Njáls saga and its Christian background
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4.1 Introductory

The argument was presented in chapter 1 above that the author of *Laxdæla saga* used the theme of shipwreck and drowning as a device to add structure to the narrative: physical shipwrecks and drownings, some of which were undoubtedly historical, provided a narrative context for the employment of Christian sea-metaphors of storm and shipwreck, with subsequent escape or drowning. Metaphor as a mode of thought is rare and conventionalised in the *Íslendingasögur*, though common in ecclesiastical literature, and it seems likely, therefore, that the author of *Laxdæla saga* was influenced in his employment of metaphor by his reading of religious works. The present chapter will argue that the author of *Njáls saga* used a similar combination of the physical-historical and the Christian-metaphorical (in his case, physical and metaphorical harvests, rich and meagre). For authors such as those of *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga*, the advantages of employing metaphor in this way presumably included, not only the strengthening of structural ties across the saga, but the enrichment of the narrative through intertextual allusions to familiar Christian ideas concerning links between the physical and the metaphysical.

4.2 The *bleikir akrar* of Hlíðarendi

Among the best known passages in saga literature is that in which Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, banished from Iceland for three years, and on his way to leave the country, looks back on the slopes above his home, and decides to stay (p. 182).

Annan dag eptir býr hann snemmendis ferð sína til skips ok sagði þá öllu liði, at hann myndi ríða í braut alfari, ok þóttu mýnnum þat mikit, en væntu þó tilkvámu hans síðar. Gunnarr hverfr til allra manna, er hann var búinn, ok gengu menn út með honum allir. Hann stingr niðr atgeirinum ok stiklar í söðlinum, ok ríða þeir Kolskeggr í braut. Þeir ríða fram at Markarfljótí, þá drap hestr Gunnars fóti, ok stókk hann ór söðlinum. Honum varð lítið upp til hliðarinnar ok bejarins at Hlíðarenda ok mælti:

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433 ‘In the domestic tradition metaphorical language was specific for the poetry. Secular saga literature restricted itself to an extremely moderate use of metaphors, mostly in quite conventional phrases. The high frequency of imagery in the religious prose is as such a principal innovation’ (Hallberg, ‘Imagery’, p. 402).
“Fogur er hliðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfoegr sýnzk, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim apr ok fara hvergi.”

(Early next morning he made ready to ride to the ship, and told all his people that he was going abroad for ever. Everyone was dismayed at the news, but hoped that some day he would return. When he was ready to leave, he embraced them all, and the whole household came out to see him off. With a thrust of his halberd, he vaulted into the saddle, and rode away with Kolskeggr.

They were riding down towards Markarfljót when Gunnarr’s horse stumbled, and he sprang from the saddle. His glance was drawn upwards to the slopes and the farm at Hliðarendi, and he said: ‘How lovely the slopes are, more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before, pale cornfields and new-mown hay. I am riding back home, and I will not go away’

Gunnarr makes this decision knowing that his death will be the inevitable result (he is killed the following autumn). Critical attention has been drawn to this passage since it is here, more than anywhere else in the sagas, that a character voices a powerful emotional response to his home environment. The traditional critical view has been that this passage movingly demonstrates the natural eagerness of a farmer to return to his work on the land, the land itself presumably not being seen to possess any moral status or rhetorical voice.\(^{434}\)

A more recent, but representative, expression of this view states that: ‘it is the farmer who speaks, whose sense of beauty is a pride in use’\(^{435}\). The ‘epic naturalism’ of saga descriptions, according to this view, is contrasted with the vision of the Christian artist, for example the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which sees landscape in moral terms, ‘as a rhetorical expression of a state of mind’\(^{436}\). Allen has, however, attempted a rhetorical reading of the landscape at Hliðarendi, albeit not a Christian reading.

So at the last moment Gunnarr is led by fate (the omen of the horse’s stumbling) and by his own inner desire to turn back to the land which in its way has created Gunnarr and defined him. To him the land seems infused with beauty, a beauty that must come from the projection upon it of his own desire to stay.\(^{437}\)

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\(^{434}\) For a survey of earlier criticism on this passage, see *A Critical Introduction* p. 157, and Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Um Njálu*, pp. 212-13.

\(^{435}\) Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes and seasons*, p. 46.

\(^{436}\) Pearsall and Salter, *Landscapes and seasons*, p. 45.

\(^{437}\) *Fire and Iron*, p. 150 (my italics).
This analysis of the passage attempts an uneasy compromise between two almost incompatible views of the hero’s psychology. Allen’s first suggestion treats the passage in terms of medieval Icelandic literary conventions, providing an interpretation which sees Gunnarr’s psychology as subject to the controlling power of fate: ‘Gunnarr is led by fate (the omen of the horse’s stumbling)’. This ‘medieval’ reading places Gunnarr in a tradition of fatalistic heroes, his tragic decision being reminiscent of the decisions of some other saga characters, who see in ‘omens’ the hand of fate, and who courageously decide rather to embrace their fate than attempt to avoid it.

Allen’s second sentence, as quoted above, articulates a modern and post-Freudian psychologising view, which sees the hero’s internal thought-processes as the cause of the tragedy: ‘a beauty that must come from the projection upon it of his own desire to stay’. He sees Gunnarr’s character as largely admirable, but suggests that he suffers from a self-destructive recklessness:

Gunnarr has few faults, but one of them is an occasional hastiness of decision, an impulsive rashness which offsets his usual self-control. This impulsiveness plays a large part in two of his fateful decisions where, in effect, he hands himself over into the power of present or future foes. In the one, this impulsiveness is called forth by Hallgerðr; in the other by the beauty of the land itself.

Lars Lönnroth follows Allen in seeing a similarity between Gunnarr’s emotional reactions to Hallgerðr and to his land: ‘the attraction Gunnarr feels for the “pale cornfields” appears to be similar to his attraction for Hallgerðr’. However, he expresses more strongly than Allen the view that the author of Njáls saga wished to portray Gunnarr as morally flawed. The attraction Gunnarr feels for Hallgerðr immediately upon meeting her represents, according to Lönnroth, ‘his first moral fall. The second and more serious one occurs as he catches sight of the “pale cornfields”. The same fatal psychological mechanism is at work in both cases’. Gunnarr’s two falls are the result of seduction: he is first seduced by Hallgerðr, who ‘teases him into desiring her’, and later by ‘the beautiful slopes with their deceptive promise of continued prosperity and happiness.’

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438 For example, Vésteinn Vésteinsson in Gísla saga, ch. 12.
439 Fire and Iron, pp. 147-48.
441 A Critical Introduction, p. 156.
Unlike Allen, Lönnroth sees a Christian message in the effect on Gunnarr of the hillside at Hlíðarendi. He points to ‘a very close foreign analogue: Alexanders saga’, and suggests that the author’s ‘lyrical description of the beautiful slopes’ is a product of the author’s ‘clerical mind’. To such a mind:

The beautiful landscapes seen by Gunnarr and Alexander must have represented a dangerous worldly temptation, snares of the devil. Such an interpretation is clearly intended in Alexanders saga, and it also fits well in Njáls.

David Ashurst has shown, however, that although the landscape seen by Alexander ‘certainly does have a Christian significance’, it is ‘one which is as far removed as possible from that of a dangerous worldly temptation’. Rather than a temptation, the pale cornfields are ‘a Promised Land: by claiming them Alexander is laying hold of the promise of God, with whatever new responsibilities that might entail’. If there is a Christian message in the slopes at Hlíðarendi, it is certainly not the same as that of the landscape that Alexander gazes upon.

Heather O’Donoghue points out that the landscape at Hlíðarendi is man-made, a fact that must be taken into account when looking for any Christian message:

What Gunnarr sees is hard-won prosperity, a farm operating as it should, facing the coming autumn in good shape. Of course, there may be a metaphorical undertone, and for a Christian author and audience especially, the intimation of a coming harvest will seem full of meaning. But essentially, Gunnarr’s vision is of farmland, not natural scenery; a landscape transformed by human endeavour.

Certainly, it is precisely Gunnarr’s familiarity with the land at Hlíðarendi to which he responds: the specific aspects of the landscape that move him so strongly are the bleikir akrar ok slegin tún (‘pale cornfields and new-mown hay’) – the harvest, in other words, which he, as the farmer, has nurtured and created. O’Donoghue’s suggestion would therefore appear to be correct: if there is indeed a Christian message in Gunnarr’s vision of the slopes at Hlíðarendi, it will be found, not in the landscape itself, but in the metaphorical significance of this harvest.

This in turn would make it unlikely that the beauty of the landscape and that of Hallgerðr have parallel rhetorical effects in Njáls saga, both causing in Gunnarr the same

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443 A translation of Walter of Châtillon’s twelfth-century Latin poem Alexandreis.
447 Old Norse-Icelandic Literature, p. 60.
dangerous reaction, whether described as ‘impulsive rashness’ (Allen), or as a ‘moral fall’ (Lönnroth). The motivation for Gunnarr’s response upon seeing Hallgerðr for the first time is almost the opposite of that which causes his reaction to his vision of the harvest at Hlíðarendi. There, his response had been to a familiar landscape that he himself had produced. By contrast, his immediate rush to propose marriage to Hallgerðr merely shows how little he knows of her character and history, a point made by the author at the moment when Gunnarr asks Hóskuldr and Hrútr for their approval of the marriage (p. 87):

Hrútr segir Gunnari allt um skaplyndi Hallgerðar ófregit, ok þótti Gunnari þat fyrst òrít mart, er áfátt var, en þar kom um síðir, at saman fell kaupmáli þeira.

(Hrútr told Gunnarr, without being asked, everything about Hallgerðr’s character, and though it seemed to Gunnarr at first that there were many faults, it finally came about that they made an agreement.)

If Christian harvest-symbolism could indeed be shown to be present in the image of the white slopes of Hlíðarendi, this would raise the further issue of whether this image is part of a wider metaphorical discourse of fertility and growth. It will be seen at the outset that the narrative of *Njáls saga* is frequently set against the background of the agricultural cycle. Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði are shown sowing their cornfields (chapters 53 and 111); Njáll seeks to ensure the productivity of his farm through the use of manure (chapter 44); farmers take advantage of an early spring to sow their lands early (chapter 109). In all, *Njála* ‘mentions grain cultivation more often than any other saga’448.

The saga also makes mention of a period when the harvests failed, with actual famine as the result (p. 121):

Í þann tíma kom hallæri mikit, svá at menn skorti baði hey ok mat, ok gekk þat um allar sveitir. Gunnarr miðlaði morgum manní hey ok mat, ok hofðu allir þeir, er þangat kómu, meðan til var. Svá kom, at Gunnar skorti baði hey ok mat.

