

MEDITATIONS FROM UNDER THE CLOAK:
CHRISTIANITY, TRAUMA, AND RECONCILIATION IN
BRENNU-NJÁLS SAGA

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Mediations from Under the Cloak: Christianity, Trauma, and Reconciliation in *Brennu-Njáls Saga*.

This thesis explores the representation and testimony of trauma in the medieval *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Beginning with an outline of contemporary trauma studies, this thesis examines the repercussions narratives of social trauma. The chapters 100-105, the burning of Njal and Flosi's dream show the repercussions of the conversion as affecting not only the characters in the saga, but also landscapes, supernatural events and even the text itself. *Njal's saga* proves to be a exemplar of medieval trauma narrative as it displays the trauma of the characters in the tenth century, and provides a metatextual testimony of saga compiler's own trauma stemming from the loss of the Icelandic common wealth in the thirteenth century. *Njal's saga* exposes the violence of the tenth century and shows that even in the twenty-first century the reader must deal with the traumas long past.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary trauma studies arose out of the massive scar left on the world by the Holocaust.¹ My work with trauma is informed by many studies on memory, testimony, and history that came from working with survivors. Where I diverge from contemporary trauma studies is in the usage of anachronistic materials. I have found examinations into the traumatization of the medieval psyche are lacking. Therefore, in this thesis, I begin an exploration of reading medieval texts within the lens of trauma to illuminate the value trauma theory brings to understanding memory and identity in the medieval period. Looking forward I hope to show the manifestations of psychological trauma and its representation in the northern medieval corpus.

¹ For more comprehensive looks into contemporary trauma studies see: Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012.); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.); Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992.); Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence, from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015.); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014.); Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern*. (Munich: Piper, 1967.); Tom Toremans, “Deconstruction: Trauma inscribed in language” in *Trauma and Literature*. ed. John Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); James Edward Young. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.)

The English word trauma stems from the ancient Greek word τραῦμα (trâuma) meaning wound or hurt.² The Greek sense of the word is connected to the physical body that is wounded. In other terms, the harmonious synchronization of the body is transgressed from external actors, manifesting as physical injury which the body attempts to heal.³ Over time, the word trauma diffused into other languages and became to mean not only physical trauma but psychic transgressions as well.

A psychological wound disrupts the mind's experience of, "time, self, and the world." It is not a "simple and healable event" as a wound of the body.⁴ Once in the mind, trauma forces mnemonic erasure upon the psyche through repetition of the experienced event (in this example a wound) that was, at the time, incomprehensible to the psyche. As the psyche attempts to reconcile this wound in memory, the experience is relived as it is remembered thus replacing the memory of a time before the traumatic experience; with the memory with the traumatic experience.⁵ This erosive function of trauma creates an unending cycle where the trauma sufferer wants to either recover their pre-trauma past, or forget the traumatic experience altogether. They become stuck undulating between remembering and forgetting with each repetition rubbing away more of the surface and

² Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, "τραῦμα," in *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.), p. 1811.

³ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.), p.3. "the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" Caruth interprets here Sigmund Freud's understanding of the relationship from body to mind as he discusses in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*.

⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.), p. 79

penetrating deeper into the memory. The act of remembering thus becomes a departure, where the individual's history is renewed through remembrance.⁶ The original past becomes a represented past that only resembles the original body after trauma has penetrated and eroded the current past. The traumatized self builds a new history on the ruins of the original historical narrative.

Traumatic repetition may come to an end through the experiencer's testimony of the wound. Recalling and telling their traumatic past relieve the experiencer, allowing them to reconcile their experienced past with other. This reconciliation does not mean that the trauma disappears, it just alters the cycle. Trauma is an act that cannot see its own completion, due to the experiencer living and forgetting, and that is why it repeats indefinitely.⁷ Bearing witness and testifying to the experience provides a path to ending the repetition and reconciling trauma. Only after the representative experience created by *traumatic looping* is told in relation to the historical record of an event can the trauma come to a semblance of an end.⁸ The life of the experiencer is affirmed by testimony. It gives them justification for surviving when many others did not. The testimony gives trauma a second life. The trauma can be heard by others and thus affects them vicariously.⁹

⁶ Ibid, p. 87.

⁷ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992.), p. 51.

⁸ Ibid, p. 28. Although the trauma never fully dissolves and can be relived even after testimony.

⁹ For the term vicarious, I utilize the idea of the passage of trauma through stories about that the Holocaust as explored in James E. Young, "The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's 'Maus' and the Afterimages of History," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1998): 666-699.

The telling of a trauma experienced can penetrate the listener to make it feel as if they were the person who lived it.¹⁰ The impact of the narrative creates a feeling of empathy that allows larger groups to be affected by trauma. The testimony expresses the represented history of the original sufferer and thus produces a trauma narrative. This type of narrative has the power to change the collective memory of a social group and thus its sense of identity, like its operation on the level of the individual. Trauma penetrates and rewrites history through many voices creating a discourse about the lessons of trauma.¹¹ Over time, this discourse ossifies and becomes objectified in various ways (i.e. aesthetic objects, museums, monuments). These objects, which can be found throughout all of history, tell the story of the traumatic wounding of a society and how the given society attempted to reconcile cultural trauma.

The work undertaken by trauma theory is an academic attempt to reconcile the experiences of the Holocaust with the cultural understanding of history. The Holocaust upended humanity's understanding of itself and forced retrospection onto society. There was drastic inward deliberation in western Europe that sought to diagnose the rise and development of totalitarian regimes. These works looked toward social factors and historical developments, but often did not take survivor's recollections into account. In the seventies, movements developed to record the testimony of survivors.¹² This led to the collection of a plethora of testimonies from survivors all around the globe.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 5

¹¹ Jeffrey C. Alexander. "Cultural Trauma" in *Trauma: A Social Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2012.), p. 15

¹² Henry Greenspan, Sara R. Horowitz, Éva Kovács, Berel Lang, Dori Laub, Kenneth Waltzer, and Annette Wieviorka, "Engaging Survivors: Assessing 'Testimony' and

In the 1990's works began being published that utilized this plethora of information to develop trauma studies. The work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub showed a lack of cohesion between some of the testimonies to the historical record. In one example a survivor came to tell the story of resistance in one of the concentration camps. She recalled the concentration camp had four smokestacks which were blown up, but historical documentation showed that in reality the camp only had one.¹³ This misremembering for the historians provided enough basis to disregard this testimony, but they were not listening to what was being remembered. Laub and Felman's innovation was to listen to the trauma narratives and understand them as real experiences. The survivor remembered four smokestacks ablaze because the impact of resistance had a strong affect upon her, even if history shows the event being of little consequence.¹⁴ Laub and Felman displayed the inherent value of testimony as a tool in the remembrance of history. The testimony will not always be completely historically accurate, but what is highlighted gives insight to the importance of an event on an individual.

