Njál's saga and its Christian background
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Summary

*Njáls saga* is universally recognised as the greatest and most complex of all the Íslendingasögur. The saga is a late example of the genre, and by the time of its writing (between ca. 1270 and ca. 1295), the narrative conventions of the Íslendingasögur were well established. But while the author of *Njáls saga* was clearly familiar with these conventions, he chose at times either to treat them with considerable freedom (for example, the motif of the young Icelander who finds favour at the Norwegian court is treated in a radically original way in the story of Hrútr Herjólfsson), or to ignore them completely (*Njáls saga*, for example, does not open with the expected prologue in Norway); other Íslendingasögur fall into three main types: biographies of heroes, histories of dynasties, and regional histories, but *Njáls saga* cannot be simply categorised in these terms.

The originality with which the writer of *Njáls saga* composed his narrative has led to its being likened to a novel created by an author. The question of authorial creativity is part of a long-standing and continuing debate regarding the question of saga origins, a debate which centres round the issue of the extent to which the Íslendingasögur can be shown to have been composed from oral, as opposed to written, sources. *Njáls saga*, as it has come down to us in written form, is far too long and complex to have been recited as a whole from memory, although it seems likely that individual episodes had once circulated in oral tradition. Identifying which parts of the saga descend from oral, and which from written sources has, however, proved difficult. For example, the author knew material that appears in other Íslendingasögur, but it cannot be stated with certainty that he used other written versions of these sagas, since he might instead have been using the same oral traditions which lay behind these sagas. There is much also about the law and legal process in the saga, but even the law-codes cannot be decisively identified as written sources.

The present study seeks to contribute towards knowledge concerning the extent to which the author of *Njáls saga* used written texts, by looking for sources for the saga narrative within written literary genres which had no associated oral traditions. Among the literary genres of this type that could have been available for use by the author are ecclesiastical texts, including Scripture and its exegesis, church
liturgy, and hagiographical and apocryphal writings. It is to be noted that there is a greater number of explicitly Christian elements within Njáls saga than in any of the other Íslendingasögur, and in addition, an account of the Conversion of Iceland is placed near the centre of the narrative, two facts which encourage a search in ecclesiastical literature for sources for Njáls saga. On the other hand, there has been no critical agreement concerning whether the Conversion has much effect on the ethical values of the society portrayed in the saga, which might suggest that the influence of Christian literature was small, and localised within the Conversion chapters. In addition to looking for Christian sources, therefore, the present study also seeks for evidence in the saga of an overall Christian-ethical standpoint, inherited from the author’s reading in ecclesiastical literature, from which characters and events can be judged. A test-case is Ámundi Hóskulðsson, the man blind from birth, who exacts blood-revenge although a Christian. The fact that he miraculously has his sight restored, which enables him to kill his enemy, has been critically decried as a blasphemy; chapter 3.11, which reads this episode against a range of Christian literature including, particularly, Scripture and its exegesis, shows that the blasphemy is Ámundi’s, and not the author’s.

The ‘Christian background’ of the title of this thesis is the ecclesiastical literature which was available for use by the author; how he used it formed part of his narrative method. The thesis aims also to determine whether the author of Njáls saga was the first among the writers of Íslendingasögur to use Christian sources in this way, or whether there already existed when he worked a narrative model in another saga. Of all the Íslendingasögur, Laxdœla saga is the obvious text to compare with Njáls saga, both because it, too, has an account of the Conversion of Iceland at the centre of the narrative; and because, although the exact nature of the relationship between the two sagas is not clear, it is generally acknowledged that they share some intertextuality. Accordingly, chapter 1 aims to set up a critical methodology by identifying Christian elements in Laxdœla saga and examining how the author uses them within the narrative.

Chapter 1 argues that the author of Laxdœla saga used knowledge derived from ecclesiastical literature in order to supply a further, Christian level of meaning to his narrative. This ecclesiastical knowledge encompassed the church year and associated liturgy (for Maundy Thursday and the Thursday after Easter), together with some exegesis of the Scripture appointed for those days. These Scriptural readings, with their
exegesis, provide the key to understanding why two central characters, Guðrún and Kjartan, should so profoundly change the direction of their lives: following the death of Þorkell Eyjólfsson, the hitherto proud and magnificent Guðrún becomes a penitent nun; after hearing a Christmas sermon, the hitherto defiantly pagan Kjartan becomes a convert to Christianity. Furthermore, when the saga is read against this liturgical background, what had previously been recognised as a leitmotiv - shipwreck, with survival or drowning – acquires a much more central significance: in addition to all the material voyages, storms, and shipwrecks, the saga narrates the metaphorical, spiritual voyage of Guðrún’s life, storm-tossed and shipwrecked, but finally safe. The chapter concludes that the familiarity with both the theological content and the narrative conventions of ecclesiastical literature strongly suggests that the author was a male cleric.