(This was a time of great famine in Iceland, and all over the country people were going short of hay and food. Gunnarr shared out his own stocks with many people, and turned no one away empty-handed while they lasted, until he himself ran short of both hay and food.)

Gunnarr travels to Kirkjubær, to the farm of Otkell Skarfsson, who has a surplus of both hay and food, and attempts to procure some of each, offering to pay for the goods. Otkell refuses either to sell or give his produce to him. It is this confrontation with Otkell that starts the chain of events that will lead to Gunnarr’s killing twice in the same family, and ultimately to his own death.

It could be argued, however, that it is not surprising that the saga should include the description of a period of shortage among its several references to the cultivation of grain, and that such a description simply adds to the narrative’s historical realism. During the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries there were repeated times of hardship, as is apparent from Sturlunga saga and Íslendinga saga: en þá var hallæri mikit (‘but there was then a great famine’: probably 1184 or 1185); þessi vetr var kallaðr Sauð-vetr, ok var felli-vetr mikill; þá dó hundrað nauta fyrir Snorra Sturlusyni í Svinga-skardí (‘this winter was called Sheep-winter, and caused a great loss of livestock; a hundred cattle belonging to Snorri Sturluson died in Svinaskardí’: 1226-27); þessi vetr var kallaðr harðr ok íllr, ok heldu menn illa víðast um sveitar (‘this winter was called hard and difficult, and over wide districts it was with difficulty that people preserved their livestock’: 1232-33)449.

Guðmundar saga makes reference to the precariousness of grain cultivation in thirteenth-century Iceland: korn vex í fám stöðum sunnanlands, ok eigi nema bygg (‘grain grows in a few places in the south of the country, and nothing but barley’450). Climatic conditions in Iceland during the Middle Ages were such that ‘grain from Icelandic farms never satisfied the demand of the home market, not even in areas where the greatest emphasis had been placed upon its cultivation’451. Much of the land, too, was difficult, so that ‘incessant labour was necessary to till the barren soil’452.

The harshness of landscape and climate meant that the threat of famine was a constant feature of Icelandic life during the period when the saga was written. Indeed, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson suspects that the author’s own experience of bad harvests prompted the reference to the hallæri mikit (‘great famine’):

Almost constantly throughout the ninth decade of the thirteenth century there were poor seasons and scarcity of food. At about this time Njála was written, and I am convinced that these conditions are reflected in the

449 Sturlunga saga I, pp. 127, 275, 315.
450 Prologus, ch. 2 (Biskupa sögur II, p. 5).
description of the bad season in the episode of the saga in which Gunnarr goes to Kirkjubær in an attempt to buy food and hay (chapter 47). But it would be useless to insist that this is so since it is impossible to prove it.\textsuperscript{453}

It is equally impossible to disprove it. In fact, though, it seems unlikely that the author’s personal experience was his primary motivation for including the episode, since aspects of his account of Gunnarr’s attempt to procure hay from Otkell Skarftsson are apparently borrowed from 
\textit{Hœnsa-Póris saga}, being based on the episode where Blund-Ketill attempts to borrow or buy hay from Hœnsa-Pórir.\textsuperscript{454} As in \textit{Njáls saga}, a good man is here involved in a confrontation over an unpleasant individual’s surplus hay in time of general hardship, a confrontation that leads to the former’s death. This apparent borrowing suggests that the author of \textit{Njáls saga} did have some rhetorical purpose in mind when he set the start of the feud between Gunnarr and Otkell at the moment when Gunnarr had run short of hay and provisions.

It is Otkell’s collision with Gunnarr, which the latter perceives as a deliberate attack, that provokes his fateful decision to take blood-revenge (pp. 134-35): \textit{Gunnarr mælti: “þá er vit finnumsk næst, skaltú sjá atgeirinn”} (Gunnarr said, ‘The next time we two meet you will see the halberd’). The activity in which Gunnarr had been occupied immediately prior to the moment of Otkell’s ‘attack’ had been the sowing of his cornfield, the process that brings into being the \textit{bleikir akrar ok slegin tún} of Hlíðarendi. Gunnarr’s decision to use weapons against Otkell marks what Njáll refers to (p. 139) as ‘the beginning of Gunnarr’s career of killings’ (\textit{upphaf vígaferla þína}). It sets in chain a number of causally linked events whose consequences are fully developed at the time of harvest, when Gunnarr is to leave Iceland for his three-year banishment. And it is when the harvest is ripe that his horse stumbles.

The stumbling horse is a traditional motif,\textsuperscript{455} a fact that no doubt influenced Allen’s suggestion that ‘Gunnarr is led by fate (the omen of the horse’s stumbling) … to turn back’. Lönnroth, however, rejects fate as the cause of Gunnarr’s fall, pointing out that this motif ‘has been given an entirely new twist’ in \textit{Njála}, so that ‘Gunnarr in no way regards his fall from the horse as an omen’; instead, Gunnarr is ‘a very

\textsuperscript{453} *Literary Masterpiece*, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{455} Springer, ‘The “âne stegreif” Motif’, pp. 175-76. Allen refers to this article where he writes of ‘the omen of the horse’s stumbling’, \textit{Fire and Iron}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{456} *A Critical Introduction*, p.152.
proud man who may … do something foolish’, a man whose ‘pride and his status are emphasised again in the description of his departure from Hlíðarendi’

A medieval reader would almost certainly have read pride into the image of the falling horse and horseman. The Scriptural verse Prov. xvi, 18: *contritionem praecedit superbia et ante ruinam exaltatur spiritus* (pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall) is the likely source for medieval depictions of the falling horse and rider, which are frequently found as a powerful image of the punishment of pride, occurring in manuscripts, and as a commonplace in church buildings, whether carved in stone or on misericords. The motif is so common that it may be assumed that educated Icelanders would be familiar with it.

Gunnarr’s vision of the slopes of Hlíðarendi is forced upon him precisely because he has already fallen. He therefore cannot be said to yield to pride at this point in the narrative; instead, the moment of his fall marks the start of his being forced to suffer the consequences of the decision that brought into being his ‘career of killings’, and led to his being sentenced to a period of exile. Long before the start of his feud with Otkell and his family, Gunnarr had been drawn into the dispute between his aunt, Unnr, and her former husband, Hrútr Herjólfs, and had forced Hrútr to pay back Unnr’s dowry. At the moment when Hrútr hands over the money (p. 67), his half-brother, Hóskuldr Dala-Kolsson, says to Gunnarr: “Njót þú sem þú hefir aflat” (‘May you enjoy it the same way you have earned it’).

At that moment, Hóskuldr had asked Hrútr whether Gunnarr would ever be repaid for his ójafnaðr (‘injustice’), and had been told: “hefnask mun honum víst, ok mun oss verða í því engi hefnd né frami” (‘It will be avenged against him, but the vengeance and the credit for it will not be ours’). Hóskuldr’s ójafnaðr literally means ‘imbalance’, and can be read in terms of the principles of the medieval law of justice (*aequitas*). His exchange with Gunnarr can be read in the same terms, in which case his own words become a bitterly ironic reference to that maxim of medieval justice, *dignus est (enim) operarius mercede sua* (‘for the labourer is worthy of his wages’, Luc. x. 7; 1 Tim. v, 18); while Gunnarr’s response is sincere and without irony: “Vel

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458 There are examples in stone at Chartres and Conques (Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, p. 199). It is a standard motif on misericords, occurring, for example, on both sets of related misericords in the cathedrals of Lincoln (ca. 1370) and Chester (ca. 1380-90): see Grössinger, ‘Misericords’, p. 123.
459 See 2.3 above.
munum vér njóta, því at sónn er fjárheimtan” (‘We’ll enjoy it well, because the claim is a just one’). Hrútr’s equally sincere reply is a warning: “Illu mun þér launat verða” (‘Bad things will be your only reward for this’).

On receiving the dowry from Hrútr, Gunnarr returns it to Unnr, who, with wealth restored, now becomes an attractive marriage prospect: fewer than thirty words after Gunnarr hands Unnr the money, Valgarðr inn gráí (‘the Grey’) is introduced into the narrative, and within one hundred and twenty words, he and Unnr are married and have a son (p. 70),

er Morðr hét, ok er sá lengi við þessa sögu. Pá er hann var fullkominn at aldri, var hann illa til frænda sinna ok einna verst til Gunnars

(who was named Morðr, and he will be in this saga for a long time. When he was fully grown he was bad to his kinsmen, and to Gunnarr worst of all.)

It may well be therefore, that when Gunnarr falls from his horse and is confronted by the vision of a harvest that he has produced, he is suffering the just consequences of a very long series of causally related actions and developments. If this is so, then the metaphorical significance of the harvest-filled slopes of Hlíðarendi is a conventional Christian one: it was the central principle of medieval justice\(^\text{460}\) that one should reap as one has sown, a principle based on Galat. vi, 7-8: nolite errare: Deus non invidetur; quae enim seminaverit homo haec et metet (make no mistake: God will not be deceived. For a man also reaps what he has sown.) Seen in these terms, a part, at least, of the rhetorical function of harvest in Njáls saga is that it symbolises an individual’s just reward. It is, however, only a part.

4.3 Metaphors of poor harvest

The decision to attack the Njálssons at home in Bergþórshváll is only taken after the failure of an attempt to bring about a legal settlement at the Alþingi. The legal

\(^{460}\) See also Stokes, Justice and Mercy, p. 236: ‘Quid pro quo, measure for measure, as you sow so shall you reap, the inviolable principle on which all law and justice rest’; see also ibid., p. 147: ‘that supreme rule upon which even the New Law depends … Qualia vis metere talia grana sere’ (sow such grain as you wish to reap).
process seems doomed to fail on a technicality\textsuperscript{461}, at which point Njáll intervenes. He describes the void law-case metaphorically as a plant (p. 309):

“Svá sýnisk mér sem þetta mál sé komit í ónýtt efni, ok er þat at líkendum, því at af illum rótum hefir upp runnit.”

(‘It appears to me that this case has reached an impasse, which is to be expected since it has sprung from evil roots.’)

In Njáll’s speech there is a concealed Scriptural reference. His comment shares phrasing and idea with a passage from Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta\textsuperscript{462}: var ok þess uon (‘in this it was likely’ - compare Njáll’s ‘er þat at líkendum’) at illr auoxstr mundi upp rena af illri rot (‘that evil fruit would spring from an evil root’ - compare Njáll’s ‘því at af illum rótum hefir upp runnit’). The metaphor is one of growth to harvest.