Felman and Laub's work on testimony is perspicacious when looking for trauma during the medieval period. The clash of Christianity and paganism is generally understood through the historical lens of the former. In the Germanic realm, many of the people were preliterate and were converted before the development of written histories. Continental (west of the Vistula) Paganism was largely suppressed by 800 with exception of

'Trauma' as Foundational Concepts," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 28, no.3 (2014):pp. 190-226.

¹³ Felman and Laub, p. 61.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.62.

Denmark.¹⁵ Oral traditions were very active in pre-Christian Scandinavia, but mostly they preserved poetry, mythological stories, and local anecdotes. Most of what is understood about ancient and early medieval paganism has been in some way translated or reconciled within Christian traditions. This relationship, unlike the modern examples of Felman and Laub, is not so easy to discern. The conversion created a deep wound in the medieval Germanic world. A wound that left scars across the early medieval landscape visible in the attempted stitching together of the two traditions in acts of appropriation. The hybridizations created by these forced enjambments can be found throughout the Germanic realm in the form of texts, sculptures, and architecture.

The Franks' casket is one such object from early medieval England.¹⁶ Its age and origin are heavily disputed, but it typically ranges from the eighth to the tenth centuries.¹⁷ The casket is a pastiche of Mediterranean, Christian, and northern traditions; displaying a variety of images ranging from Roman emperors to Germanic mythology. It is unclear what the exact intentions of the collected imagery were, but I read them as an aesthetic representation of the traumatic wound posited by the shift away from Anglo-Saxon pagan society to Christianity. A society wounded by violence and upheaval brought about by widespread cultural change causing a crisis of identity. I will just offer a reading of the

¹⁵Peter Brown, "The Closing of the Frontier: Frisia and Germany" in *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity A.D. 200-1000* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.), p. 413.

¹⁶ The small whalebone casket was purchased by Sir Augustus Franks in 1857 from an art dealer in Paris and later donated to the British Museum. For a more detailed account of the history of the casket see Amy L. Vandersall, "The Date and Provenance of the Franks Casket," *Gesta* 11, no. 2 (1972): 9-26. For an older account see: Philip Webster Souers. "The Wayland Scene on the Franks Casket," *Speculum* 18, no. 1(1943):104-111

¹⁷ Vandersall, p. 9.

front panel of the casket, as it displays a microcosm of the wider social attempts at reconciliation between the Christian and Germanic pagan traditions that I will discuss with *Njál's saga*.

The front panel is divided in two sections bordered by runic inscription. The inscription poetically describes the origins of the ivory for the casket.¹⁸ Inside of the runic border is an inset of two images. The inset is divided down the middle keeping the two images distinct from one another. The left inset on the front of the casket depicts what appears to be the Germanic myth of Wayland the smith, who was imprisoned by the King Niðhad because of his ability to forge magic rings. The right inset depicts the nativity scene with the three Magi giving the infant Christ their gifts. The casket portrays the two images sewn together in an amalgamation of circulating religious traditions in Anglo-Saxon England.

The left image on the Frank's casket attempts to combine several the elements of the Wayland legend in an evocative image rather than a narrative one. Implying a wide understanding of the story by the intended viewers. The image depicts Wayland forging a cup from the skull of the king's son, in which he serves the king's daughter a drugged drink. The daughter is raped as a form of secondary revenge against the king by infecting his lineage.¹⁹ The casket also shows, to the far right of Wayland side of the panel, a figure

¹⁸ I would also like to point to the eco-mimetic implications of the casket as well. The casket is born from violence committed to the natural world as it is created from whale bone. The violence in its creation further exacerbates the casket's status as a representative of a wound. It reflexively refers to its origins in the runic inscription on the border of the front panel, thus offering a reconciliation between the violence done to the whale and the creation of the casket.

¹⁹ Philip Webster Souers. "The Wayland Scene on the Franks Casket," *Speculum* 18, no. 1 (1943): 106.

strangling birds which is often associated with Wayland's brother, Egill, who uses the feathers of the bird to fashion wings to help Wayland escape his bondage.²⁰

The right inset shows a representation of the adoration of the magi. This biblical image is known to depict the birth of Jesus and was a common medieval motif.²¹ The adoration is depicted on the casket by the magi moving from the left side of the inset to the right, where an infant Jesus and Mary await them in the manger. They each bear a gift for the infant. Above the wise men, in a runic inlay, stands the word "magi" indicating that indeed this is what the image depicts. There is also an avian figure which is interpreted as a holy ghost figure in the bottom right of the image.²² The two scenes are divided by a knotwork pattern that runs vertical between them

This division is a representative of the conversion of Germanic society to Christianity. The sharp break displays the traumatic upheaval of traditions, the visual representation of the wound. The arrangement of the two images physically represents the progression of society from the pagan to the Christian. As the eye reads the image from left to right, the Germanic Wayland, stands on the far left, then the sharp division in the middle, representing a traumatic upheaval in traditions, then finally the infant Jesus on the far right representing the new infantile religion being born into the Germanic world. The knot work pattern simultaneously divides and stitches the wound of the conversion shut. It sutures the two traditions tightly together leaving a knotted scar behind as reminder of the

²⁰Ibid, p. 109. Souers interpolates that this comes from the version of the Wayland myth recounted in *Piðrekssaga*.

²¹Vandersall, p.12.

