Chapter 7
Closing Remarks

7.1 Conclusions from the study

This study has sought to identify a number of Christian ideas and sources in *Njáls saga*, in an attempt to add to our understanding of how the author constructed his narrative. Because the study has focused on these Christian elements, there has been almost no discussion of any possible influence on the author of other *Íslendingasögur*, apart from *Laxdœla saga*, although he clearly was completely familiar with the narrative conventions of that genre. His use of stock episodes (a young man travels to Norway and has a relationship with a woman of royal birth, for example); stock characters (the woman who incites a male relative to take revenge, for example); and stock language (‘women’s counsels are cold’, for example); all testify to the author’s facility with those conventions. Examples of all three of these have been examined in this study: an example of the first is the sexual relationship between Hrútr Herjólfsson and Queen Gunnhildr\(^{715}\); the second and third are both found in the scene where Hildigunnr goads Flosi into taking up the case against the killers of her husband, Hóskuldr\(^{716}\). In each case, it has been suggested, the author’s treatment of these conventions is original and creative\(^{717}\).

7.1.i *Njáls saga* and *Laxdœla saga*

Christian elements in one of the *Íslendingasögur, Laxdœla saga*, were examined in chapter 1, in an attempt to test an older suggestion that that saga might have been an influential model for the author of *Njáls saga* to follow. This study has argued that he did indeed use a considerable number of the same Christian narrative elements as are to be found in *Laxdœla saga*, including: a group of related Christian metaphors (in *Laxdœla saga* shipwreck and drowning, in *Njáls saga* growth and productivity); the ecclesiastical year and associated liturgical readings (in *Laxdœla saga* the Thursdays before and after Easter; in *Njáls saga*, Michaelmas); Scripture and its exegesis; echoes that prompt

\(^{715}\) See 2.5 above.

\(^{716}\) See 4.6 above.

comparison between the pagan opening of the narrative and its Christian ending (in *Laxdaela saga* the comparison between Unnr and Guðrún, in *Njáls saga* that between the events that occurred during the reigns of the pagan Haraldr Greycloak and the Christian Brian Boru); and the last-minute redemption of a hero (Kjartan in *Laxdaela saga*, Skarpheðinn in *Njála*). It cannot be proved from the coincidental presence of these narrative elements in both sagas that *Laxdaela saga* was indeed a ‘source’ for *Njáls saga*, but their apparent absence from other *Íslendingasögur* makes this a probability. On the other hand, what can be said with certainty is that the appearance in *Njáls saga* of several of the same types of Christian elements as are found in *Laxdaela saga* suggests that the author of *Njáls saga*, like the author of *Laxdaela*, was willing to develop the narrative techniques of another, newer model of saga narrative. And what it is hoped may reasonably be claimed from the present study is that the reading of *Laxdaela saga* presented here can throw light on the Christian background of *Njáls saga*, since the authors of both sagas apparently shared the same Christian cultural heritage.

7.1.ii The author’s creativity

The present study has suggested that the author used his sources in order to ‘create’ or ‘invent’ a large part of the saga. Among the elements, episodes and scenes argued to have been ‘invented’ by the author are: Scriptural references; the saga’s richest metaphor; the overall bipartite structure of the saga; some smaller structuring elements, such as the cross-referencing between the saga’s first and last battles; the slopes at Hlíðarendi, ready for harvesting; Njáll’s words and behaviour when he hears about the new faith; the death of Hoðskuldr Hvítanessgoði; Síðu-Hallr’s conversion and intervention at the Alþingi; Þórhallr Ásgrímsson’s intervention at the Alþingi; the nature of Gunnhildr’s curse on Hrútr; the story of Hrappr Þrgumleiðason; Flosi’s words about the sowing of evil grain as he rides to the Alþingi, following the death of Hoðskuldr; Njáll’s comments on the deadlocked nature of the ensuing law-case; his fatal decision to lead the men of his household indoors, rather than allow them to face their attackers outside; the condition of the bodies of Njáll and Skarpheðinn, when they are discovered after the burning.

All the above elements, it has been suggested, are products of the author’s invention, following his reading in various genres of learned and ecclesiastical literature.