The continuation of this passage in Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar allows identification of the Scriptural source for the image\textsuperscript{463}: ill rot mvndi illan avoxt gefa ... þviat ilt tre ma eigi godan avoxt gefa helldr skal þat vera vpp hoggit ok j elld kastad (‘an evil root will give evil fruit … because an evil tree cannot yield good fruit; rather, it must be cut down and thrown into the fire’). The source of this statement is Matt. vii, 18-19 (from the Sermon on the Mount):

\begin{quote}
non potest arbor bona fructus malos facere neque arbor mala fructus bonos facere; omnis arbor quae non facit fructum bonum exciditur et in ignem mittitur
\end{quote}

A good tree cannot make evil fruit nor an evil tree make good fruit; every tree that does not yield good fruit will be cut down and sent into the fire.

Njáll’s metaphor of a plant growing from ‘evil’ roots develops that used by Flosi (p. 288) before the law-suit is brought to court:

“Þat hefir nú víst at høndum borit, at ek mynda gefa til mína eigu, at þetta hefði eigi fram komit; er ok illu korni sáit orðit, enda mun illt af gróa.”

(‘It’s true that I would give everything I own if this matter had never arisen. And evil grain has been sown, and therefore evil will grow.’)

Like Njáll’s metaphor, Flosi’s makes reference to the evil growth that comes from evil origins. However, unlike Njáll’s words, Flosi’s specifically mention the sowing of ‘evil’ grain. It is worth noting at this point that Flosi’s metaphor (er ok illu korni

\textsuperscript{461} The technicality is that Mórðr Valgarðsson, who began the proceedings against Höskuldr’s killers, himself took part in that killing (ch. 121).

\textsuperscript{462} Ch. 269 (Flat. I, p. 324).

\textsuperscript{463} See Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 156.
sáit orðit) poignantly contains echoes of the words that describe Hóskuldr’s literal act of sowing grain (ok sár niðr korninu), immediately before he is cut down by the Njálssons.

There is another Scriptural echo here, from the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matt. xiii, 24-30), a passage which, like the Scriptural source for Njáll’s metaphor, is concerned with judgement, and with punishment by fire. Flosi’s er ok illu korni sáit orðit is close in meaning to Vulgate (super)seminavit zizania (Matt. xiii, 25). Unfortunately, there is no surviving Norse translation of the complete parable, so it cannot be determined whether the immediate source for Flosi’s words is the Vulgate, or a Norse translation, although the one verse from this parable that does have an extant Norse translation might suggest a vernacular source:

Tunc dicam messoribus: collegite zizaniam et legate ea fasciculos ad conburendum (Ec mon mela viþ cornscvrþarmenn, at þeir samni illom grosom oc bindi saman i bundin oc casti i eld).

(‘Then I will say to the reapers: gather the tares and bind them in bundles for burning.’)

Vulgate zizaniam (‘tares’, Matt. xiii, 30) is here rendered by illom grosum (compare Flosi’s illu korni).

Njáll’s metaphor of the evil root producing an evil harvest appears simply to be part of a comment on the immediate future outcome of the law-case. But if his words are read against their Scriptural source (Matt. vii, 18-19), they become prophetic of the future tragedy. ‘Every tree that does not yield good fruit will be cut down and sent into the fire’. In other words, there must be a judgement, when justice will demand that an evil harvest must be gathered together in bundles, and there will be a burning.

It remains to identify this evil harvest and the seed from which it has sprung, and whether there is also a sowing and reaping of good. Since the harvest metaphor is a Christian one, the evil growth must result from an identifiably anti-Christian act, while the good seed and its harvest may be looked for in the saga’s account of the Conversion and its consequences.

4.4 Pangbrandr and the seed of God’s word

It was pointed out at 3.5 above that the author’s decision to depict St Michael as loading the scales of judgement in favour of mercy marked a radical departure from

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464 Kirby, Biblical Quotations I, p. 167.
orthodox tradition, in which the archangel disinterestedly weighs good and evil. In another radical step, the author closely links the conversion to Christianity with the Last Judgement: as Þangbrandr converts Síðu-Hallr he makes reference to the eschatological weighing of deeds performed in this life. To relate conversion and merciful judgement in this way, as parts of the same process, suggests that the author of *Njáls saga* had a salvation view of history: fallen man needs mercy, and for the baptised there is the hope of mercy.

The intimate association of conversion and judgement is Scriptural, and occurs notably in Christ’s exegesis of the parable of the sower (Matt. xiii, 18-23). The seed is ‘the word that tells of the Kingdom’ (*verbum regni* – v. 19), that can take root and grow in the hearts of those who ‘hear the word and understand it’ (v. 23). The resulting harvest will be weighed for its yield, whether ‘a hundredfold or, it may be, sixty-fold or thirty-fold’ (*qui vero in terra bona seminatus est, hic est qui audit verbum et intellegit, et fructum adfert, et facit aliud quidem centum, aliud autem sexaginta, porro aliud triginta*).

The Church, for example through its observance of Ember Days, reinforced the metaphorical connection, made in Christ’s exposition of this parable, between fertility of the land and spiritual growth in the human breast. The Norse Homily for Ember Days shows that the Church’s message, that a spiritual field (*ager Dei*) exists within each Christian, was familiar in Iceland: *acr guðs i hiortum varum er ver fœrum guði avoxt goðra verka* 

465 (God’s field in our hearts, where we bring to God the fruit of good works).

The early Church saw mission as sowing the seed of God’s word. The portrayal of missionaries as ‘sowers of words’ derives from the Scriptural description of the Apostle Paul: *dicebant quid vult seminiverbius hic dicere* (Acta Apost. xvii, 18: they said, ‘what does this sower of words wish to say?’). Bede comments on this verse:

> He is rightly called a sower of words … for the seed was the word of God, and he himself said, *If we have sown spiritual things for you* 

466 (cf. 1 Cor. ix, 11: *si nos vobis spiritualia seminavimus*).

In the Icelandic *Postola sögur*, sowing the seed of God’s word is a commonplace metaphor for the preaching of the Apostles and teachers of the faith.

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(kennimenn), one that can be considered to have been thoroughly familiar to the author of Njáls saga. Just how familiar it must have been, will be seen by comparing two parallel versions of words spoken to Peter by the convert, Faustinianus (my italics):

(i) Minn herra! Nu þickia mer guðs orð, þau sem þu hefir saað i briosti mer, vera buin með goðum vilia at gefa af ser goðan aavoxt. Vill ek nu fusiða skirn taka af þer\(^{467}\).

(My lord, it seems to me now that the words of God that you have sown in my breast are ready to yield good fruit with a good will. I now eagerly wish to receive baptism from you.)

(ii) Nu þykia mér goðs orð, þau er þu hever sagt i briost mér, vera buin til at gera góþan avøxt ... \(^{468}\).

(It seems to me now that the words of God that you have spoken in my breast are ready to produce good fruit ...)

Whereas the first version contains a full statement of the metaphor of ‘sowing the word’, the only harvest reference in the latter version comes at the words góþan avøxt. Since there is no reference to sowing, understanding of the text relies on the reader’s knowledge that the phrase goðs orð is to be interpreted as spiritual seed (verbum dei), and that briost mér is the metaphorical earth that receives that seed. This commonplace metaphorical connection between sowing and evangelising is the only possible explanation for the free adaptation, found in the Norwegian Homily Book\(^{469}\), of Christ’s definition of the seed in his exposition of the parable of the sower: verbum regni (the word of the kingdom). The homily reads: Corn þat er buanden sere ero orð guðs ok fyir-tolur kenni-manna (‘The seeds that the sower sowed are the words of God, and the persuadings of teachers of the faith’).

In chapter 103 of Njáls saga, the priest Þangbrandr is pessimistic about the outcome of his own attempts at persuading the Icelanders to adopt Christianity. Gestr Oddleifsson gives him a comforting reply (pp. 268-69)\(^{470}\):

‘Þú hefir þó mest at gort,’ segir Gestr, ‘þó at qðrum verði auðit í log at leiða. En þat er sem mælt er, at eigi fellr trú við it fyirsta hogg.’

(‘But still, you’ve done most of the work,’ said Gestr, ‘even though others

\(^{467}\) Petris saga Postola I, ch. 73 (Post., p. 67).
\(^{468}\) Clemens saga, ch. 5 (Post., p. 141).
\(^{469}\) The homily is given the simple title Euangeliun: GNH, pp. 69-70, at p. 70.
\(^{470}\) See also 3.9 above.
may be destined to make the faith law. As they say, a tree doesn’t fall at the first blow.’

Gestr appears to be quoting a proverb here\(^{471}\), which he introduces with *sem mælt er* (‘as is said’), and his comment may strike the modern reader as gnomic and impenetrable.

In his complaint to Gestr (p. 268), Þangbrandr describes his missionary work as having been *erfíðligast* (‘the hardest toil’) at the Alþingi. This word places him in a tradition of apostolic preachers, labouring for God:

> Ók blezaðr Jacobus gorir, sem guð byðr honum, aflandi guði nokurn aavøxt in Hyspaniis með sinni mæðu ok erfíði\(^{472}\).

(And the blessed James did as God commanded him, gathering some fruit for God in Spain, through his own exhaustion and toil.)

Seeing the Þangbrandr of *Njáls saga* within this evangelising tradition allows an explanation for one of the differences between the saga and the other sources for the conversion of Iceland. Snorri mentions in *Heimskringla* that Þangbrandr was provided with a trading ship for his journey to Iceland (*Var honum kaupskip fengit*\(^{473}\)), although both *Kristnisaga*\(^{474}\) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta*\(^{475}\) are reticent on this point, merely mentioning that Þangbrandr’s ship (*skip*) carried a cargo (*farmin*), for which Síðu-Hallr arranged safe storage. *Kristnisaga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar in mesta* are also in close agreement that when the missionary’s company first landed in Iceland, the locals would not speak with the Christians or direct them to a harbour: *(villdv þeir ekki við þa mæla landzmenninir ok eigi visa þeim til hafnar)*\(^{476}\).

In *Njáls saga*, however, the locals do not refuse to speak with Þangbrandr and his party (við þá mæla) - they are actually forbidden to trade with them (*eiga kaup við þá*):

> Brœðr tveir bjoggu á Berunesi; hét annarr Þorleifr, en annarr Ketill ... Þeir logðu til fund ok þonnuðu mænum at eiga kaup við þá. (p. 256)

(At Beruness lived two brothers, called Þorleifr and Ketill ... They summoned a district meeting and forbade anyone to trade with the newcomers.)

\(^{471}\) For Finnur Jónsson, ‘ein sprichwort’ (*Njáls saga*, p. 243).

\(^{472}\) Tveggia postola saga Jons ok Jacobs, ch. 21 (Post., p. 570).

\(^{473}\) *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 73 (Í.F. 26, p. 319).