²² Ibid.

traumatic wound. The casket is one of the first extant Germanic objects to attempt to reconcile the old traditions and new tradition and epistemology of the Christian world.²³

The casket testifies to the trauma of the conversion, but it gives a false synthesis of history. A history in which Christianity is given precedence over the pagan tradition. This Christianized synthesis creates a monster out of the pagan story. The pagan tradition is portrayed violently and full of brutality in comparison to the soft courtly idyll that is represented by the nativity scene. The creator of the casket emphasizes monstrous nature of paganism through the Wayland story. The choice of Wayland displays a fear of the monstrous created through hybridity. He is simultaneously a man and an animal, he flies, as well as forges magical items. The figure reflects the hybridized society of 9th century Anglo-Saxon England.

Mainland Britain was divided between the Christian Anglo-Saxon and the pagan Norse. The first Norse interaction with England was the raid on Lindisfarne in 793 and by 886 they had established the Danelaw, in the eastern half of Britain, through a treaty with Alfred the Great.²⁴ The casket's testimony reinvokes the trauma of the conversion. The two traditions represented on the casket are set against each other as the violent Norse pagans represent the brutality and monstrosity and the Anglo-Saxons as peace-loving good Christians. This dichotomy renders worries about a hybridized society. The political situation in 9th century England invokes a return to the dithering of the conversion. The Franks' casket is therefore not only a testimony about the trauma of the conversion but also

²³ The traditional date of the casket is in the 9th century, but Amy Vandersall, places it potentially in the 10th century leading this statement to be contentious.

²⁴ Gwyn Jones, "Appendix II. The Danelaw" *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.), p. 421.

a testimony to the resurgence of paganism, via the Norse, in their land and the fears about the loss of identity that may come with it. The casket is a physical reminder of the radical departure from paganism as well as the testimony of its resurgence.

The Franks' casket is the beginning of several attempts at reconciling Christianity with Germanic paganism. As society moved away from pagan cultures, reconciliation became the obsession of many monastic scholars.²⁵ Christianity spread northwards into Scandinavia eventually arriving in Iceland the year 1000. Medieval Icelanders interest in great story telling opened the island to be an active battle ground between the pagan and Christian world.

The first prominent Icelandic historian was Sæmundr Sigfússon (1056 –1133). A student on the continent (either France or Franconia), he returned to Iceland bringing Latin learning with him. He established a school at Oddi, which became a bastion of education and manuscript production on the island. Sæmundr wrote, a now lost, Latin history of the Kings of Norway, which was utilized by Snorri Sturlusson to write his *Heimskringla*.²⁶ In addition to Sæmundr, Ári Þorgilsson (1067–1148) was the other man instrumental in the development of the storytelling tradition in Iceland. He was a homegrown scholar at the school in Haukadalr. There he learned the classics, but also oral Icelandic traditions.²⁷ His only verified work is *Íslendigabók* (the Book of Icelanders). This work chronicles the names and information about the first people to arrive and settle Iceland in the ninth and

²⁵ These reconciliatory efforts can be found in many medieval works such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Das Nibelungenlied*, and *Olafs saga Tryggvasonar*.

²⁶ E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.), pp. 81-82.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 88.

tenth centuries as well as the conversion in the year 1000. This work along with *Landnámabók* (the Book of Settlements), which is thought to be partially Ari's work, are key sources for the creation of the *Íslendigasögur*.²⁸

The *Íslendigasögur* are the indigenous genre of Iceland. They recount the stories of prominent Icelanders during the settlement period (876 –1000). Most of the sagas are works of anonymous scribes working in monasteries during the thirteenth century. The sagas utilized a combination of elements for source materials. The aforementioned chronicles usually provided the framework and basic information about the saga's protagonist. Other stories and elements, such as legal codes and skaldic poetry are mixed in creating a dynamic long prose narrative. The plot of the saga generally centers around a feud between two families resulting in a legal transgression. The sagas were always based in the past but are no longer considered historically accurate. Instead they provide readers with insight to the thirteenth century mind and their concerns which are overlaid on to the saga form. They also illuminate much about the tenth century pagan past due to their proximity to it. It is through these scribes that most, if not all the information about Germanic paganism survives to this day.²⁹

²⁸ Theodore M. Anderson, "Critical Considerations" in *The Problem of Saga Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964.), p.83.

²⁹ Outside of runestones, place names and some early texts like the Merseburg incantations and Hildebrandslied there is a lack of primary source references from the Pre-Christian age. For early views on the subject consult, Jakob Grimm, *Die deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen: Dieterischen Buchhandlung, 1835.). For more contemporary see John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.). For conversion narrative and rise of Christianity see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.)

The culmination of medieval Icelandic literary production is the masterfully crafted *Brennu-Njals Saga* emerging in 1280. *Njála* is widely considered the pinnacle of the genre of the Icelandic Family saga due to its length and mid-thirteenth century date.³⁰ The saga centers around two tenth century families, one led by the titular Njal Þorgierson, and the other of Gunnar of Hliðarendi who get entangled in a blood feud that encompasses much of Iceland. The saga features a doubled structure with two narrative climaxes. The conversion functions as a subplot which serves as a divider between the two distinct halves of the text. Like the Franks' casket, the conversion's appearance in the middle of *Njála* represents as a physical wound disrupting the otherwise cohesive text. In the saga, the conversion of Iceland is traumatic threatening to fracture society which effects every person in the text. A new system of morality and ethics introduced by the conversion penetrates the characters' actions through the course of the narrative climax. This thesis will examine the effects of this conversion in four distinct sections of *Njal's saga* that encompass several important textual moments. These sections highlight the struggle of not only the figures of the text, but how the authorship still struggled with the reconciliation of the conversion to Christianity nearly three hundred years prior. *Njal's saga*, after the conversion episode, functions as a rhetorical justification of the conversion to Christianity, as the author's own society struggles to maintain their identity during the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth.