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718 In the sense that they didn’t form part of possible earlier, oral versions of the narrative or sections of it.
This study has not been concerned with the possible part played by oral traditions in the writing of *Njáls saga*, although it seems likely that the author made use of oral, as well as written, sources. For example, Gísli Sigurðsson has made out a strong case for the existence of an ‘immanent saga’ of Þorðell Geitisson of Krossavík, which was known to the author of *Njáls saga*, and details of which may be gathered from:

a consistency in Þorðell’s portrayal across the range of sources, without there being any question of literary relations, strongly suggesting that this image was already developed in the story tradition, viz. of a chieftain of noble birth from the eastern fjords, a courageous peacemaker and expert in the law …

The author’s inventiveness is also apparent in the use he made of this source, however, since he completely inverts Þorðell’s defining characteristics, as these were transmitted in the tradition:

By the time Þorðell disappears from *Njáls saga* his chief qualities have been put to the test and found wanting; his legal expertise proves to be of no avail and his courage fails him in his hour of need. This provides a pretext for a bit of good-natured fun.

All in all, it can be said that the author of *Njáls saga* freely adapted his sources to aid the structural shape and thematic development of his narrative.

### 7.1.iii The theme of judgement

The present study agrees with the conclusion reached by Andersson, namely that the ‘thematic principle’ is of central importance in *Njáls saga*, although it disagrees with his claim that ‘failure’ is the constitutive element of that principle:

Whereas *Egils saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga*, and *Laxdæla saga* were largely organised as a succession of generations, the author of *Njáls saga* abandons the generational structure completely, opting instead for a thematic principle. That principle is failure: failed characters, failed institutions, the failed values of valour and wisdom, and, not least, the failed literary conventions of the saga, which are shown to be hollow or perverse.

This study has argued that the author employed his creativity in order to explore as his theme, not the concept of failure, but the nature of good legal judgement; he did this …

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720 Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*, p. 179. Presumably those among the early audience of *Njáls saga* who knew the other sources would have been alert to the author’s originality.
721 *Growth*, p. 203.
within the narrative conventions of the genre of *Íslendingasögur*, setting his exploration within an account of ‘historical’ events that had occurred during the Saga Age and Iceland’s transition from paganism to Christianity. In *Njáls saga*, it was claimed here, good legal judgement involves justice and mercy following the divine model and working cooperatively together, as evidenced, for example, in the rule of the ideal king, Brian Ború.\(^{722}\)

Chapter 5 has argued that metaphors of sowing and harvesting are among the narrative elements that provide unity to *Njáls saga*. And throughout the present study there has been an attempt made to identify a number of other such structural elements, including parallels and contrasts between characters and episodes, for example: the death in battle of Úlfr the Unwashed, as a contrast with the escape at Clontarf of Hrafn the Red;\(^{723}\) comparison of the fates of Skarpheðinn and the berserk Ótryggr;\(^{724}\) and of Skarpheðinn and Víga-Hrappr Qrgumleiðason.\(^{725}\) It was argued that in all of these pairs of stories, the comparison points up a contrast between those characters whose fate is decided by justice alone, and those who are the beneficiaries of mercy. The episodes of the intervention of Síðu-Hallr at the Alþingi and the blind Ámundi Hóskulðsson at the Þingskálapíningi were also compared,\(^{726}\) as were the posthumous stanza uttered by Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and the dying words of Hóskuldr Hvítanessgoði; both these pairings, it was suggested, demonstrate the contrast between the values of the new law, that shows mercy in that it refuses to retaliate, and an outdated ethic that aims to satisfy the demands of justice alone through retaliation in like measure.

In addition to these things, though, it has been argued that *Njáls saga* incorporates a number of other Christian elements, including: repeated echoes of Matthew xviii, 1-10 (the Gospel for Michaelmas); echoes of related Scriptural texts concerning good and bad fruit, and the burning of the bad (the parables of the sower, and the tares among the wheat, together with Christ’s exposition of them: Matt. xiii, 4-9, 24-30, 36-43; Christ’s comments on the good and bad trees: Matt. vii, 18-19, from the Sermon on the Mount); references, through echoes of *Niðrstigningar saga* and, probably, Gregory’s *Moralia in Iob*, to the penitent thief; elements borrowed from the homiletic and hagiographic tradition surrounding the protomartyr, Stephen.