\(^{474}\) Ch. 7 (*Hauksbók*, p. 133).

\(^{475}\) As in *Flat*. I, p. 422.

\(^{476}\) So *Kristnisaga* (*Hauksbók*, pp. 132-33); the account at *Flat*. I, p. 421 reads: *landzmenn ... villdu ... aegi mæla við þa ok ekki visa þeim til hafnar*.
The saga therefore portrays Þangbrandr as a trader as well as a missionary. When Hallr
hears of Þangbrandr’s difficulties, he rides to meet him, and greets him with the
following words (p. 257): “Ganga ekki mjök kaupin við menn?” (‘Is the trading going
badly with people?’)

The author’s apparent wish to depict Þangbrandr as a trader as well as a
missionary may not strike the modern reader as surprising. It is, after all, quite possible
that the narrative here simply transmits a historical tradition about the priest. Conditions
in Scandinavia around the year 1000 were such that missionaries might well have had to
concern themselves with the practicalities of trade, and in any case, Þangbrandr was an
emissary of King Óláfr Tryggvason, and was possibly therefore trading on the king’s
behalf.

On the other hand, exegetical tradition understood missionaries to be traders on behalf of
a greater king. For example, Origen,\textsuperscript{477} commenting on the parable of the indebted
servants (Matt. xviii, 23-35), writes:

The servants in this parable, are solely those who are employed as
dispensers of the word; to whom it was entrusted, that they might trade
with it.\textsuperscript{478}

And Gregory comments on Luc. x, 1-7 (the passage that contains Christ’s words at v. 2:
‘The harvest truly is great but the labourers are few; so ask the Lord of the harvest
therefore to send labourers to his harvest’):

Let us consider what interest we, who received a talent from God, and
were sent to trade (\textit{ad negotium}) with it, have brought him. Indeed, he
told us, \textit{Trade until I come} (\textit{Negotiamini dum venio} Luke xix, 13). He is
now coming, and he is seeking increase from our trading. What sort of
increase of souls have we shown him as a result of our trading (\textit{de nostra
negotiatione})? How many armfuls of souls (\textit{animarum manipulos}) will we
bring before him from the harvest of our preaching (\textit{Quot ejus conspectui
animarum manipulos de prædicationis nostræ segete illaturi sumus})?\textsuperscript{479}

Gregory states that at ‘that day of accounting’ (\textit{illum tantæ districctionis diem}) the
apostles will bring the fruits of their preaching:

Peter will appear with a converted Judea, which he drew after him; Paul
will appear leading a converted world, so to say; Andrew will lead a

\textsuperscript{477} \textit{In Matt., Tractate 7}, familiar from the \textit{Catena Aurea}.
\textsuperscript{478} Taul, \textit{Sunday Sermons} 4, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{479} \textit{Hom. in evang.} 19 (homily 17 in PL 76, cols. 1139 ff., at col. 1148); English translation from Hurst,
converted Achaia with him into the sight of its king, John Asia Minor, and Thomas a converted India. Þangbrandr’s pessimism concerning the outcome of his own missionary work may reflect a historical tradition that his mission had only limited success. According to Theodoricus, King Óláfr Tryygvason was dissatisfied with Þangbrandr’s work:

Theobrandus vero veniens ad regem increpatus est ab eo pro minus peracto negotio.

(In fact, when Theobrandus came to the king, he was rebuked by him for not having completed his work.)

At the same time, it will be noted that the word here used to describe Theobrandus’s missionary task, negotium (‘trading, business, work’), argues Theodoricus’s familiarity with the exegetical tradition concerning the need to use one’s talents in ‘trading’.

Christ’s injunction to the disciples that they should evangelise: Negotiaminae dum venio (‘trade until I come’, Luc. xix, 13), once more forges a close link between conversion and judgement: the missionary work is urgent, as Christ’s return is imminent, and judgement is at hand. The purpose for which the process of history exists, the creation and redemption of mankind, is approaching its consummation. Such is the urgency of his task that the missionary cannot waste time working in unproductive areas:

Andreas postoli segir þa: “Guð hefwir mik sendan higat til fundar við þik, broðir, fyrir þvi at hann vill annars staðar taka avoxt þinna kenninga” ... Þa for Matheus postoli brott þadan ok ut aa Blaland ok predikaði þar guðs eyrindi, ok færði hann þar þar guði mikinn avoxt sinna kenninga ok liet þar lif sitt fyrir guðs nafni.

(The Apostle Andrew then says: ‘God has sent me here to meet you, brother, because he wishes to take the fruit of your teaching in another place’ ... Then the Apostle Matthew went from there and out into Africa and preached there God’s mission. And there he brought for God much fruit from his teaching, and there he lost his life for God’s name.)

The biographer limits himself here to only the briefest remarks on Matthew’s African mission: by his preaching, the Apostle converts the people, bringing much avoxt to God and afterwards dies. The terseness reflects the truth that time is short, and the great day of accounting is at hand, when all missionaries, from the time of the apostles down to the present, will have to show God how they have used their talents. And Gregory is in no

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481 Andreas saga postola II, ch. 3 (Post., p. 357). There is another version at Post., p. 320.
doubt that that day will be terrible. He makes this clear in Homily xvii, in the lines that immediately precede those quoted above:

Let us imagine that day of accounting when the Judge will come and demand a reckoning from the servants to whom he entrusted his talents. We will see him in dreadful majesty, among choirs of angels and archangels. In that great examination the multitude of all the elect and the condemned will be led forth, and it will be revealed what each one has done. Peter will appear with a converted Judea (etc)

When the apostles and missionaries go before judgement, they will receive their reward, and will indeed ‘benefit as they have earned’. It is therefore little wonder that Njáls saga depicts the missionary-trader Þangbrandr as disconsolate (ch. 103) when he considers that his mission has not succeeded. The only words of theology that Þangbrandr utters in the saga are his remarks to Síðu-Hallr concerning the Archangel Michael, and the weighing of souls. At that dreadful time of accounting, his own accomplishments, like those of Hallr, will be weighed before God in the presence of the angels and archangels. Hallr will be judged by the weight of his deeds, and Þangbrandr, like all other missionaries, by the ‘armfuls of souls’ he can present to God.

Hóskuldr’s words to Gunnarr (p. 67), “Njót þú sem þú hefir aflat”, were translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson as: ‘May it serve you in the manner you have earned it’, and by Robert Cook as: ‘May you enjoy it the same way you have earned it’. It was suggested at 4.1 above that these words contain a conventional Christian message that is borne home to the reader at the moment when Gunnarr’s horse stumbles, and he catches sight of the ripe harvest on the slopes of Hlíðarendi, namely, that Gunnar will receive the appropriate payment for his past actions. Those, however, in the medieval audience of Njáls saga who were familiar with the Icelandic literature of evangelism, and who could therefore make the metaphorical link between, on the one hand, mission and conversion, and on the other, sowing and harvesting, would have been aware of the possibility of a further meaning in Hóskuldr’s remark. This results from play on the verb afla, which in that literature regularly occurs as a metaphor, meaning ‘gather (fruit)’ [vít. ‘bring about spiritual growth, make converts’]. Three examples from Tveggia postola saga Jons ok Jacobs will show how the metaphor works:
(i) Sva aflaði verkmaðr drottins mikinn aavóxt aa einum degi, at allr sa lýr, er þar var kominn, trúði rett á Jesum Kristum ok skirðiz i hans nafni.482

(The Lord’s labourer gathered so much fruit in one day that all the people who had come there believed truly in Jesus Christ and were baptized in his name.)

(ii) Þvi vitraðiz honum hinn helgi andi ok segir, at hann skal fara higat yfir hafit allt vestr í Hyspaniam at bera þar fram guðs orð ok orendi. Ok blezaðr Jacobus gorir, sem guð byðr honum, aflandi guði nockurn aavóxt in Hyspaniis.483

(Then the Holy Spirit appeared to him and said that he should journey from there west over the sea as far as Spain, to carry forward there God’s word and mission. And the blessed James did as God requested him, gathering fruit for God in Spain.)

(iii) Voru þeir baðir aagiætir menn i sinni stiorn ok valldi, aflandi mikinn aavóxt i vestrhalfunni með sinum kenningum ok kraptaverkum Jacobi.484

(They were both outstanding men in their rule and authority, gathering much fruit in the western districts through their teaching and James’s virtuous deeds).

When Hóskuldr’s words: “Njót þú sem þú hefir aflat” are read against the background of these familiar Christian texts, they cease to be just a warning directed specifically at Gunnarr. With the meaning of ‘benefit as you have gathered fruit’, they become a metaphor for the heavenly reward of the missionary, Þangbrandr.

They link, too, with Njáll’s comments about the legal case that follows the murder of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði. When Njáll describes the case as being “í ónýtt efni” (‘in a useless state’), he recognises that this is the logical outcome of its origins: “ok er þat at likendum, því at af illum rótum hefir upp runnit” (‘and that is to be expected since it sprang from evil roots’). It was noted at 4.3 above that Njáll’s words contain a reference to Matt. vii, 18-19, where the quality of a tree’s fruit is ascribed to the qualities of the tree. In the terms of the saga’s metaphor of harvest, this law-case will yield no good fruit, since: ill rot mvndi illan aavóxt gefa (an evil root will give evil fruit). There can therefore be no benefit in the outcome of the case, a point made in the adjective the author here puts into the mouth of Njáll: ó-nýtt, the stem of which is cognate with the verb njóta.

482 Post., p. 582.
483 Post., p. 570.
484 Post., p. 592.
4.5 Mórðr Valgarðsson

This metaphor of Njáll’s was linked in 4.3 above with that in Flosi’s speech when he hears of the death of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði (p. 288), because of the fact that both refer to the evil growth that springs from evil origins. It was suggested that Flosi’s words contain a reference to the parable of the tares among the wheat: *er ok illu korni sáit orðit, enda mun ilt af gróa* (‘and when evil seed has been sown, evil will grow’). These words gain further resonance, when Hóskuldr’s final moments are considered.

Hóskuldr is killed while he is sowing his cornfield, on a sunny morning of a fine spring, when the prospects look good for farmers; all are busy with the same task as him (pp. 279-80):

[ch. 109] Nú várar snemma um várit, ok færðu menn snemma niðr korn sín ... [ch. 110] Veðr var gott ok sól upp komin. [111] Í þenna tíma vaknaði Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði; hann fór í klæði sín ok tók yfir sík skikkjuna Flosanaut; hann tók kornkippu ok sverð í aðra hnd ok ferr til gerðis síns ok sár niðr korninu.