The first chapter of this thesis will look at Chapters 100-106, which has been postulated by some scholars to be its own *þáttur* due to its intrusive insertion in between the

³⁰ Theodore M. Anderson, "Demythologizing the Tradition" in *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas 1180-1280* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.), p. 183.

high points of the narrative.³¹ This examination will look closely at the conversion in three subsections. The first being the conversion of Njal, Hall of Siða and other prominent Icelanders. The second being the push back from priests and holy people with the final section covering the legal codification of the religion and the implications of this action for the entirety of Icelandic society. The ambiguity created by this event functions as the initial departure from which the oscillations of trauma are born.³² This section on the conversion narrative will display the initial traumatic wounding and ambivalent reaction which escalates as the old ways and the new ones come into conflict with one another leading to the death of Njal.

The second chapter will cover what I will call the martyrdom of Njal. After the death of Gunnar, a close friend of Njal, the violence that plagues much of the saga circulates from some minor confrontations to murders. After Njal's sons murder their foster brother Hoskuld, and disrupt the following legal proceedings, the saga ramps up for the second and main climax of the text, the burning of Njal. The main antagonist, Flosi, and one hundred of his men come to burn Njal and his sons alive in their farmstead. Njal accepts his fate and like a martyr is burned alive, for crimes he was innocent of. When the burners return Njal's body and that of his grandson and wife are untouched by the flames. This martyrdom displays their innocence giving the text an iconographic feel, in a literature known for its brutal imagery.

³¹ Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical approaches to Njals Saga* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971.), p. 117. Allen denies this claim as it is made by others such as Sveinsson. See Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njál's Saga: A Literary Masterpiece* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.), p. 52.

³² Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*. p.7.

The burning has a two-fold function as it shows the traumatic development stemming from violence on the individual. It also displays the social effects Christianity has on the burners. A complicated morality is put on display in this scene as the saga compiler's Christianized world view mingles with the pagan traditions. The burning of Njal is arguably the result of Christianity as in Gunnar's death scene, there is talk of burning him in his home as well, but it is decided against due to a code of honor and circumstances. The burning of Njal displays the conflict between the pagan rights of reciprocity as well as Christian morality. Njal's death scars Icelandic society deeply as well as casts a dark shadow over the rest of the text.

The third chapter studies Flosi's dream. It covers both the function of dreams in saga narrative as well as the author's attempt at reconciliation of the two traditions through writing. This scene blends three distinct traditional elements together as noted by Einar Ól. Sveinsson.³³ It blends a folkloric motif the figure of Iron-Grim, the dialogues of St. Gregory and landscape together to create a hybridized scene that also reflects Flosi's traumatized psyche. This section divulges into the status of Flosi and displays the workings of trauma on the individual level, mainly through Flosi's dream and the manifestation of it through speaking to his confidant, Ketil. Flosi's dream show the conflict of two ethical systems and the affective nature trauma takes upon the actors themselves. Flosi's condition serves as a reminder that even those who commit a heinous act, can have reflexive psychological repercussions from them.

³³ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.), p.15

In the conclusive section, the skaldic poem *Darraðarljóð* will be visited. This brutal poem serves to reiterate traumatic repetition by evoking the violence that has dominated the entire text, while surrounding it with supernatural and elements. This scene serves as an attempt to close the traumatic loop, since the Christian forces at the battle of Clontarf win over the pagan ultimately ending the reign of paganism in the region. This also corresponds with Flosi reconciling with the Kari, who was the sole survivor of the burning and taking a pilgrimage to Rome to confess his sins to the pope. The text closes on an ambiguous note, as Flosi sails out from Norway and is presumed lost at sea giving no definitive ending to the loop of trauma.

Overall, the text of *Njal's Saga* provides several avenues to look at the creation of a trauma narrative on a social scale as well as the effects of trauma on the individual. The backgrounded plot centered around the conversion to Christianity carries on a debate that had been active since the seventh century and highlights the ability for trauma to wound without violence. *Njal's* saga is a story centered around violence, but the ultimate source of strife comes from social upheaval and epistemological change.

CHAPTER II

“CHRIST DIDN’T DARE FIGHT WITH HIM” SCENES FROM THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND

Brennu-Njals saga is generally regarded to have been written in the 1280s. The oldest remaining manuscript extant today, a fragment from *Þormóðsbók* (AM 162 B fol.8) dates to the beginning of fourteenth century.³⁴ Overall, there around 60 manuscripts of *Njála* dating from around 1300 into the nineteenth century.³⁵ This level of textual reproduction was unprecedented for the medieval period making the saga of Njal Porgierson and his family stand out among its thirteenth century peers.

Njal’s saga is the work of an author “who seems to have had the last line of the saga in mind when he wrote the first”.³⁶ The saga was anonymously written by a monk in the southern portion of Iceland. His work composes a tightly woven series of events; interlaced with faith, law, and familial intrigue. It breaks with typical saga convention with its character development and structural ingenuity. As Theodore Anderson has pointed out, “*Njal’s saga* persistently subverts a series of traditional narrative patterns and the authorial perspectives they imply.”³⁷ Anderson’s observation strongly highlights the focus of the

³⁴ Ludger Zeevaert, “Easy tools to get to grips with linguistic variation in the manuscripts of *Njáls saga*,” Digital Medievalist, University of Lethbridge, 10. Jul. 2015, <http://doi.org/10.16995/dm.60>. The Icelandic quoted in this text comes from the critical edition *Brennu-Njals Saga, Islenzka Fornrit. XII*. ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykjavik: Islenzka fornritafelag, 1954.) (abbreviated as *IF XII*)

³⁵ Zeevaert.

³⁶ Stefan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957.), p. 146.

³⁷ Anderson, *The Growth of the Medieval Saga 1180-1280*. p. 200.

saga on Iceland. Nearly all the fully formed family sagas begin with a Norwegian history, explaining the genealogy of the saga's main character. The *Njala* author ignores this convention; choosing instead to begin with the plot. The saga does not disregard historicity, it utilizes history as a narrative tool, but rather that the compiler favors focus on the problems of Iceland.