\(^{722}\) See 3.2 above.

\(^{723}\) See 3.3 above.

\(^{724}\) See 6.7 above.

\(^{725}\) See 6.5 above.

\(^{726}\) See 3.8 and 3.11 above.

\(^{727}\) See 5.7 above.
All the elements mentioned in the last paragraph are also concerned with issues of justice and mercy. They explore the question of what is necessary for salvation (humility, the quality of being *lítilmenni*, is the sign of the true Christian: examples of such individuals are Síðu-Hallr and Hőskuldr Práinsson, who ‘turn the other cheek’ instead of retaliating, and make their appeals – the former to the Alþingi, the latter to God – for mercy to be shown to others). This simple, familiar Christian message: ‘follow the divine model in exercising judgement through both justice and mercy’, provides a consistent ethical viewpoint from which the reader of *Njáls saga* may evaluate characters’ actions, including, for example, as well as those of Síðu-Hallr and Hőskuldr Práinsson, noted immediately above: the blind Ámundi Hőskulðsson’s revenge; Njáll’s apparent tactical error in ordering the men of his household indoors; the mercilessness of Queen Gunnhildr.

### 7.1.iv The author’s learning

It will be clear from the above that the author of *Njáls saga* was widely read in ecclesiastical literature, and that he had assimilated his reading. He must have had access to a library that contained at least the writings of the standard authorities: the present study has suggested that he used Augustine (principally and widely), with Jerome, Gregory and Bede. It seems a reasonable hypothesis, therefore, that he wrote the saga as a member of a religious house, although this in itself does not prove that he had a lifelong vocation as a monk, or indeed that he was even a cleric. He might have been a layman and literate member of an aristocratic family such as the Svínfellings, who had retired into a monastery:

> What we can say about the religious houses is that they are conspicuously private in origin, that they were all very small and that their principal function was to be retirement homes for aristocrats.

It is not impossible that the author did not have much Latin. The description of the branded cross-marks on Skarpheðinn’s body comes from the vernacular *Niðrístigninar saga*, rather than the Latin *Descensus* which is its source. And Norse versions exist of a good deal of the other apocryphal, exegetical and homiletic material quoted in this study.

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728 A number of scholars have suggested that the author was connected with this family: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, IF’12, pp. cvii-cxcxii; Barði Guðmundsson, *Höfundur Njál*, pp. 1-91; Lönnroth, *A Critical Introduction*, pp. 174-87.

729 Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization*, p. 133; see also p. 140, where a list is provided of aristocrats who established religious houses and then retired into them. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson recognised the possibility that the saga had been written in a monastery, to which the author had retired (IF 12, p. cii).
All of these considerations may suggest that the author, if a cleric, was not necessarily a monk. On the other hand, there are some indications, if the arguments presented in this study are accepted, that *Njáls saga* is not the work of a geriatric member of the lay aristocracy, or indeed of a secular priest, but that the author was in fact a religious.

Among these, his knowledge of works by even such well-known authorities as Augustine, Gregory and Jerome suggests that he had more theological training than would have been likely in the case of a layman or secular priest. And his familiarity with the ecclesiastical calendar, which suggests a monk’s more expert knowledge of the liturgy, and with Scripture and its exegesis, suggestive of a monk’s reading, are all exemplified in his use of the Gospel reading in the liturgy for Michaelmas, with its significance as commented by Jerome. Scriptural reference and commentary also inform the metaphoric structure of the saga (the metaphors of sowing and harvesting), which is in turn indicative of a metaphorical mode of thought and expression that is very different from an ‘objective’ saga style, a mode of thought that argues that the author had been trained in the tropes, and that he therefore probably knew Latin.

When these matters are looked at together, what evidence there is suggests that, although he may well have been born into an aristocratic family such as the Svíňfellings, the author had spent his life in a monastery. This conclusion is in partial disagreement with the view expressed by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson: ‘The saga may have been written in a monastery, but in spirit it is not a monastic work. If the author was a monk, he certainly became one so late that it had little influence on the saga.’ The present study agrees, however, that *Njáls saga* is not a ‘monastic work’, in that although the author writes from a consistent ethical standpoint, he does not moralise.

