smaragdus is mentioned in chapter 1, and the fifth/sixth-century bishop Epiphanius Latinus is mentioned in chapter 3. There is no claim that the author of *Njáls saga* had read the works of these authors: Epiphanius is quoted because he provides a conveniently brief and straightforward statement of commonplace ideas that may be compared with the text of the saga; Smaragdus, too, provides a means by which the ideas of influential authorities may be accessed. His compilation of patristic homilies on the Epistles covered the whole Church year, and was but one of many widely known homiliaries during the Middle Ages. The completely familiar Aquinas is also quoted, in chapters 2, 3 and 6, although it is extremely unlikely that the *Summa Theologiae*, left unfinished on the author’s death in 1274, was known in Iceland by about 1275-1295, when *Njáls saga* was written. The *Summa* is quoted because it is an authoritative compendium of what was considered to be orthodox belief during the latter half of the thirteenth century.

### 0.7 *Njáls saga* and *Laxdœla saga*

The phrase ‘the Christian Background’ in the title of this work is intended to include two discussions. The first is an examination of the narrative function within *Njáls saga* of elements taken from ecclesiastical literature. The second is an investigation into whether *Njáls saga* is unique among the *Íslendingasögur* in its treatment of ecclesiastical sources, or whether there already existed at the time that *Njála* was written, a saga in which these sources are used in a similar way, and which might therefore have supplied a narrative model. For a number of reasons, *Laxdœla* is the obvious saga to take as a test-case.

*Laxdœla saga* was written about the middle of the thirteenth century, and seems to have quickly become popular, to judge from the number of manuscripts that have been preserved (including six medieval vellum manuscripts). Other sagas seem to have been influenced by this work:

It is quite conceivable that *Laxdœla saga*, a popular saga as attested by a relatively large number of manuscripts, established something akin to a

---

83 See Erikson, *Interpretatio Evangeliorum*, p. 6 for Epiphanius’s probable dates.
84 It should be noted, however, that the work quoted, which is now ascribed to Epiphanius, was held during the Middle Ages to have been written by Augustine.
85 Einar Ólafur Sveinsson dates the saga’s composition to between 1230 and 1260 (ÍF 5, p. xxv); Beck, ‘*Laxdœla saga*’, p. 162, dates it to ‘die Zeit um 1250’; Heller, *Die literarische Schöpfung*, argues for a date after 1250; Andersson, *Growth*, p. 148, accepts a date ‘in the closing years of the Icelandic commonwealth’ (i.e. shortly before 1262-64).
86 All but one of these (Möðruvallabók) are now fragments; for details see ÍF 5, pp. lxxvi-lxxx.
school of saga writing, best represented by *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*.\(^{87}\)

Andersson has made a strong case for regarding *Laxdæla saga* as an influence on the authors of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, noting that these sagas share with *Laxdæla* the characteristics of length, ‘a special focus on the period of colonization’, ‘a broad historical canvas’, ‘a sense of dynasty’, and ‘a desire to resurrect regional history’. Whether or not *Laxdæla saga* provided a narrative model for further sagas is yet to be determined, although it does seem to have been the lender in certain other cases where there is agreement between it and other saga narratives, to judge from Gísli Sigurðsson’s careful study of the literary relations between *Laxdæla saga*, *Gunnars saga Þiðrandabana* and *Fljótsdæla saga*.\(^{88}\) Further evidence of how influential *Laxdæla saga* was in medieval Iceland may be seen from the fact that the author of *Grettis saga*, written probably early in the fourteenth century, makes explicit reference to *Laxdæla* as a source.\(^{89}\)

A preliminary comparison of *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga* might lead to the rapid conclusion that the author of *Njáls saga* was another who used *Laxdæla saga*, although without referring directly to it. There are several well-known similarities between these two sagas: some of the same characters and events appear in both *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*; both sagas make explicit Christian references, and both have the Conversion at the centre of their narratives.\(^{90}\) It is therefore quite possible that the author of *Njáls saga* used *Laxdæla saga* as a model. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, who cites a number of similarities between the two sagas, goes so far as to suggest that the author of *Njáls saga* was considerably influenced by *Laxdæla*, taking information from that source in preference to other sagas.\(^{91}\)

A careful scrutiny by Andersson\(^{92}\), however, of this apparent series of links between *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, revealed that there is no evidence of verbal echo of *Laxdæla* in *Njála*, and that similarities in episode are just that: similarities, and not borrowings. On the other hand:

\(^{87}\) Andersson, *Growth*, p. 207.
\(^{88}\) *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, pp. 231-45.
\(^{89}\) *ÍF* 7, p. 25.
\(^{90}\) According to Fichtner, ‘Arithmetical Proportion’, the Conversion is placed almost exactly at the centre of *Laxdæla saga*.
\(^{91}\) ‘Af òllum Íslenzkum sögum vírðist augljóst, að höfundur Njálu hefur þekkt Laxdæla sögu. Hefir hún verið honum harla minnisteð og haft mikil áhrif á hann’ (IF 12, pp. xxxix-xl). For further discussion of the importance of *Laxdæla saga* as a source for *Njáls saga*, see *ibid.*, pp. lxix - lxx, lxxii - lxxiii.
\(^{92}\) *Problem*, pp. 96-103.
The similarities are incontestable and no one is likely to venture the claim that the author of *Njáls saga* was not open to some direct or indirect influence from *Laxdæla saga*.