Njál's saga utilizes Icelandic sources to give historical context rather than a connection to the Norwegians. The saga intersperses historical genealogical information, taken from sources like *Landnámabók*, to build a framework. It then combines that frame with traditions that must have been active in the thirteenth century to create a fuller portrait bringing the characters to life. *Njála's* characters become the most human when engaged at the Alþing, Iceland's legal parliament and court system. Stefan Einarsson states very eloquently the power that the *Njala* author brings to these moments. He states, "Nothing, perhaps, astonishes us more than his way of conjuring up the colorful life of the Althing now lost forever, by copying long formulas out the dead and dry-as-dust lawbooks and endowing them with the life of his spirit."³⁸ *Njál's saga* brings life to the law by portraying the effects of legal proceedings on the people. Additionally, the genealogies and the legalistic terminology of the Alþing give credence to the narrativized historical reconstruction of the saga. This reconstructed history testifies to the authors own worries about the loss of Icelandic culture as the commonwealth is dissolved by the Norwegian crown.³⁹

³⁸ Einarsson, p. 148.

³⁹ Ibid, p.147.

The saga's focus is oriented toward fate, mainly of two prominent men, one pre- and one post- conversion. The conversion to Christianity serves as focal point from which the shape of the saga renews itself constituting a doubled structure. The saga compiler has an interest in doubles which are paramount to the text, as they can be found not just in the structure of the text, but in figures and motifs as well. These doublings often create friction in the text, as in the feuding between Halgerð and Bergþora. They also foreshadow events to come such as the death of Gunnar previewing the burning of Njal. Structural doublings like these also display the return of the repressed traumatic effects of the conversion, as the events transpire in a similar manner, with much different outcomes. Gunnar's death is justified due to his outlaw status and it signifies the death of the pagan hero as the conversion follows soon after. The burning of Njal is a brutal murder that has vicarious moral, emotional, and legal effects for the remainder of the saga.

Njal's saga is a saga about Iceland written for Icelanders. This does not mean that the work is simply a piece of nostalgia, yearning for the days of great heroes and pagan simplicity. It complicates this notion through repeated attempts at reconciling the precarious religious plight of the late tenth century with the thirteenth century's uncertain socio/political situation. It bears witness to a trauma remembered and testifies to a trauma lived. It testifies to the troubles of social upheaval thus creating a narrative of social trauma and it supports its claims with genealogical and legal histories which indicate the conversion to Christianity as a departure from a legendary past into a traumatized world.

The conversion chapters 100-106 function as an interjection into the main body of the narrative. They occur as saga is de-escalating from the death of Gunnar. The disruption is notable it is one of the few moments that feels out of place in the saga. The chapters

emphasize the missionary Þangbrand sent from Norway to convert Iceland by Ólaf Tryggvasson.⁴⁰ These scenes break the cohesiveness of the narrative creating a physical break in the structure of the saga. They prefigure the traumatic effects of the conversion setting the stage for the escalation of the narrative to the burning of Njal. Coincidentally, Njal is first to perceive the coming of Þangbrand in Chapter 100.

News of the new religion stems from hearsay before any Norse Christian arrives in the commonwealth.⁴¹ In relation to this news, Njal was heard saying, “Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sæll, er þann sið bjóða, þa ska lek þat vel flytja”⁴² The text finishes this passage by adding, “Han mælti þat opt. Hann fór opt frá qrðum mǫnnum ok þulði, einn saman”.⁴³ Njal’s statement displays his foresight, one of his prominent character features. As stated by Lars Lönnroth, “Predictions by authoritative spokesmen of the narrator that this or that character will be lucky or unlucky therefore

⁴⁰ King Ólaf Tryggvasson brought Christianity to Norway in a very violent manner. *Njal’s saga* gives a brief mention of Ólaf’s rise to power at the beginning of Chapter 100. Other versions of the Ólaf story can be found in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, The most complete version of Olaf’s life come from *Óláfs saga Tryggvassonar en mesta* which is based off of Snorri’s version as well as the earlier Latin versions of Oddr Snorrasson and Gunnlaugr Leifsson.

⁴¹ Grønlie Siân, *The Book of the Icelanders: The Story of the Conversion* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006.), p. 4. I make this distinction because Ari Þorgilsson’s mentions the “Papar” in *Íslendigabók*, who were eremitic Irish monks who departed sometime after the Norse settled Iceland in the 870’s. Ari states, “They later went away because they did not wish to stay here with heathens”

⁴² *IF XII*, p. 255. “It appears to me as if the new faith must be much better, and that he who accepts it will be happy. If later they preach the new religion, I shall favor supporting it.” All translations in this thesis are my own.

⁴³ *Ibid.* “He said that often. He often went from other men and murmured to himself alone.”

serve as very important clues to the ethic of the saga.”⁴⁴ Njal, the figure of authority, understands the coming strife of the systematic change imposed by the conversion, accepts it as such, and encourages others to do the same. The saga compiler argues, through Njal, for the prevention of the fracturing of the commonwealth by not fighting the incoming religion. Njal lives this trauma before others due to his prescience. Trauma stems from events, “that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later.”⁴⁵ For Njal, these events first appear in his psyche, which leads to an accelerated expression of traumatic looping. The trauma returns for Njal when the events actually occur. His foresight precedes his grasping of the entire situation forcing him to isolate. A common symptom of trauma experiencers is isolation from the group.⁴⁶ The text emphasizes that Njal begins this process at the news as it states, he is, “einn saman”. He isolates because others cannot relate to the trauma. Every textual recurrence of the religion reinstates the traumatic looping affectively restarting the traumatic experience. The key term that indicates a repetition of these events is the adverb, “opt (often)” is utilized to give a frequency to Njal’s strange behavior. Njal is both the voice of the author and the eyes/ears of the audience.

Njal’s cautionary words regarding the conversion signposts the arrival of Þangbrand and his assistant Guðlief. They are met immediately with opposition. Prominent men in the region forbid trade with the bishop. Hall of Siða hears of this and rides to meet

⁴⁴ Lars Lönnroth, “Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas,” in *Sagas of the Icelanders* ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.), p. 86.

⁴⁵ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p.91.

⁴⁶ Martin J. Dorahy and Michael C. Paterson “Trauma and dissociation in Northern Ireland,” *Trauma and Dissociation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Not just a North American Phenomenon*, eds. George F. Rhoades Jr. and Vedat Sar M.D (Binghamton: Haworth Press, 2006.), p. 238.