7.2 A suggestion concerning the saga’s early reception

There remains an important question. Gíslí Sigurðsson is among a number of scholars who have quite properly voiced their unease about some of the interpretations of sagas written from a ‘Christian’ point of view.

A[n] … approach applied by various scholars, originally deriving from the field of medieval Biblical and theological studies, centres on notions of the multiple ambiguity of texts. Much of the research on the sagas conducted in this vein has been characterised by entertaining, if highly speculative, interpretations … but tends to skate over an important fact — that the

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730 ‘Sagan má vera rituð í klaustri, en að anda er hún ekki klausturverk. Ef höfundurinn hefur verið munkur, hefur hann vissulega orðið það svo seint, að það hafur haft lítil áhrif á söguna’ (ÍF 12, p. cii).
Icelandic sagas do not contain any key as to how they should be interpreted, such as we usually find in genuine medieval allegories – and thus modern scholars in this area have been apt to let their imaginations run far beyond what is likely to have been in the minds of the writers as they wrote their sagas and the readers as they read them.\textsuperscript{731}

The present study has by no means treated \textit{Njáls saga} as an allegory, and has suggested that for the most part the Christian elements that have been identified are familiar ones. It is hoped that the results of the study have been reached by means of ‘reasoned support’, and that the study, without ‘masking the complexity’ of the saga narrative, has shown it to be in fact ‘more richly suggestive’\textsuperscript{732}. Nevertheless, the principle that lies behind Gísli Sigurðsson’s remarks has a wider significance: there would have been little point in a saga author’s wishing to give his audience a Christian (or any other) message, if the audience were unable to recognise it. What follows will be an attempt to show that the only evidence we have, that may be interpreted as representing a reading of \textit{Njáls saga} nearly contemporary with the saga’s composition, recognised that the model for proper judgement, as in the saga, is divine judgement, in which justice and mercy work together.

The evidence is in the illuminated initials in \textit{Kálfalekjarbók} (AM 133). One of these, the picture of horse and rider that decorates the capital \textit{h} that introduces chapter 100, was discussed at 5.4 above, and its content related to the Christian message of the narrative: faith in God protects against the pride that comes before a fall. There are two others, which each mark particularly important stages in the narrative, as they appear at the points where Gunnarr and Njáll are introduced. The first, which contains the picture of a lion fighting a dragon, decorates the \textit{G} of \textit{Gunnarr} (at the start of chapter 19), while the second, in the \textit{N} of \textit{Njáll}, the first word of chapter 20, depicts a man piercing a dragon with a sword. Lönnroth suggests that these two illuminations are ‘obviously intended to complement each other’, and interprets them as follows:

The \textit{G} in Gunnarr at the beginning of \textit{Gunnars saga} thus contains a lion fighting a dragon - perhaps a symbol of Gunnarr fighting against his enemies. The lion was a conventional metaphor of heroic prowess, \textit{Fortitudo}, in the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the next chapter, where Njáll is introduced, the initial \textit{N} shows a bearded man fighting a

\textsuperscript{731} Gísli Sigurðsson, \textit{The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{732} Vésteinn Ólason, \textit{Dialogues}, p.227; Vésteinn comments: ‘when a critic interprets a saga as an allegory or morality tale he is creating his own new story and privileging it over that created by a reader’s or listener’s engagement with the same text. If this new story is both less original and more threadbare than the old one, then the end result of this complex interpretative process seems pretty disappointing.’
similar dragon with a sword. Could these two pictures, which are obviously intended to complement each other, be interpreted as the conjunction of *Sapientia* and *Fortitudo* fighting against Evil? This would, in any case, be an ideal representation of what actually takes place in *Gunnars saga*\(^{733}\).

The above remarks contain the intriguing implication that these illuminated capitals present a literary-critical response to *Njáls saga* that is almost contemporary with the text\(^{734}\). Lönnroth remains cautious, however, and claims no more than that ‘the large initials contain pictures which seem to bear on the content’\(^{735}\). The discussion here aims to present arguments in support of the wider suggestion made by Lönnroth, that there exists a relationship between pictures and narrative content, while at the same time claiming that the pictures do not include representations of Gunnarr and Njáll, or of their supposed spiritual qualities. It will be argued that whoever was responsible for the illuminations in this manuscript was aware of the importance within *Njáls saga* of the role played by the Archangel Michael, on whose feast-day Síðu-Hallr becomes the first Icelander to be converted by the missionary Þangbrandr.