It is generally recognised that the author of Njáls saga was deeply interested in law and legal process, but this study argues that a principal concern of the narrative is with defining good legal judgement, rather than with law per se: the saga opens with a statement concerning the validity of certain legal judgements. Chapter 2, which begins the analysis of Njáls saga, argues that justice alone forms the basis for legal judgements in the pre-Christian society of the first part of the saga. The concept of justice depicted there involves maintaining an equal balance in all areas of social interaction, and is closely similar to the medieval concept of justice (aequitas), with its fundamental insistence on giving to each his due (seen as the repayment of debt: reddere debitum unicuique). It is argued that the saga depicts as vulnerable the social and legal ties of a society which bases legal judgement on justice (aequitas) alone, and further that two women, the Norwegian Queen Gunnhildr, and Hallgerðr Háskuldsdóttir, expose this vulnerability. The chapter includes a discussion of the story of Hrútr Herjólfsson, who, as a just man, is shown from the outset to be concerned always to repay his debts; it is therefore ironic both that he is unable to pay his wife the marriage debt, and that he refuses to return his wife’s dowry when they divorce. Hrútr’s sexual relationship with Gunnhildr, here argued mainly on the grounds of orthodox Christian belief to be a witch, destroys his marriage. The chapter also discusses the ‘mixed’ character and ‘thief’s eyes’ of Hallgerðr, and her feud with Bergþóra Skarpheðinsdóttir, and argues that Hallgerðr’s usual desire to repay insult with greater insult leads to the inevitable escalation of this feud, since it does not
restore a just balance (*aequitas*), but (like the actions of Gunnhildr) generates a further debt.

Chapter 3 introduces mercy as the necessary complement to justice in the execution of good legal judgement. Examples are discussed from different parts of the narrative, to argue that the author shared the orthodox view that justice and mercy are equally necessary components of judgement. The description of St Michael the Archangel which the missionary Þangbrandr gives to Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson combines justice and mercy in an image of perfect judgement; the ‘ideal king’, Brian Boru of Ireland, executes legal judgement using a combination of justice and mercy. The Gospel for the feast of St Michael (Matt. xviii, 1-10) is suggested to lie behind the interventions of Síðu-Hallr and Þórhallr Ásgrímsson at the Alþingi.

Chapter 4 discusses the saga’s principal metaphors, which relate to growth and productivity, and argues that these are familiar Christian metaphors, associated with Conversion and with the Last Judgement. The sources are Scriptural and refer to the Last Judgement; they include Christ’s comments on the good and bad trees (Matt. vii, 18-19), and the related parables of the sower, and the tares among the wheat (Matt. xiii, 18-30). Among the passages which are discussed in this chapter are the metaphors used by Njáll and Flosi following the death of HÓskuldr Þráinsson Hvítanessgoði, the description of the white slopes of Hlíðarendi, ready for the harvest, and that of the weeds which are used to start the fire at Bergþórshváll.

Chapter 5 is principally a discussion of the saga’s bipartite structure. The chapter argues that the saga sets up contrasts between the death of HÓskuldr, the catastrophe that leads to the deaths of Njáll and his family, and key moments in the chain of events that leads to the death of Gunnarr Hamundarson. It is argued that the author modelled details of the death of HÓskuldr on the Scriptural account of the death of Stephen the protomartyr, and that other details of HÓskuldr’s life are taken from apocryphal tradition concerning St Stephen. In medieval literature and art, depictions of the martyrdom of Stephen are frequently paired with descriptions of the conversion of Saul: conventional portrayals of Saul falling from his horse are strongly reminiscent of the saga’s description of Gunnarr, at the moment when he refuses to go into exile and thereby seals his own fate. It is suggested that the frequent pairing of images and accounts of Stephen and Saul lies behind the saga’s bipartite structure.

The discussion of judgement is taken up again in chapter 6, which concerns the burning at Bergþórshváll, and the deaths of Njáll and Skarpheðinn. Njáll’s
apparent tactical error in retreating indoors, instead of fighting Flosi in the open, is argued to be a strategic attempt to limit further bloodshed as far as is possible, and, since Skarphéðinn must inevitably at some time face divine justice, to give him a chance to seek God’s mercy. Njáll is shown to be motivated entirely by love at this point. Comparison of Skarphéðinn’s posthumous appearance with other texts, and particularly with the portrayal of the penitent thief in Niðrstigningar saga, suggests that Skarphéðinn does indeed repent at the eleventh hour and is received into Paradise. It is argued that Christ’s own apocalyptic explication (Matt. xiii, 43) of the parable of the tares among the wheat is the source for the preternatural radiance of Njáll’s body after his death.

Chapter 7 concludes that there are indeed similarities in the ways in which the authors of Laxdæla saga and Njáls saga make use of Christian narrative elements: both authors use Scripture and its exegesis, both use Scriptural texts associated with specific ecclesiastical feasts, both use Christian metaphors, and both structure their narratives with the help of echoes which prompt contrasts between pagan openings and Christian endings. It cannot be proved that the author of Njáls saga used Laxdæla saga as a narrative model, but it seems likely. The study ends with some remarks on the early reception of Njáls saga, based on a discussion of the illuminated capitals found in the manuscript AM 133, dated to ca. 1300 - approximately only twenty years after the saga was written. Pictures on fol. 14r and 14v show a lion fighting with a dragon, and a human figure piercing a dragon with a sword; these pictures introduce Gunnarr and Njáll into the narrative. The two pictures are compared with iconography from elsewhere, and it is concluded that the lion-dragon fight is a representation of Christ’s first defeat of the devil at the harrowing of Hell (the purpose of Christ’s first coming), while the ‘human’-dragon fight is, in fact, a representation of St Michael’s final defeat of the devil at the end of time (at Christ’s second coming, and the Last Judgement). The references in these pictures, in the first to the redemption of the undeserving, and in the second to the damnation of the impenitent, show that the early artist had understood the principal theme of the saga to be the cooperating action in judgement of justice and mercy, with its model in the divine scheme of salvation.