(Spring came early that year, and farmers sowed their corn early ... The weather was good and the sun had risen. That was the time that Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði woke up. He dressed himself and put on the cloak ‘Flosi’s gift’. He took a seed-basket in one hand and a sword in the other, went out to his cornfield, and started to sow the grain.)

The occasion when Mórðr is finally successful in inciting the Njálssons to murder Hóskuldr follows directly upon the statement that the fine spring weather has encouraged men to sow their corn early (p. 279, across the modern chapter division, though with no intervening text):

[ch. 109] Nú várar snemma um várit, ok færðu menn snemma niðr korn sín. [ch. 110] Þat var einn dag, at Mórðr kom til Bergþórshváls. Þeir gengu þegar á tal, Njálssynir ok Kári. Mórðr rœ gir Hóskuld at vanða ok hefir þá enn margar nýjar sogur ok eggjar einart Skarpheðinn ok þá at drepa Hóskuld ...

(Spring came early that year, and farmers sowed their corn early. It happened one day that Mórðr came to Bergþórshváll. He and the Njálssons and Kári went apart to talk. Mórðr slandered Hóskuldr as usual and added many new tales and kept provoking Skarpheðinn and the others to kill Hóskuldr)

The ordering of human activity in the direct lead-up to the killing of Hóskuldr is therefore as follows: men sow their corn, Mórðr urges the Njálssons to kill Hóskuldr, Hóskuldr sows his corn. A medieval reader who was used to the juxtaposition of the
literal and the symbolic would have recognised the significance of the fact that, while other men were busy sowing grain, Möðr was preoccupied with stirring up strife between a man and his foster-brothers.

Möðr achieves his goal when he causes a split between, on the one hand, the Njálssons and their brother-in-law, Kári Solmundarson, and on the other, their foster-brother, Höskuldr Hvítanessgödi. It was a medieval commonplace to use the metaphor of ‘the sower of discord’ for one who uses words to stir up strife among brothers, planting slander like seeds in the breasts of those who listen\textsuperscript{485}. The source for the metaphor is Scriptural (Prov. vi, 16-19):

Sex sunt quæ odit Dominus, et septimum detestatur anima ejus ... proferentem mendacia testem fallacem, et eum qui seminat inter fratres discordias.

(These six things doth the Lord hate; yea, seven are an abomination unto him ... A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren).

Sowers of discord were examples of the particularly evil. So, for example, Ælfric’s vision of Furseus (St. Fursey) has the saint’s soul taken by angels to see four ‘immense fires that will destroy the world and the souls of those who have not been true to the promises of baptism and confession’. The third fire will burn the souls ‘of those who stirred up strife and discord’\textsuperscript{486}.

In his \textit{Cura Pastoralis}, one of the standard works of reference throughout the Middle Ages, Gregory the Great linked the image of the sower of discord with the parable of the tares among the wheat:

Sowers of strifes are to be admonished to perceive whose followers they are. For of the apostate angel it is written, when tares had been sown among the good crop, \textit{An enemy hath done this} (Matt. xiii, 28) ... Whosoever, then, by sowing of strifes destroys the loving-kindness of neighbours, serves God’s enemy as his familiar friend\textsuperscript{487}.

William Miller has suggested that Möðr’s slanders are incidental to the slaying of Höskuldr, who is killed (as his father had been):

when and because they have emerged as leaders of a group competing with the Njálssons for power in the district\textsuperscript{488}.

\textsuperscript{485} Robert Cook comments that ‘Dante might have placed Möðr among the sowers of discord in Canto 28’ (‘Mörður Valgarðsson’, p. 76).
\textsuperscript{486} \textit{þæra. þe ceaste and twyreðnysse styredon} (Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, p. 193).
\textsuperscript{487} Gregory, \textit{Pastoral Rule}, ch. 23 (\textit{Admonition} 24): NPNF, 2nd Series vol. 12, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{488} ‘The Central Feud’, p. 318.
Robert Cook accepts the ‘sociological’ truth of this claim:

but it must not be allowed to explain everything. *Njáls saga*, like all the Sagas of Icelanders, is first of all a literary structure, not a sociological document. Certainly the experience of most readers of the saga is that Móðr viciously spreads slander which moves the Njálssons to commit their heinous crime, and the author clearly intended to leave this impression … Móðr sees to it that the Njálssons perpetuate the old feud, and to this extent he plays an important role in the events of the saga.\(^{489}\)

The view of Móðr’s actions given in the present chapter supports the case put forward by Cook. The slandering of Höskuldr may be read metaphorically as the sowing of the tares of discord in the breasts of the Njálssons, and the murder of Höskuldr as the first evil outcome of that sowing. If this reading is correct, one might expect the author of *Njáls saga* to indicate in some way that the spiritual result of Móðr’s metaphorical sowing is alienation from God, particularly as regards Skarpheðinn, since it is he who takes the lead in the killing of Höskuldr. And if the author of *Njáls saga* did indeed have salvation history in mind as he worked, as his own version of the image of St Michael’s scales suggests, one might further expect to find in due course an unambiguous sign that divine grace has been proffered to Skarpheðinn.

4.6 Weeds at Bergþórshváll.

The immediate cause of the fire at Bergþórshváll is a pile of weeds (*arfását*), which is used by the Burners as kindling to start the blaze. This pile is first mentioned in ch. 124 (p. 320):

Kerling var sú ein at Bergþórshváli, er Sæunn hét; hon var fróð at morgu ok framsýn ... Þat var einn dag, at hon þreif lurk í hón sér ok gekk upp um hús at arfasátu einni. Hon laust arfasátuna ok bað hana aldri þrifask, svá veslug sem hon var ... Kerling mælti: “Þessi arfasáta mun tekin ok kveyrtr við eldr, þá er Njáll er inni brendr ok Bergþóra, fóstra mín, - ok berið þér hana á vatn,” segir hon, “eða brennið hana sem skjótast.”

(There was an old woman at Bergþórshváll called Sæunn. She was wise in many ways and could foretell the future … One day she grabbed a stick and went around the house to a pile of chickweed. She hit the pile and cursed it for being so contemptible … The old woman spoke: ‘This chickweed will be taken and set afire when Njáll is burned in his house, along with my foster-daughter Bergþóra - put it in water,’ she said, ‘or burn it, as fast as you can.’)

\(^{489}\) ‘Mörður Valgarðsson’, pp. 70-71.
Sæunn’s behaviour may well seem as bizarre to the modern reader as it apparently did to the Njálssons. She acts here as if the weeds were sensate, able to hear the curse and feel the blows, while her hope that a pile of dried weeds will not thrive is unnecessary, to say the least. On the other hand, the author clearly intends her words and actions to be read as ominous: (‘she was wise in many ways and could foretell the future ... much of it came true’).

The plot demands that there should be dry kindling readily available for the Burners, but to those who have read accounts of burnings in other sagas, it may seem odd that a pile of weeds (arfasáta) should be already separated out, dried, and available for use to start the fire at Bergþórhváll. In reality, good kindling in sufficient quantities was probably unlikely to be easily available at the site of an intended burning, as is shown in the account of the burning of a house by Guðmundr dýri in 1197:

Dat þöttsusk þeir Guðmundr sjá, at húsin mundi seint sækjask, ef eldr væri eigi at borinn. Þá vóru margir menn inni vel vápnaðir. En eldr fésk einginn heima þar. Þá föru þeir á þann be er á Grund heitir, ok náðisk þar á óðrum be en eigi á óðrum. En sumir brutu húís, fjós ok hlöðu, ok náðu heyvi ok viði ok báru at húsum heyin. Ok er eldr kóm, gátu þeir eigi kveykt fyrir durunum. Þá gengu þeir á húsin upp, Þóðr Laufæsingr ok þeir menn er með hónum vóru, ok rufu þakit af húsunum ok görðu eldana á ráfrinu. En þurr var viðrinn undir.490

(Guðmundr and his men thought they saw that it would be difficult to attack the house, unless fire were brought to it; there were then many well-armed men inside. But there was no fire to be obtained at home there. Then they went to the farm called Grund, and there on that farm was obtained what was not on the other. And some broke into the house, the cowshed and the barn, and got hold of hay and wood, and carried the hay to the house. But when they brought fire, they could not get it going before the doors. Then Þóðr Laufæsingr and the men who were with him climbed up onto the house and tore the thatch off it, and set fires on the roof. And the wood beneath was dry.)

The following example is taken from a very different literary genre, the life of an Apostle. In this case heathens, who are intent on burning a young man to death because he has been converted by the saint, have to use miscellaneous combustibles - anything they can find that is convenient for the purpose:

Sídan baru þeir elld at husinu ok logðu i næfrar ok spónu ok aðrar elldkveykiur, þær sem elldnæmaztar vóru, ok toku at brenna husit.491

491 Andreas saga postola II, ch. 11 (Post., p. 365).
(Then they set fire to the house and laid on it pieces of birch-bark, wood-chips and other kindling, those things which were most inflammable, and the house began to burn).

The author of *Njáls saga* seems, then, to intend the reader to speculate as to how it comes about that someone at Bergþórshváll had collected the weeds into a separate pile and left them there to dry out, presumably for burning at some time in the future. And the reader may speculate in the first place just why it is that the land at Bergþórshváll should have produced such a quantity of weeds.

Njáll is first introduced into the narrative in chapter 20, as a very wealthy man who owns two farms (pp. 56-57):

*Njáll bjó at Bergþórshváli í Landeyjum; annat bútti hann í Þórólfsfelli. Hann var vel auðigr at fé ok vænn at áliti, en sá hlutr var á ráði hans, at honum óx eigi skegg.*

*(Njáll lived at Bergþórshváll in the Landeyjar. He had a second farm at Þórólfsfell. He was well off for property and handsome to look at, but there was one thing about him: no beard grew on him)*

Crops certainly do grow for him, however, and the author explains the reason for his land’s fertility. Hallgerðr, who is seeking information about Njáll and his family, questions some beggarwomen who have just been at Bergþórshváll (pp. 112-13):


*(‘What were Njáll’s servants doing?’ said Hallgerðr. ‘We don’t know what all of them were doing,’ they said, ‘but one was carting dung to the hillocks.’ ‘What’s the point of that?’ said Hallgerðr. ‘He said that manuring would make the hay there better than anywhere else,’ they said.)*

Despite Hallgerðr’s evident ignorance of the usefulness of manuring the fields, Njáll most certainly was not a pioneer of this practice.492

*from the early years of settlement all available manure must have been used as fertilizer. Otherwise heaps of manure from the ancient period would have been discovered.*493

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492 According to *Rígsþula*, it was regarded as a slave’s job. See Foote and Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, p. 76.