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\(^{733}\) ‘Structural Divisions’, p. 70.

\(^{734}\) Manuscript AM133, *Kálfaleikjarbók*, is dated to ca. 1300. See ÍF 12, p. cl.

\(^{735}\) ‘Structural Divisions’, p. 70. He continues: ‘It must be pointed out, however, that pictures in Icelandic manuscript initials may well have had a purely decorative and ornamental function’.
The motif of the lion fighting against the dragon is conventional, and occurs frequently in church carvings. Its appearance on corbels is widespread, and it is commonplace on misericords: G.L. Remnant, for example, lists twenty-six examples of the motif, with two in Carlisle Cathedral, three (authentic medieval examples) in Gloucester, and four in the Minster at Lincoln. Figure 9 shows a misericord from Ripon Cathedral, North Yorkshire.

The well-known hymn *In Resurrectione Domini*, attributed to Fulbert of Chartres, has the motif in the first two stanzas, where its significance is also revealed:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Chorus novae Ierusalem} \\
\text{Novam meli dulcedinem} \\
\text{Promat colens cum sobriis} \\
\text{Paschale festum gaudiis.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Quo Christus, invictus leo,} \\
\text{Dracone surgens obruto,} \\
\text{Dum voce viva personat,} \\
\text{A morte functos excitat.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Let the choir of the new Jerusalem utter new sweetness in song, worshipping with sober joys the Easter festival in which Christ, the unconquered lion, rising up with the dragon overwhelmed, awakens the deceased from death, as he cries aloud with a living voice).

This hymn celebrates the resurrected Christ’s victory over death, and his harrowing of Hell. Fulbert here appropriately depicts Christ as a lion and his enemy as a dragon:

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736 See, for example, Anderson, *Animal Carvings in British Churches*, p. 37, fig. 19, and p. 41 (for Beverley Minster).
737 *A Catalogue of Misericords*, passim.
738 See also Welander, *The History, Art and Architecture of Gloucester Cathedral*, pp. 551-52. There are in fact four lion/dragon misericords at Gloucester, but one is a modern copy.
739 *Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi*, vol. 50, p. 285.
appropriately, since the battle between the lion and the dragon is a traditional Easter motif. Augustine had set out the background to the motif in a sermon on the Resurrection: God the Father, like a lion, awakens his sleeping cub, Christ, with a mighty roar, just as Christ, as a lion, awakens the dead with a living voice:

Christus ergo in passione quasi leo accubuit, et in morte requievit ... Collocatus ergo in sepulchro, ibique triduo quasi leo robustus atque imperterritus iacuit, securus de mox futura resurrectione. Sed quis suscitabit eum? Quis? nisi pater validissimo rugitu a somno illum excitans mortis?\(^{740}\)

(Therefore Christ lay down in suffering like a lion, and slept in death ... He was placed, therefore, in the tomb, and lay there for three days like a lion, strong and undaunted, untroubled from his imminent resurrection. But who will awaken him? Who, if not the Father, rousing him from the sleep of death with a mighty roaring?)

Dunbar was to follow the same tradition as Fulbert in his poem *On the Resurrection of Christ*:

Done is a battell on the dragon blak,
Our campioun Chryst confoundit hes his force;
The \(3\)etts of hell ar brokin with a crak,
The signe trivmphall rasit is of the croce.
The diuillis trymmillis with hiddous voce,
The saulis ar borrowit and to the blis can go.
Chryst with his blud our ransonis dois indoce:

*Surrexit dominus de sepulchro*

Dungin is the deidly dragon Lucifer,
The crewall serpent with the mortall stang ... 

He [viz. Christ] for our saik that sufferit to be slane
And lyk a lamb in sacrifice wes dicht,
Is lyk a lyone rissin vp agane ...

*Surrexit dominus de sepulchro*\(^{741}\).