Pangbrand, inviting him back to his farm to find a market for trade. After some time, Pangbrand sets up a tent to celebrate Michaelmas and the celebration draws Hall's attention. He interrogates Pangbrand about the angel Michael asking which features does Michael possess, to which Pangbrand replies, "hann skal meta allt þat, sem þú gerir, bæði gott ok illt, ok er svá miskunnsamr, at hann metr allt þat meira, sem verl er gort".⁴⁷ This impresses Hall who would like to have him as a friend ⁴⁸so long as Pangbrand, on behalf of Michael, promises Hall that he would be his guardian angel to which Pangbrand agrees.

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This peaceful conversion is not indicative of the other conversion episodes, but it displays an interest that some figures developed towards the new religion. The authorial choice to use Michael seems to be a fitting understanding of the warrior/honor-based society of eleventh century Iceland. A deity that judges one's deeds would assimilate well to a society where honor was, "as basic and essential as one's daily bread."⁵⁰ The interest in the mercy of the angel Michael also foreshadows the deeds of Hall's son-in-law Flosi, who is the main conspirator in the death of Njal. Hall's acceptance of the religion relies on the promise of Michael's protection. The swearing of oaths is one of the most serious acts

⁴⁷ *IF XII*, p. 257. "He will value all that you do, both good and bad, and he is so merciful that he values all that which is well done most greatly."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* "Eiga vilda ek hann mér at vin."

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* "Þat vil ek þá til skilja", segir Hallr, 'at þú heitir því fyrir hann, at hann sé þá fylgjuengill minn."

⁵⁰ Theodore M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas" in *Sagas of the Icelanders*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989.), p. 41.

done in the Germanic world, so Hall forces a quid pro quo from Þangbrand, the angel's protection in exchange for religious conversion of the people of his farmstead.

Hall's dealings with Þangbrand portray a domestic practicality that seems to be inherent to the medieval Icelanders.⁵¹ This practicality is also very apparent in the second domestic conversion scene portrayed in these six chapters. In this second anecdote Þangbrand deals with a berserker that is terrorizing the farm of Gestr Oddliefsson in the area of Bardastrand. The text says of the matter, “frá honum var sagt svá mikit, at hann hræddisk hvárki eld né egg, ok váru heiðnir men hræddir mjök.”⁵² The fear struck into the community is reduced due to their “heathen” nature their fears of this berserker are nullified by the text, due to their religious status. This is a rare moment where *Njal's Saga* takes on a continental tone towards paganism. The saga compiler is careful not to use such terminology, but the fear of the berserker, centered around his seeming imperviousness toward fire and steel, is a moment where his Christian beliefs shine through in the text.

In response to the threat, Þangbrand offers a test of the two faiths. This test of faith furthers the pressure applied by the saga compiler on the Norse religion as the author tries to clarify the reasons Christianity ultimately takes over the pagan religion. The test as suggested by Þangbrand is a literal trial by fire. Three fires are constructed, one blessed by the pagans, the second by Þangbrand and third unblessed as a failsafe. The final conditions of the test were negotiated that should the berserker walk through the pagan fire but finds fear at Þangbrand's fire, then the people of the household would convert. Later that night,

⁵¹ Willian Ian Miller, *Why's your axe bloody?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.), p. 183.

⁵² *IF XII* p.267, “Much was said of him, that he feared neither fire nor the edge of a sword and heathen men were very fearful of him.”

the berserker appears, and the fires are lit at news of his coming. He advances directly through the “heathen” fire. He then comes to Þangbrand’s fire where he:

ok þorði eigi at vaða þamm eldinn ok kvazk brenna allr. Hann høggr sverðinu upp á bekkinn, ok kom í þvertréit, er hann reiddi hátt. Þangbrandr laust með róðukrossi á hǫndina, ok varð jarategn svá mikil, at sverði fell ór hendi berserkinum. Þá leggr Þangbrandr sverði fyrir brjóst honum, en Guðleifr hjó á hǫndina, svá at af tók.⁵³

This is the only real example of conversion by the sword that comes in *Njála* and it is portrayed as a misaligned version. The people are not put to death if they do not convert, but rather they convert if the bishop is successful in eliminating the berserk.⁵⁴ Another quid pro quo situation is thus created where the ever-practical Icelanders find a way to remove their problem, the berserk, with low repercussions. Everyone is stricken with awe when Þangbrand’s promise works and rids the region of the berserk. The people then capitulate to the man who performed the seemingly impossible task and give themselves over to Christianity.

This scene shows the compiler’s nuanced understanding of the two religious traditions and way of navigating a reconciliation between them. This scene portrays two miraculous events in a saga that has a complicated relationship with supernatural events. The first being the violent burning sensation reported by the berserk as he reaches Þangbrand’s fire and the second being the dropping of his sword after being struck by the bishop’s crucifix. The burning scene evokes two things, firstly, Christian conceptions of

⁵³ *IF XII*, p. 269. “and did not dare to pass through the fire and said he burned all over. He swung his sword up from the bench and it stuck in the crossbeam where he had swung. Þangbrand struck him on the arm with his crucifix and there was a great miracle, the sword fell from the berserker’s hand and Þangbrand thrust his sword into his chest and Guðlief swung at his hand and cut it off.”

⁵⁴ Miller, p. 183.

hell and second the burning of Njal at the climax of the story. The berserk's burning plays out in direct opposition to Njal's as he has not given up his pagan religion and thus is violently burnt alive. The bishop's blow of the cross then functions as both a moment of mercy, but also of resounding violence. The power of the touch of God, via crucifix, disrupts the berserker's rage allowing Þangbrand to kill the berserk with his sword. The Christian conquering the pagan foe. Both acts show that Þangbrand may have a streak of compassion for the pagans. The blow with the cross implies a last-minute absolution of the berserk's sins forcing him to drop his weapons and accept his death at Þangbrand's final blow. The symbolism of dropping his weapons subverts Norse conceptions of Valhalla, where one is only permitted to enter if they have fought bravely in battle. His dropping of the sword and the blow of the cross brings ambiguity to the fate of the berserker.