493 Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*, p. 293. See also p. 294: Fields could also be enlarged by keeping
The reference is therefore an anachronism, perhaps deliberately introduced into the narrative to show Njáll to be a good farmer. It is not important, however, whether the thirteenth-century audience believed that Njáll was in fact the first Icelander to have spread manure on the land; it is enough simply to recognise that they were themselves completely familiar with the practice.

Hallgerðr will soon be given evidence of the fertility of the land at Bergþórshváll; during a period of terrible famine (ch. 47), when Gunnarr shares his hay and provisions with many others, before running short himself, Njáll is able to give him fifteen horse-loads of hay and five of food. The next time the saga makes reference to what the land at Bergþórshváll produces, it is to the pile of weeds that will be used as kindling.

The word used for the weeds is a compound of arfi, usually translated ‘chickweed’ (stellaria media) and sáta, ‘hay-rick’⁴⁹⁴, and would appear to be an ironic contradiction in terms: ‘a load / hay-rick - but of weeds (and therefore useless)’. George Dasent seems to have been disturbed by the apparent pointlessness of keeping a pile of chickweed on a farm, since he translates arfasátta as ‘a stack of vetches’⁴⁹⁵, making the pile into an economically useful resource. Vetches, leguminous plants, were regularly used for animal feed and, because they fix nitrogen in the earth, for improving the soil’s fertility. Occasionally, too, in time of scarcity, they were used as food for humans⁴⁹⁶. This translation, although it offers an apparently logical explanation for the existence of this pile, is unlikely to reflect the author’s intentions, since nowhere else in Norse does arfi refer to any useful plant.

The translation of Sæunn’s curse that was quoted above is idiomatic, but not literal: (Hon laust arfasátuna ok bað hana aldri þrifask, svá veslug sem hon var, translated by: ‘She hit the pile and cursed it for being so contemptible’). The sentence may be translated more literally as: ‘she hit the weed-pile and cursed that it might never thrive, so wretched as it was’. When the wording of the curse is read with its literal meaning, the verb þrifask, used here of withered weeds, might seem to continue the

⁴⁹⁴ Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. sáta: ‘a truss of hay, a small hay-rick’, two of which constituted a load for a horse.
⁴⁹⁵ The Story of Burnt Njal, p. 230; Dasent translates arfasáta as ‘vetch-stack’ on p. 236.
⁴⁹⁶ Wilson, Food and Drink in Britain, p. 183.
harvest metaphor. But the wording is conventional, and other examples of it should therefore be looked at, before any conclusions can be drawn as to its meaning in this context.

This is not the only occurrence of the phrase in *Njáls saga*. The same curse is used against Hallgerðr’s foster-father, Þjóstólfr, immediately after the killing of her first husband, Þorvaldr (ch. 12). The murder takes place on an island; Þjóstólfr afterwards escapes being captured by Þorvaldr’s men by smashing a hole in their boat, so they cannot pursue him to the mainland (p. 35): *Þjóstólfr reri inn á fjördinn, en þeir báðu hann illa fara ok aldri þrífask* (Þjóstólfr rowed away up the fjord, and they cursed that he might have an evil journey and never thrive)⁴⁹⁷. Þjóstólfr, directed by Hallgerðr, does indeed have an evil journey, fleeing to safety under the protection of Svanr and his witchcraft.

In *Vatnsdœla saga*, ch. 26, the same curse is used against one Hrolleifr, at the moment when he is killed: *Hjó hann þá af honum hófuðit ok bað hann aldri þrífask*⁴⁹⁸ (he then struck his head off, and cursed him never to thrive). Once again, the cursed man is associated with anti-Christian powers, in this case, heathendom and devilry. Hrolleifr is earlier described as *manndjúfull; heljarmaðr; fjándinn*⁴⁹⁹ (a human devil; a man of death / Hell; the fiend); he is in fact captured when on his way to a sacrifice.

It may be, then, that when Sæunn curses the pile of weeds never to thrive, the weeds are to be seen as in some sense representative of an anti-Christian, demonic presence at Bergþórshváll. Sæunn also curses the *arfasáttr* for being *veslug*, a word which may be translated into English as ‘poor, wretched, sorrowfull, deprived of’⁵⁰⁰. The word is used in hagiographic writings to describe the spiritual state of those who cut themselves off from God. In the saga of John and James, the word is used to describe a man who refuses to honour the Feast of St James, and who pays the penalty for his transgression: *en sa veslugi maðr do þegar i stað af þessari pinu fyrir þetta lögbrot ok guðs reiði, er hann hafði i fallit*⁵⁰¹ (but that wretched man died immediately on the spot of this torment, because of that breach of the law and because of God’s anger, which he had incurred).

Finnur Jónsson’s edition of *Njáls saga* (p. 292) has the semantically very close

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⁴⁹⁷ Cook’s translation (‘they cursed him and wished him ill’) again indicates the conventional, formulaic wording.
⁴⁹⁸ ÍF 8, p. 70.
⁴⁹⁹ All at ÍF 8, p. 59.
⁵⁰⁰ See Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v. veslugr.
⁵⁰¹ Tveggia postola saga Jons ok Jacobs, ch. 116 (Post., p. 702).
vesol, rather than veslug, in Sæunn’s curse; in hagiographic literature, this word carries the same connotations as the other of alienation from God. So in Antonius saga, it is used of a pirate who mocks the power of God, despite being given the following warning in a letter: “Ek saa reiði gvðs yfyr þik komandi” (‘I saw God’s anger coming upon you’). The saga continues: Þessi enn vesli hervikingr las yfyr brefvit ok tok með haði ok hlatri ord heilags foðvr (this wretched pirate read over the letter, and received with scorn and laughter the words of the holy father).\(^{502}\)

And Plautilla, the woman whose gives her kerchief to bind the eyes of the Apostle Paul when he is beheaded, accuses the heathen soldiers of being vesalir in their stubborn refusal to recognise the power of God, even when they are given signs:

Hun svaraði þeim: “Ier vesalir vilit eigi trua, þott ier siait augum yðrum, a guðs takn oc iarteinir hans vina”\(^{503}\).

(“She answered them: ‘You wretched people will not believe in God’s signs and the miracles of his friends, even though you see them with your own eyes.’”)

Sæunn’s curse of the weed-pile, when read literally, and against the background of vernacular religious literature, denounces the pile as somehow estranged from God. She beats the pile as though it were itself morally culpable. It clearly is not, although since the Njálssons and Kári share the responsibility for the killing of Hóskuldur, the arfasátr may represent their collective guilt, symbolising the sterile growth of evil in their breasts, from the metaphorical sowing of Mórðr’s slanders. Useless growth, barren and uncontrolled, occurs elsewhere in Njál’s saga as a direct result of the operation of evil words: another curse, in this case Gunnhildr’s curse on Hrútr, makes of his flesh a swollen mockery of male fertility.

A pile of weeds, symbolising alienation from God and separated out ready for burning, is a reminder of the fate at harvest-time of the tares in the parable. Christ says that at the time of judgement, the reapers will be commanded: *colligite primum zizania et alligate ea fasciculos ad conburendum* (collect the tares first, and bind them in bundles for burning). The word arfasáta (‘rick / pile / load of weeds’) is semantically close to these Scriptural bundles of weeds. Augustine creates a somewhat similar term, when writing of the final judgement: *certe in finem destructet, quando illud ventilabrum venerit, et acervus paleae a massa separatus fuerit* (he will

\(^{502}\) *HMS* 1, p.114.

\(^{503}\) Tveggia postola saga Petrs ok Pals (Post., p. 314).
certainly destroy at the end, when that fan shall have come, and *the heap of chaff shall have been separated from the mass*)\(^{504}\).

Reading the weeds at Bergþórhváll as a metaphor – the scant harvest that results from the sowing of evil slander - reveals further levels of irony and structural parallel in the narrative. Njáll is a successful farmer who has been able to give his spare produce to Gunnarr during a period of famine; now, the catalyst that will bring about his death is the weeds collected from his manured hillocks. Ironically, in view of his having been the recipient of Njáll’s charity during the famine, Gunnarr’s own death results from his response to seeing the rich harvest on his own hillside at Hlíðarendi.

And when Njáll utters his famous prophecy (p. 172): “*með logum skal land várt byggja, en með ólogum eyða*” (‘with laws shall our land be built up but with lawlessness laid waste’), the reader naturally assumes from the context that *land várt* refers to Iceland, and the fact that Njáll is here quoting a formula from the law-codes supports that assumption. But the word *land* may refer to an estate, as well as a country\(^ {505}\), so that *land várt* may be translated as ‘our estate’ – that is to say, the farm at Bergþórhváll. Viewed retrospectively, when the weeds at Bergþórhváll are read as metaphor, Njáll’s words take on a second, unconsciously ironic meaning.

4.7 Flosi Þórðarson

Flosi Þórðarson is the paternal uncle of Hildigunnr Starkaðardóttir, wife to Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði. When Hóskuldr is murdered by the Njálssons and Kári, it falls to Flosi, as the closest powerful male relative, to prosecute the case against the killers. On his way to the Alþingi, to do so, he breaks his journey to eat a meal at Ossabœr, Hildigunnr’s home. The author of *Njáls saga* makes of their meeting one of the great scenes of Icelandic saga literature (pp. 289-90). It opens with Hildigunnr making extravagant preparations to honour Flosi, which the latter interprets as an insult:

[ch. 115] Flosi reið þaðan í Ossabœ.

\(^{504}\) *En. in Ps. li*: PL 36, col. 607.

\(^{505}\) Cleasby-Vigfússon, *s. v. land*. 
Flosi gekk inn í stofuna ok settisk niðr ok kastaði í pallinn hásætinu undan sér ok mælti: “Hvárki em ek konungr né jarl, ok þarf ekki at gera hásæti undir mér, ok þarf ekki at spotta mik.”

(Flosi rode from there to Ossabær. Hildigunnr was outside and said, ‘All my men are to be outside when Flosi rides up to the farm, and the women are to clean the house and put up the hangings and make the high seat ready for Flosi.’)

Soon Flosi rode into the hayfield. Hildigunnr came to meet him and spoke: ‘Greetings and salutations, kinsman – my heart rejoices at your coming.’ Flosi said, ‘We shall eat our morning meal here and then ride on.’ Then their horses were tethered. Flosi went into the main room and sat down and pushed aside the cushioned high seat and spoke: ‘I’m neither a king nor an earl, and there’s no need to fix up the high seat for me, and no need to make fun of me.’)

Flosi is undecided whether her motives are good or evil. In reply to her protestation that her honouring him was sincerely intended (“þetta gerðum vér af heilum hug”), he replies:

“Ef þú hefir heilan hug við mik, þá mun sjálft leyfa sík, ef vel er; mun ok sjálft lasta sík, ef illa er.”