Figure 10 represents the illuminated capital at the start of *Njáls saga*, chapter 20, which introduces Njáll into the narrative. The picture shows a beardless man thrusting a sword through the body of a dragon.

\(^{740}\) *Sermo Mai 93, De Resurrectione Domini*, PL. *Supplementum II*, cols. 1201-5, at col.1202. This sermon, formerly attributed to Augustine and now recognized as Pseudo-Augustine, was popular, to judge by the number of manuscripts in which it is found. The theme became a commonplace through the bestiaries.

\(^{741}\) Stanzas 1-3: Bawcutt, *Dunbar*, vol. 1, p. 69.
Lönnroth’s suggestion that this is a representation of Sapientia cannot be correct: Scripture portrayed Sapientia as female\(^\text{742}\), and wisdom, when personified, is invariably portrayed as female during the Middle Ages. This tradition was maintained in Scandinavia, as found, for example, in the personification of Wisdom in *Komungsskuggsjá*\(^\text{743}\). Neither is this a picture of Njáll, as is evident from the man’s appearance. Njáll is already middle-aged when first introduced into the narrative, and has sons of marriageable age, while the long, thick, curling hair of the man in the picture clearly shows him to be young.

Combats between dragons and beings of human shape, who may or may not have wings, appear not infrequently within capital letters in medieval manuscripts, and it would appear therefore that the artist responsible for these pictures in *Kálfalækarbók* worked within a tradition of illumination.

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Figures 11\textsuperscript{744} and 12\textsuperscript{745} each show a winged and haloed angel spearing a dragon down the diagonal of a capital letter, M or N. The angel of figure 11 has long hair, and is certainly St Michael, since the capital M begins the sentence: \textit{Memoriam beati Archangeli Michaelis toto orbe uenerandam ...}, the opening of a \textit{Sermo in dedicatione basilicæ beati Archangeli Michaelis. iii. kalendas Octobris}. It is furthermore a safe assumption that figure 12 also contains a representation of St Michael, since the manuscript in which it is found, Paris, Latin 11685, was produced at Mont St Michel\textsuperscript{746}. This manuscript is Norman, however, and the picture might therefore be considered a product of a cultural setting somewhat remote from Iceland\textsuperscript{747}. On the other hand, the type was also known in England, and figures 11 and 12 may in fact be links in the same chain of transmission\textsuperscript{748}.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig_13.png}
\caption{Fig. 13}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{744} London BL Arundel 91 (s. xi / xii, Canterbury, St Augustine’s), fol. 26v.
\textsuperscript{745} Paris, BN, Latin 11685, fol. 40.
\textsuperscript{746} Alexander, \textit{Norman Illumination}, plate 19f, and p. xvi, where he describes the picture as ‘initial ‘N’ with St. Michael and the dragon’.
\textsuperscript{747} There seems, for example, to have been little trade between Iceland and Normandy. See Jón Jóhannesson, \textit{Íslendinga Saga}, p. 325, for an evaluation of the problematic record of the visit to Rouen made in 1198 by a \textit{navis Islandiae}.
\textsuperscript{748} Alexander, \textit{Norman Illumination}, p.98, n.4, describes this picture as being of ‘a type later found at Canterbury’, and gives two examples.
Figure 13, from the second quarter of the eleventh century, shows the initial Q of *Quid* at the beginning of Psalm 51: *Quid gloriaris in malitia?* (‘Why do you pride yourself in your wickedness?’). Thomas H. Ohlgren has discussed this picture (he reads the first word as *Quod*) as follows: ‘inhabited by St. Michael?, without wings, wearing helmet and holding sword and shield, fighting a winged dragon, whose body and tail form the tail of the letter’\(^{749}\). Like Ohlgren, Elżbieta Temple is cautious about the identity of the dragon’s opponent: ‘a figure in chain mail, probably St. Michael (though without wings), who, armed with a sword and shield, fights a winged dragon forming the tail of the letter’\(^{750}\).

Ohlgren and Temple are properly careful not to claim for certain that the figure in human shape is a representation of the Archangel. But if that cannot be definitely proven on pictorial-iconographic grounds, it can nevertheless be shown for other reasons to be extremely likely. Augustine, in the most influential medieval commentary on the Psalms, relates verse 7 of Psalm 51: *Propterea Deus destruet te in finem* (‘Therefore God will destroy you at the end’) to the Last Judgement, when the old serpent will be finally defeated:

> etsi non modo, certe in finem destruet … quando dicturus est Dominus, Ite in ignem aeternum qui paratus est diabolo et angelis ejus?