This episode foreshadows the coming trauma of the burning, through which concepts of mercy and compassion reverberate and distort pagan morality. Here the moral implications of the death of the berserk are little, as this form of revenge killing fit with the crimes committed by the berserk. Later in the burning of Njal, this sense of moral justice becomes corrupted and complicated when intermingled with Christian morality, so the violence become perceived as a traumatic act and the implications of said violence affects the perpetrators strongly. These waves of violence bring with them the psychological change that begins with the conversion of the average peoples.

These two scenes centered around the more ordinary people of Iceland show the importance of the domestic sphere during the conversion. As Miller puts it, "at no point in *Njál's Saga* does theological discussion or orthodox doctrine get dealt with more deeply

than at this homely level.⁵⁵ These discussions continue to develop throughout the saga, but the Hall of Siða episode provides a peaceful discussion of doctrinal information, without blood-shed. The berserker episode provides an allegorical understanding of doctrine influenced by morality. Those who do not repent will suffer. This portends the burning as, unlike the berserk, Njal is penitential and thus his body survives his ordeal unburned. The Hall and berserk episodes also illuminate a strong sense of the legalistic and religious values inherent to Germanic paganism. Values such as revenge and the swearing of oaths were dictated by the law and have reverberating implications on other social levels of Norse society. The two scenes work together to show that a reconciliation of the traditions could cohabitate through mutual respect. Both Hall and Gestr convert after their agreements with Þangbrand culminate positively for them. His methods also seem to appease the Icelanders giving hope that Christianity will permeate the populace.

The group of people who pushed against Þangbrand's mission the hardest were the people who were deeply rooted in the traditions of paganism, such as shamans and witches. The chapters 101 and 102 relay engagements that Þangbrand has with these types of people. The saga compiler has an interest in folk narratives, and they arise in certain places throughout the text. One of the most memorable ones comes in chapter 101.

The chapter begins with Þangbrand visiting various districts preaching the faith. When Þangbrand and his retinue left the Skógar district, news of his travels went before him and reached some men who paid a sorcerer named Heðinn to kill Þangbrand and his men. Heðinn performs sacrifices at Arnarstakk heath. As Þangbrand was traveling due east from the heath, "þá brast í sundr jörðin undir hesti hans, en hann hlóp af hestinum ok komsk

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 180.

upp á bakkann, en jörðin svalg hestinn með ǫllum reiðingi, ok sá þeir hann aldri siðan. Þá lofaði Þangbrandr guð.”⁵⁶ The landscape itself is now marred by the conversion. The chasm functions as an eco-mimetic wound created in response to Christians riding across it.⁵⁷ Heðinn’s usage of geomancy generates a sense that landscape itself has a role in the conversion. As will be seen later in Flosi’s dream, the landscape there too plays an important role in Flosi’s feelings of guilt. The intentional damage of the land functions as a premonitory symbol of the lasting traumatic effects of Christianity on the Icelandic identity.

This brief mention of the landscape provides a moment of narrative significance, this demarcates an important event. Richard Allen states that rarely is there, “any description of the landscape in the sagas, except for those details which will influence the action later on.”⁵⁸ The description of landscape is a narratological tool used to slow down the saga to draw attention to important details. In *Njal’s saga*, the landscape and the supernatural often accompany significant scenes, such as deaths and overtly Christian elements. In the latter half of the saga, the Christian and supernatural coagulate around the wounds first created by the conversion. The Hedin episode provides a turning point for Þangbrand’s conversion efforts as his only peaceful conversion (Hall of Siða) comes first

⁵⁶*IF XII*, p. 259. “The earth broke asunder under his horse, he jumped off the horse and climbed up the embankment, then the earth swallowed the horse with all of the riding gear, they never saw it again. Þangbrand praised God.”

⁵⁷ This usage of the landscape differs from the idyllic scene before the death of Gunnar. In that scene he is so stricken by the beauty of the waves of grain on his homeland, that he decides to stay in Iceland despite his exile. The landscape plays an eco-mimetic role as the represented beauty equates to the equally illustrious death of Gunnar.

⁵⁸ Richard F Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njál’s saga* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973.), p. 34.

and all the following accounts including the berserk episode rely either on violence or fail in their mission. The extensive violence created by Þangbrand, namely series of killings, gets him exiled from Iceland.

The first such killing comes after they discover that Heðinn was responsible for the magic that opened the earth, swallowing Þangbrands's horse. Guðlief tracks down Heðinn and kills him. The second such scene immediately follows where Þangbrand murders the skald Veturliði who fights against him and as seen in *Kristini saga*, performs a *nið* or ritualized insult against him.⁵⁹ One could argue that Þangbrand acted defensively since defamations were as taken as severely as physical violence but this again reminds the reader of the complex intermingling of traditions that is at work in this part of the text.⁶⁰ Þangbrand, who as a Christian born Saxon, should not fall privy to Norse pagan systems of honor, yet he still acts upon a *nið* as if he were pagan. This shows, like the Franks' casket, religious and moral systems were changing, but other societal layers such as the honor and reciprocal systems found in Germanic paganism still operated with little change. Þangbrand is also insulted by Thorvald the Sickly, whom he and Guðleif kill after they discover Thorvald's plan to kill them when they came to preach in his village. This sequence of killings in chapter 102 is ended with a debate between Þangbrand and Steinunn, mother of Ref the Poet, after Þangbrand's ship is crashed off the east coast of Iceland.

⁵⁹ Carol J. Clover "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Representations* 44, no.1 (1993): 8-9.

⁶⁰ Jenny Jochens, "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000," *Speculum* 74, no. 3 (1999): 645.

Pangbrand's debate with Steinunn is one sided in nature. She does most of the talking and tries to convert Pangbrand to paganism Their exchange runs thusly:

“Hefir þú heyrst þat,” sagði hon, “er Þórr bauð Kristi á hólmi, ok treystisk hann eigi at bejask við Þór?” “Heyrt hefi ek þat,” Pangbrandr, “at Þórr væri ekki nema mold ok aska þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði.”⁶¹

The debate is short but telling in the competing ethical systems at work in this text. Steinunn's speech puts the pagan values on display. She belittles Christ with a *nið*. A man who would not fight has little position as a man in the Norse system.⁶² Both figures, Thor and Christ, stand as metonyms of their faith systems. Steinunn is therefore challenging not just the figure head of the religion, but the ideological underpinnings as well. She criticizes the mercy and compassion that is associated with the religion implying the cowardice and fear that were looked down upon in Norse paganism.