(‘If you are being sincere with me, and your motives are good, they will praise themselves, but they will condemn themselves if they are evil.’)

The ambiguity continues, as Flosi prepares to eat. This time, he is treated dishonourably:

Síðan váru borð tekin, en Flosi tók laugar ok lið hans. Flosi hugði at handklæðinu, ok var þat raufar einar ok numit til annars endans; hann kastaði í bekkinn ok vildi eigi þerra sér á ok reist af borðdúkinum ok þerrði sér þar á ok kastaði til manna sinna.

(Then the tables were brought out and Flosi and his men washed their hands. Flosi took a good look at the towel: it was all in tatters and torn off at one end. He threw it on the bench and refused to dry his hands on it, but tore a piece off the table-cloth and dried his hands on it and threw it to his men.)

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson comments:

From the Christian point of view, to be sure, Hildigunnr’s desire for revenge is blameworthy; but it is fully in accord with the pagan concept of honour and thus a fitting theme for heroic poetry and prose of all times. Within this frame of reference it does not offend our aesthetic sensibilities.506

He had earlier stated that:

506 Literary Masterpiece, p. 113.
It must be borne in mind that the author himself embraces the concept of honour which gives rise to her taunting words, as do almost all the characters in his story. Thus there is no cause for censuring Hildigunnr on this score\(^{507}\).

The author had a negative view of the ‘desire for revenge’, however, as was demonstrated at 3.11 above, with reference to the case of the blind Ámundi Hóskulđsson. In the episode now under discussion, Hildigunnr presents Flosi with balanced alternatives, the high seat and the torn towel, and he must choose between them\(^{508}\): depending on what choice he makes, he will be in Hildigunnr’s eyes either a man of honour (fit to occupy the high seat), or an object of contempt (the torn towel\(^{509}\)).

His comment that his social rank does not entitle him to occupy the high seat reverses the situation where Hallgerðr objects that the seat she is given at a feast is of too low a status (p. 91: another scene where a woman becomes bent on revenge).

\[
\text{(Hildigunnr then went out and opened up her chest. She took from it the cloak which Flosi had given Hóskuldr and in which Hóskuldr was slain, and which she had kept there with all its blood. She went back into the main room with the cloak. She walked silently up to Flosi. Flosi had finished eating and the table had been cleared. Hildigunnr placed the cloak on Flosi’s shoulders; the dried blood poured down all over him. Then she spoke: ‘This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Hóskuldr, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all good men I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying – or else be an object of contempt to all men.’)}
\]

\(^{507}\) Literary Masterpiece, p. 108.

\(^{508}\) For another view, see Clover, ‘Hildigunnr’s Lament’, pp. 37-40, and p. 52, n. 86.

\(^{509}\) Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Literary Masterpiece, p. 37, draws attention to a similar situation, where a torn tablecloth is spread before the guest in the seat of honour, in this case Bishop Guðmundr Arason. The torn tablecloth is interpreted as an insult. The host, Kolbeinn Tumasson, apologises, and the bishop smiles as he Replies, ‘and with his smile he concealed his great displeasure’.
Flosi flung off the cloak and threw it into her arms and said, ‘You are the worst monster and want us to take the course which will be worst for us all. Cold are the counsels of women.’

The balanced choices Hildigunnr gives Flosi (high seat or torn towel - to take vengeance or be an object of contempt) mark her out as an adherent of the old materialist code of honour, seeing justice in terms of equity (balanced scales)\textsuperscript{510}. The author’s use of a traditional ‘heroic’ motif, the ‘goading woman’, accompanies the return to the old law, with its ethic of revenge, a return marked by Hildigunnr’s blasphemously referring to God and Christ\textsuperscript{511}. Hildigunnr’s case is at this moment like that of the blind Ámundi Hóskuldsø: a Christian blasphemously uses God’s name to justify a revenge killing.

Flosi’s closing comment, ‘cold are the counsels of women’, is a set phrase. It also occurs in \textit{Gísla saga Súrssonar}, where it is uttered in reaction to words spoken by Þordís, Gísli’s sister, at the moment when she discovers that it must have been Gísli who murdered her husband, Þórrímr:

\begin{quote}
þau eru nú ok komin at hauginum Þórgríms, er þau rœða þetta. Þá stinger hon við fótum ok kvezk eigi fara lengra; segir hon nú ok, hvat Gísli hafði kveðt, þa er hann leit hauginn Þórgríms, ok kveðr fyrir honum vísluna. “Ok ætla ek,” segir hon, “at þú þurfir eigi annan veg epír at leita um víg Þórgríms, ok mun rétt búin málin honum á hendr.” Borkr verðr við þetta ákafliga reiðr ok mælti: “Nú vil ek þegar aprt snúa ok drepa Gísla. En þó veit ek eigi,” sagði hann, “hvat satt er í þessu, er Þórdís segir, ok þykki mér hitt eigi öllkara, at engu gegni, ok eru opt kold kvenna ræð.”
\end{quote}

(They had arrived at Þórrímr’s burial mound while they spoke. Suddenly, Þórdís stopped and said she would venture no farther. Then she recited the verse that Gísli had composed when he looked at Þórrímr’s burial place. ‘And I suspect,’ she said, ‘that you need not look elsewhere concerning Þórrímr’s slaying. He will rightly be brought to justice.’ Borkr became enraged at this, and said, ‘I want to turn back right now and kill Gísli. On the other hand, I can’t be sure,’ he said, ‘how much truth there is in what Þórdís says. It’s just as likely that there’s none. Women’s counsels are often cold.’)

Sarah Anderson comments that:

\textsuperscript{510}See 2.3 above.
\textsuperscript{511}This seems not to be her only blasphemy. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson has identified Hildigunnr’s greeting words to Flosi, \textit{er nu fegit hjarta mitt tilkvama þinni}, as based on Vulgate or hagiographic: \textit{laetatum est cor meum in adventu tuo}. Lönnroth suggests that: ‘to an Icelandic audience this must have sounded almost blasphemic’ (\textit{A Critical Introduction}, p. 114).
\textsuperscript{512}\textit{Gísla saga}, ch. 19.
Flosi’s and Börkr’s estimates of women’s counsels are proverbial in character: their speeches recur to received wisdom … At stake here is not women’s nature, but rather … their ráð – their advice, their readings.513

It should be noted, though, that Þórdís makes no explicit demand for revenge, nor does she challenge Börkr to act against Gísli. Instead, her concern is for justice. It is Börkr’s own ‘reading’ of her words that both inflames his anger, so that he wishes to kill Gísli there and then, and causes his comment that ‘women’s counsels are often cold’.

In Laxdœla saga, the phrase köld ráð (cold counsels) is used in a comment on the advice given by a man:

Dá mælti Þorgils ok roðnaði mjök: “Gørla skil ek, hvaðan alda sjá reinn undir; hafa mér þaðan jafnán köld ráð komit; veit ek, at þetta eru ráð Snorra goða.” Sprettr Þorgils upp þegar af þessu tali ok var inn reiðasti.514

(Þorgils flushed very red and said, ‘I know all too well where this comes from, for I have always felt the brunt of cold counsels from that quarter: I know that this is the advice of Snorri goði.’
He jumped to his feet in a towering rage and broke off the conversation.)

As in Gísla saga, the speaker of the ‘cold counsel’ is a woman (Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir), and the man she is addressing works out the truth behind what she says – in this case, that the ‘cold counsel’ comes from Snorri goði. And the effect on the man who ‘reads’ the counsel is the same here as in Gísla saga: rage, and a desire for immediate action.

A particularly interesting example of the formula is found in the Icelandic homily on the Nativity of St John the Baptist, where it occurs as an authorial comment, addressed directly to the reader, rather than in the speech of any character. The immediate narrative context is that Salome, daughter of Herodias, has danced before Herod and his court, and Herod has promised to grant her whatever she wishes, even if that should be half his kingdom.


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513 Cold Counsel, p. xii. Robert Cook, trans. p. 330, notes that Chaucer’s Nun’s Priest uses the expression ‘Wommenes counsels been ful ofte colde’, indicating ‘that it may have been a common proverb’.
514 ÍF 5, p. 195 (ch. 65).
515 Nativitas sancti Johannis baptiste (H.B.I., p. 13).
Then the girl runs to her mother, and seeks her advice (rāð) about what she should ask for. But from there came the worst counsel (órāð). ‘You must ask,’ she said, ‘for John the Baptist’s head to be brought to you on a dish.’ The girl chooses the course that her mother had laid before her. It happened there, as very often seems to take place, that cold are women’s counsels (rāð). John’s life was taken for this reason.

The standard view concerning Herod’s dealings with Salome and her mother was that Herod was trapped by his own oath. Despite the fact that he does not want to kill John, whom he knows to be innocent, Herod has him beheaded in order to protect the integrity of his word. This was regarded as an act of spurious justice which will itself be justly judged by God. Bede comments that John:

underwent persecution for justice’s sake at the hands of a king and queen … at the hands of Herod and Herodias … By God’s strict judgement it happened to him [Herod] that, as a result of his craving for the adulteress whom he knew he ought to reject, he caused the shedding of the blood of the prophet, who he knew was pleasing to God … This is the judgement to which Herod fell victim, so that he found he had either to break his oath or, to avoid breaking his oath, to commit another shameful act.516

Flosi reacts to Hildigunnr’s urging as follows (pp. 291-92):

Flosi kastaði af sér skikkjunni ok rak í fang henni ok mælti: “Þú ert it mesta forað ok vildir, at vért tækim þat upp, er öllum oss gegnir verst, ok eru kold kvenna råð.” Flosi brá svá við, at hann var í andliti stundum rauð sem blóð, en stundum fjölb sem gras, en stundum blár sem hel.

(Flosi flung off the cloak and threw it into her arms and said, ‘You are the worst monster and want us to take the course which will be worst for us all. Cold are the counsels of women.’
Flosi was so stirred that his face was, in turn, as red as blood, as pale as grass, and as black as death.)

Similes are rare in the sagas of Icelanders, and for three similes to occur together is unique within the genre. Robert Cook has suggested that the three changes of colour are a device used by the author to give ‘powerful emphasis to Flosi’s overwrought state’517. It can be shown that the similes are all conventional, however, so that the original audience, being familiar with the conventions, could ‘read’ the similes individually and in combination: when taken together, they depict three stages in the degeneration of Flosi’s soul.