(and if not now, certainly at the end He shall destroy … when the Lord is to say, ‘Go ye into fire everlasting, which hath been prepared for the devil and his angels?’)\(^{751}\)

Scriptural eschatology states that the final, eternal imprisonment of the devil and his angels is preceded by St Michael’s defeat of the devil as dragon (Apoc. xii, 7-8, the Scriptural source for pictorial representations of St Michael as a warrior in combat with the dragon):

Et factum est praelium magnum in caelo: Michael et angeli ejus praeliabantur cum dracone, et draco pugnabat et angeli ejus; et non valuerunt, neque locus inventus est eorum amplius in caelo.

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\(^{749}\) *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Illuminated Manuscripts*, pp. 199-200.

\(^{750}\) *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900-1066: A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*; the miniature is reproduced from Ill. 260 of this work. See also Alexander, *Anglo-Saxon Illumination*, plate 25b.

\(^{751}\) *Enarratio in Psalmum li*, PL 36, col. 607. The English translation is from NPNF, vol. 8, p. 199. See also above, 5.5.
(And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the
dragon; and the dragon fought, and his angels, and did not prevail; neither
was their place found any more in heaven.)

In all likelihood, then, figure 13 also depicts St Michael.

The following conclusions may therefore be drawn from figures 11, 12 and 13:
firstly, that there was a medieval tradition of decorating capital letters with pictures of St
Michael’s fight with the dragon; and secondly, that where the identity of the dragon’s
human-shaped opponent in these illuminated capitals is not obviously St Michael, any
external evidence that is available for examination will support his identification as the
Archangel. It therefore seems extremely likely that the figure in the illuminated capital N
in Kálfalekjarbók also represents St Michael.

The youthful appearance of the figure in the picture from Kálfalekjarbók is also
explained, if it is indeed taken to be a representation of St Michael. Tradition had it that
angels appear in the likeness of youths, and the tradition was known in Norse, an
example occurring in Agathu saga Meyiar II, ch. 6:

Þa kom nockur ungr madr silkiklaedum skryddr, ok fylgdi honum meir
en .cc. fagrskrydda sveina. Þetta lid hafdi eigi sed adr ne sidan ... En er
aptr var lokin grauf Agathe, þa for inn ungi madr i brott med lidi sinu, ok
var hann hvergi sidan senn ne spurt til hans i þvi heradi; af þvi ættum
vær, at eingill guds hafi þar verit752.

(Then there came a young man, dressed in silk clothing, and more than
two hundred finely dressed boys accompanied him. No one saw that
company before or since ... But when Agatha’s grave was closed, the
young man left with his company, and certainly he was not seen
afterwards, nor was anything heard of him in that region. Because of this,
we suppose him to have been an angel of the Lord.)

Accordingly, Michael too is a youth:

Et circa media nocte apparuit illi iuuenis et uocauit ... Erasme, surge, ecce
ego Michahel angelus.753

(And about the middle of the night, a youth appeared to him, who called
... ‘Erasmus, rise up. Behold I am the angel Michael’).

One problem remains, however, if the human figure in the Kálfalekjarbók picture is to
be identified as St Michael. Whereas representations of the Archangel that show him
fighting with a sword typically depict him with the weapon raised behind his head, as if

752 HMS I, p.12. For the reading in the other version of the legend, see ibid., p.5.
753 From the life of St Erasmus of Antioch. See Cross, ‘Source, Lexis, and Edition’, p. 35: Appendix,
Erasmus (items at viii).
about to strike down at the dragon, here he is depicted as having thrust his sword right through the dragon’s body. I think it quite possible that the illuminator of *Kálfa*laekjarbók combined the iconography of the Archangel with that of Sigurðr Fáfnsbani, the other great dragon-slayer familiar to medieval Scandinavia (and the paternal ancestor of Hallgerðr, and therefore also of Hóskuldr Práinsson Hvítanessgoði, in *Njáls saga*754). The picture in *Kálfa*laekjarbók may be compared with the representation of Sigurðr on the wooden portals of the church at Hylestad, Norway (figure 14).