Sverrir Tómasson has suggested that the nature of the relationship between *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga* is better seen as one of ‘interertextuality’ rather than direct influence. If there did in fact exist a school of saga writing influenced by *Laxdæla saga*, the author of *Njála* was no slavish pupil in it. For example, he was concerned to write a national saga, not a regional one on the model of *Laxdæla*. Andersson makes a stronger suggestion: that the authors of *Laxdæla* and *Njála* had radically different visions of the Saga Age and its people; that if, for the author of *Laxdæla saga*, ‘character was suffused with and obscured by nostalgia’, the author of *Njáls saga*:

reacted against nostalgia and focused almost exclusively on defects of character ... By the time the author of *Njáls saga* went to work, the Icelandic past had become seriously problematical. The glittering vision of the past was extinguished, and the great historical figures had become not only ironically but genuinely ambiguous. Tragedy had become more interesting than triumph. Marriage patterns, the feud system, and legal processes were open to question. Many of the sequences read like parodies of traditional narrative conventions, and the optimism of *Laxdæla saga* looks almost comical by comparison.

It would seem that *Njáls saga* is at once the greatest of the Íslendingasögur and the least typical. Andersson concludes this study of *Njáls saga* with a final reference to the author’s reaction to *Laxdæla*:

It is hard to believe that the author of *Laxdæla saga* did not know *Egils saga* and did not engage in an almost polemical debate with the earlier text on matters of regional and ancestral pre-eminence. It is equally hard to believe that the author of *Njáls saga* did not know *Laxdæla saga* and did not view the dream world of that text with a scepticism bordering on disdain.

The suggested ‘intertextuality’ of *Njáls saga* with *Laxdæla saga* will be examined in this study, in an attempt to determine: whether or not the relationship between the sagas was one of direct influence; whether the author of *Njáls saga* did indeed take a sceptical view of the ‘optimism’ of *Laxdæla saga*; and whether he can be said to have viewed character...

---

93 *Problem*, p. 97.
94 ‘Er [viz. the author of *Njáls saga*] kennt sich gut in Dalir aus, obwohl man einen direkten Einfluss der Laxdæla saga auf seinen Text nicht nachweisen kann; eher wird man von einer Intertextualität sprechen dürfen’ (*Njáls saga*, p. 231).
95 Andersson, *Growth*, pp. 201, 208.
in that saga as ‘suffused with and obscured by nostalgia’\textsuperscript{97}. The route to be followed here will involve an examination of the way in which both authors incorporated Christian elements into their narratives, in an attempt to identify similarities in narrative method. A number of examples of parallels will be given in this study which, while they cannot prove actual influence from \textit{Laxdæla saga}, do strongly suggest it (the more so, because these elements do not occur in other \textit{Íslendingasögur}).

The study will, however, mainly concentrate on the \textit{Njáls saga} narrative, and will attempt to identify themes, actions, metaphors, verbal echoes, and internal cross-references and parallels, in order to add another layer to the reading of the saga. There will be no suggestion that \textit{Njáls saga} is in any way an allegory\textsuperscript{98}; rather, the study will simply attempt to identify part of another, Christian, set of ‘ideas … familiar to Icelanders of the 13th century’\textsuperscript{99}, and test whether such identification can add a further level to the reading of the whole narrative, and not just to the explicitly Christian parts.

There would have been no point, of course, in an author incorporating Christian elements into his saga if his audience could not recognise them. Assessing the original audience’s response to the \textit{Íslendingasögur} is problematic, however, since the audience left no description of itself, and little is known about the level of literacy in medieval Iceland. What is known, however, is that clerics and lay people shared communities to an extent unknown elsewhere in medieval Europe, which makes it likely that the original audience of the sagas was mixed: lay and clerical, literate and uneducated\textsuperscript{100}; it is also quite possible that each of these groups influenced the other\textsuperscript{101}. The clerics in the audience are likeliest to have been alert to the presence of familiar Christian ideas in a saga. In order to test whether at least some of the original audience of \textit{Njáls saga} might have included, in their response to the saga, an understanding of the Christian ideas similar to the reading presented in this study, there will be a discussion in the final chapter of what may be thought to be the earliest work of interpretation of \textit{Njáls saga}, produced in Iceland, and which may be dated to ca. 1300.

\textsuperscript{97} Andresson, \textit{Growth}, p. 201.
\textsuperscript{98} Vésteinn Ólason, \textit{Dialogues}, p. 227.
\textsuperscript{99} Gíslí Sigurðsson, \textit{The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{100} Clover, ‘Icelandic Family Sagas’, pp. 270-71, 282.
\textsuperscript{101} Vésteinn Ólason, \textit{Dialogues}, p. 47