517 Njal’s Saga, p. 330, n. 4.
The meaning behind the first of these similes reinforces that which lies behind the use of another convention. It was noted above that at the moment when Bórrkr in Gísla saga, and Þorgils in Laxdœla saga, react to what they call ‘cold counsels’, they become consumed with anger. It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Flosi is also filled with anger when he utters the same formula. This conclusion is supported by his first change of colour. The simile ‘red as blood’ is used to indicate extreme rage, as Alexanders saga makes clear. Alexander is described as þrutinn af mikille reiði þeire er eigi matte leynaz fyrir brugðnu oc blodhraðo litar apte (swollen up in so great a rage that it could not be concealed, because his face had changed colour and become blood-red)⁵¹⁸.

Þorfinnr Sigurdarson, earl of Orkney, had had one of King Magnúss Óláfsson’s retainers put to death. Magnúss sails to Orkney, and king and earl meet on board the former’s ship. At first, their conversation is amicable, until:

Konungr leit við jarli ok mælti: “Þar kemr þó enn, Þorfinnr jarl, at þú þykkisk of fá drepit hafa mina hirðmenn óbœ tta.”  Var konungr þá svá rauðr sem dreyri. Jarl sprat þá upp ok gekk ofan ór lyptingunni ok á skip sitt; var þá kyrrt um kveldit⁵¹⁹.

(The king addressed the earl, and said: ‘Nevertheless, Earl Þorfinnr, it still remains that you think you have succeeded in killing my retainer without paying compensation.’ The king was then as red as blood. The earl jumped up, and went down from the upper deck and onto his own ship. Things remained quiet that evening.)

Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga provides another example. The eighteen-year-old protagonist has journeyed to Norway, to the court of Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson. Speaking with the folly of youth, he reminds the earl of the shameful manner in which his father had met his death: killed by a slave, while hiding from his enemies in a pig-sty:

Jarl setti svá rauðan sem blóð, ok bað taka fól þetta skjótt⁵²⁰.

(The earl turned as red as blood, and commanded [his men] to seize that fool at once.)

When Flosi turns ‘red as blood’, therefore, it is a sign that anger has taken hold of him.

The second simile applied to Flosi is fólr sem gras. The basic meaning of fólr is ‘pale’; the stem fól- has been seen as the first element of compound terms used to describe Skarpheðinn’s unnatural pallor, following the killing of Höskuldr

⁵¹⁸ Alexanders saga, pp. 3-4; quotation and translation from Lönnroth, A Critical Introduction, p. 109.
⁵¹⁹ Orkneyinga saga, ch. 30.
⁵²⁰ Gunnlaugs saga, ch. 6.
Hvítanessgoði: *fölleitir, inn fölleiti, föllitaðr*. Robert Cook reasonably, therefore, translates *fól sem gras* as ‘pale as grass’ (p. 195). Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, however, give ‘pale as withered grass’ (p. 240), while Clover has ‘pale as straw’.

The adjective *fól* has the same stem as the inchoative verb *fólna*, ‘to grow pale, wither, decay’, which might suggest Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson’s reading for *fól sem gras*. A fuller version of the simile is found in the short redaction of *Nikulás saga leikara*, and this version clearly supports an interpretation that includes the concept of decay as well as paleness: *hann syndist fólur semm graz er fellur til jardar* (he seemed pale and withered as grass that falls to the earth).

In a saga which has growth to good or bad harvests as its central metaphor, it would therefore appear that the second simile, *fól sem gras*, should be interpreted as a spiritual withering towards the death of the soul, the metaphor working in Flosi’s case to combine the troll-like pallor of Skarpheðinn and the pile of withered weeds at Bergþórshváll. Through his use of the second metaphor, the author of *Njál’s saga* shows Flosi cutting himself off from Christ and from Paradise, which is described in the Icelandic Homily Book as the place ‘where the blooming of grasses does not grow pale and wither’ (*par fólna eige blóme grasa*).

Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson translate the third simile, *blár sem hel*, by ‘as black as death’, as does Carol Clover, while Robert Cook, in his translation of the saga (p. 195), gives ‘as black as Hel itself’, treating *hel* as a proper noun. In his note on the three similes (p. 330, n. 4), Cook points out that:

‘Hel’ is the Old Norse word for both the goddess of death and the place of the dead, corresponding to the Greek Hades. The word has been adapted in English as a place of eternal punishment.

By retaining the original spelling of the word, rather than anglicising to ‘Hell’, Cook is therefore able to make simultaneous reference to pagan and Christian concepts of death.

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521 ‘Hildigunnr’s Lament’, p. 16.
523 See 3.5 and 3.6 above.
524 *H.B.I.*, pp. 143–44. See also the description of Paradise in *Matheus saga post. III: Paradis... par renna eigi upp fyynnar ne illgresi, par fólna alþrís fargrir* (Paradise, where neither thorns nor weeds spring up, where lovely flowers never wither and fade): *Math. s. post. III* (Post., p. 827 and n. 1): the variant reading in Unger’s manuscript B, copied from Codex Scardensis.
When the simile is applied to characters in other texts, however, it is done so from a Christian standpoint, and is condemnatory. Glámr in *Grettis saga*, ch. 32:

Húsfreyja svarar: ‘Ekki er þat háttr kristinna manna, at matask þenna dag, því at á morgin er jóladagr inn fyrtí,’ segir hon, ‘ok er því first skylt at fasta í dag.’ Hann svarar: ‘Marga hindrivitni hafi þér, þá er ek sé til einskís koma; veit ek eigi, at mǫnnunu fari nú betr at heldr en þá, er menn fóru ekki með slikt; þótti mér þá betri súð, er menn váru heiðnir kallaðir, ok vil ek hafa mat minn, en engar refjúr.’ … Hann var dauðr ok blár sem hel, en digr sem naut.

(The lady of the house replies: ‘It isn’t the custom of Christians to take food today, because tomorrow is the first day of Christmas,’ she said, ‘and therefore the first duty is to fast today.’ He replies: ‘You have many superstitions, which in my opinion amount to little. I don’t know that things go better for people now than when they didn’t practise such things. To me, religion seemed better when people were called heathens – and I will have my meal, and no trickery.’ … He was dead, and black as death, but as huge as an ox.)

Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 63, haunts the area after his death, *ok deyddi bæði menn ok fé* (and killed both people and livestock):

Fara þeir út til Bægifótshofða ok til dysjar Þórólfs; síðan brutu þeir upp dysina ok fundu þar Þórólf; var hann þá enn ofúinn ok inn trollsligst í at sjá; hann var blár sem hel ok digr sem naut.

(They travelled over to Bægifótshofði (Lame-foot’s headland), to Þórólfr’s cairn. They broke into it and found Þórólfr; he was then still unrotted, and extremely troll-like to look at; he was as black as death and as huge as an ox.)

The phrase is also applied to Agði jarl, the trollish opponent of the hero, and of King Óláfr Tryggvason, in chapter 7 of the fantasy tale *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*. All three, Glámr, Þórólfr bægifótr and Agði jarl are anti-Christian, and after death all three become revenants. The third simile that the author of *Njála* applies to Flosi, therefore refers to a state of undead trollishness, the last and logical development of the spiritual withering and dying depicted in the second.

*Njáls saga’s* triple metaphor may, then be read as follows: when Flosi yields to Hildigunnr’s blasphemous goading, he moves spiritually from anger to withering to death to hellish afterlife. It is clear that if he decides to act on Hildigunnr’s terms, his soul will be in mortal danger. In fact, he first attempts a legal settlement, but this law-

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525 See Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards, *Seven Viking Romances*, p. 268 (of Earl Agdi, stripped for a wrestling contest): ‘Thorstein thought he had never seen a body more inhuman than Agdi’s, for it was black as death’.
suit is doomed since, as Njáll comments (ch 122), it has sprung ‘from evil roots’. And once he realises that a legal settlement is not a possibility, Flosi decides to act without mercy (ch. 124):

We’ll ride to Bergþórshváll in full force and attack the Njálssons with fire and iron \( (með eldi ok járni) \)^526, and not leave until they’re all dead.

The metaphoric seeds of evil, which took root when the Njálssons listened to the slanderous words of Móðr Valgarðsson, have grown through the murder of Hòskuldr Hvítanessgoði, and reached maturity with the aborted law-suit. Justice demands that an evil harvest must now be burned: the literal weeds at Bergþórshváll have proved their worthless nature by their lack of yield, and have been harvested and separated from the true crops into a ‘bundle for burning’\(^527\); the attempt to reach a legal settlement at the Alpingi has failed, and Flosi will lead the Burners. The two evil harvests, literal and metaphorical, will be burned together. If the arguments of the present chapter and of chapter 3 above are correct, Flosi will act with justice, but without mercy, to burn the Njálssons - and if divine justice were also to operate alone and without mercy, then the Njálssons would be spiritually, as well as physically doomed. But the examples of Hrafn the Red at Clontarf, and Ingjaldr of Keldur (3.3 and 3.10 above) demonstrate that under the new law, where there is repentance, mercy will always operate. Móðr Valgarðsson, the sower of discord, has not been the only agent with an interest in Skarpheðinn’s fate: Hòskuldr Hvítanessgoði was engaged in sowing grain when the Njálssons killed him, and his last words included a prayer for forgiveness for his murderers.

4.8 Conclusions

Metaphors of crop growth and productivity are among the most familiar of Christian metaphors. This chapter has argued that the author of Njáls saga developed a complex series of such metaphors, which he used in interaction with accounts of physical / historical growth and productivity, to strengthen the structural links across the saga; to enrich his portrayal of character; and to supply a further depth to the narrative, through intertextual links both to the Scriptural passages that are the source of these

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[^526]: ÍF 12, p. 318. This formula is used elsewhere by a speaker who intends to show no mercy. Tosti, the half-brother of Harold Godwinson, plans to go to London and ‘lay waste the land with fire and iron, and show no one quarter, whether women or children’ \( (ok eyðvm landit með eldi ok larni ok gefvm engvm manne grīð hvarki konvm ne bornvm) \): Hemings þáttr, ch. 20 (Hauksbók, p. 339).

[^527]: For this Scriptural phrase, and its traditional use, see Cross, ‘Bundles for Burning’, passim.
metaphors, and to traditional Christian ideas, such as that of trading being a metaphor for mission. Such a widespread use of metaphor is at once reminiscent of, and more complex than, the use of ecclesiastical metaphor in *Laxdæla saga*, and suggests that, like the author of *Laxdæla*, the author of *Njáls saga* was unconstrained by the traditional narrative conventions of the *Íslendingasögur*. It is noteworthy, for example, that the use in this way of Christian metaphor allowed these two authors to place characters and their actions under moral scrutiny, thereby aiding in the creation of a new, less ‘objective’ (though allusive) saga style. And finally, these authors’ familiarity with this ecclesiastical, metaphorical mode of thought prompts the suggestion that they were both probably clerics.