Richard Bailey points out that ‘at least four other church portals in Norway’ depict similar scenes.755 Bugge referred to these Sigurðr carvings as ‘the pagan iconography of Christian ideas’, a comment explained by Bailey as follows:

When we remember that the entrance to medieval churches was often decorated with a carving showing St Michael’s triumph over the dragon-devil described by St John, we can understand Bugge’s interpretation: the struggle with a monster, which figures in both Christian teaching and art, is being presented in terms of a traditional Scandinavian story.756

Jesse Byock believes Sigurðr’s presence above the door of a stave church can be explained in terms of the symbolic significance of the church door and doorway (*dyrr* and *hurð*): ‘not only as the divinely appointed passageway leading to the sacred presence but also as the vulnerable spot where the spiritual defense of the sacred interior was positioned ... Sigurðr was carved as a symbolic protector of the church’.757 This suggests further syncretism of the symbolic roles of Sigurðr and St Michael, since the latter was held to be the defender of the Church.

Byock is incorrect, however, in also suggesting that this substitution of Sigurðr for St Michael had its origin in local Norwegian politics, rather than in any wider

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754 ÍF 12, p. 46 and note 2.
755 *Viking Age Sculpture*, pp. 118-19.
756 *Viking Age Sculpture*, p. 124; Bailey here translates from Bugge, *Norske Stavkirker*.
religious-iconographic syncretism\textsuperscript{758}, since this view cannot explain the presence of Sigurðr carvings on English and Manx Christian monuments. The syncretism is widespread over the West Norse world. And it is characteristic of all these carvings, English, Manx and Norwegian, that the dragon is depicted as transfixed by the hero’s sword, as in the \textit{Kálfaekjarbók} picture\textsuperscript{759}. Indeed, so typical is this feature that Richard Bailey is willing to speculate that the now lost fragment from Kirby Hill, and the Vladimir-Susdal axe (figures 15 and 16), which depict serpents with swords through them, are both examples of the Sigurðr story\textsuperscript{760}.

\textsuperscript{758} ‘Sigurðr Fáfnishani’, pp. 620-22.
\textsuperscript{759} For example, on three cross-slabs from the Isle of Man: Bailey, \textit{Viking Age Sculpture}, pp. 120-21.
\textsuperscript{760} \textit{Viking Age Sculpture}, p. 119. The Kirby Hill site has a cross, on whose shaft elements of the Sigurðr story appear beneath a Crucifixion; the other face of the Vladimir-Susdal axe is decorated with a tree and birds (motifs from the Sigurðr story).
Fig. 15: Kirby Hill

Fig. 16: Vladimir-Susdal axe
All things considered, it would appear likely that the two pictures in Kálfaekjárábók are complementary, since both apparently make implicit references to divine judgement, with its cooperative instruments of mercy first, then justice. The first picture, with its Easter theme, refers to Christ’s sacrifice, the central, supreme act of mercy that provides mankind with the hope of salvation: the risen Christ’s (iconographically, the awakened lion’s) victory over the dragon is prefaced by his harrowing of Hell, when he redeems the souls of the righteous, bringing light to those who until that moment have waited in darkness.\(^{761}\) The placing of this picture at the start of Gunnarr’s story accords with the reading of that story in the present study: that by the time that Gunnarr sees the bleikir akrar of Hlíðarendi, Iceland is ripe for the coming of Christ.\(^{762}\)

The results of the present study accord, too, with the placing of the second picture, at the start of Njáll’s story. It was argued at 6.9 above, that alongside Skarpheðinn in the burning is the invisible presence of the Archangel Michael, who has come with justice to purge out the corrupt, and with mercy to save the penitent. The second picture shows a scene from the consummation of history, when in the final harvest the weeds are burnt while the good crops are carried home to the barn, and when the sword of justice, wielded by the Archangel Michael, ends the power of the dragon for ever, as the Last Judgement comprehends the final and eternal cooperative act of justice and mercy.

\(^{761}\) Isaias ix, 2.
\(^{762}\) See 5.8 above.