Pangbrand's response is collected considering he killed Veturliði for slandering him. Steinunn slanders God and Pangbrand's reacts in an almost childish manner. He hyperbolizes the power of God; saying he could cease Thor's existence to that of dust and ashes. This summons an image of Christianity's proliferation leaving only the detritus of paganism in Europe. Pangbrand must believe there is some value in paganism, since he includes, “þegar guð vildi eigi, at hann lifði” (if God did not want him to live). God allows Thor to live for the same reasons the devil lives to challenge the faithful. God could destroy him from the world, but instead Thor and his servant Steinunn exist to test the faith of

⁶¹ *IF XII*, p. 265. “‘Have you heard,’ she said, ‘that Þór challenged Christ to a duel and he did not try his hand at fighting with Þór?’ ‘What I have heard,’ said Pangbrand, ‘that Þórr would be nothing but dust and ashes if God didn't want him to live.’”

⁶² Clover, p.7.

Pangbrand and those like him. His reaction to these events is not a rejection of paganism but a reconciliation. Both can exist in the world because Christianity needs a test of faith. Pangbrand still adheres to the pagan code of honor as he takes *nið* very seriously which indicates a reason for the continued existence of paganism in the world. His disposition in the Steinunn scene seems to be a break from his adherence to his mission, as she bests him further by bringing tangibility into the debate.

The passage with Steinunn concludes with two skaldic poems that she recites to explain Pangbrand's coincidental shipwreck in the east. Both of her poems name Thor as the reason that Pangbrand's ship was destroyed on the sea. She recites:

Þórr brá Þvinnils dýri
Þangbrands ór stað lǫngu,
Hristi búss ok bestyi
Barðs ok laust við jǫrðu⁶³

Steinunn's poem uses tangible physical evidence to support her arguments against Pangbrand. She proves the existence of Thor's power by reminding Pangbrand of his wrecked ship concretizing the abstract powers of the gods. Steinunn's utilization of an observable phenomenon speaks further to the proclivity of the practicality of the Icelanders.

⁶³ *IF XII*, p. 266.

“Thor thrust Thangbrand's beast
of Thvinnil from its place at sea;
he shook and shattered
the armored prow
and slammed it against the shore”

Thvinnil is a sea god, so “Thvinnil's beast” means ship.

Pangbrand claims his god is powerful in the abstract sense, but Thor achieves results in the real world and thus is a god worthy of praise. This observable concretization of godly power ends the debate as Pangbrand says no more and leaves to Gestr Oddliefsson's farm. This scene is the opposition to the berserker episode as it concretizes the power of Christianity; just as, this one concretizes the ability of the pagan gods. These oppositions display the attempted reconciliation between the two traditions as one religious system is not given explicit precedence over the other.

After his visit to Gestr's farm, Pangbrand has charges brought against him for the murders of Veturliði, Thorvald, and Hedin. His mission is viewed by King Olaf as a failure overall Pangbrand was unsuccessful in converting the entirety of Iceland to the new religion. Pangbrand's conversion of the prominent Icelanders, such as Njal, Flosi and especially Hall of Siða, plays an important role in the conversion through law.⁶⁴ After his return to Norway, Olaf sends two Icelanders, Hjalti Skeggjason and Gizur the White, to aid in the conversion. Their understanding of the system finally pushed the commonwealth to adopt the religion via the law.

Iceland's adoption of Christianity is unprecedented in the medieval world. Iceland converts via arbitration at the Alþing through tremendous efforts from Þorgeir Goði and Hall of Siða. They are responsible for unifying the two traditions under a legal veil which if not enacted would have torn the commonwealth asunder. There was legal code before the conversion that outlawed blaspheming the pagan gods. This law was viewed as problematic by Icelanders, who detested tyranny and would not stand for brother

⁶⁴ Miller, p. 185.

denouncing brother.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, this law was enacted and threatened the security of the commonwealth to its core. The compiler of *Njal's* saga is aware of this law as he mentions the exile of Hjalti Skeggjason for “sekr á þingi um goðgá.”⁶⁶ Hjalti's banishment gave legal precedence to paganism, which stimulates the desire for the Christians to separate. The author adapts Hjalti's banishment to express a sense of Christian persecution, but to also air his own concerns as he downplays Hjalti's role in the conversion to further exacerbate the division of society that troubles him.⁶⁷

Violence against one's family is one of the cardinal sins of Germanic paganism. The Eddic description of Ragnarök affirms the worry of this violation in pagan society. The poem *Völuspá* in the *Poetic Edda* describes the carnage,

Brother will fight brother and be his slayer;
Brother and sister will violate the bond of kinship
Hard it is in the world⁶⁸

Their fears of mutual destruction through denunciation is a very present reality in their mythology. The story of Ragnarök would have been a well-known one in the early tenth century and present in their minds as Iceland is making motions to tear itself asunder religiously. Once the institutional structure begins to dictate the behavior of the individual,

⁶⁵ Jochens. p. 645.

⁶⁶ *IF XII*, p. 269. “guilty of things against the gods.”

⁶⁷ Miller, p. 179. Miller points out that according to Ari that Hjalti plays a larger role in the conversion, so *Njála's* author must be downplaying Hjalti for his own devices.

⁶⁸ Carolyne Larrington, “The Prophecy of the Seeress (*Voluspa*)” in *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008.), p. 10.

cracks open to allow trauma to set into a society. The legal codification of religion forces the enactment of vicarious trauma in the text.

Njála relays the legal conversion in one short scene that highlights the conflict at the center of the conversion. The division of Iceland into two factions. The men approached the Law rock and “ok sǫgðusk hvárir ór lögum annarra, ok varð þá svá mikit óhljóð at lögbergi, at engi nam annars mal.”⁶⁹ This moment signifies the creation the actual penetrating wound. The men no longer feel obligated to their legal duties to their fellow Icelanders. Religion cleaves society in twain, mirroring the marred landscape in the Heðinn episode. The Icelandic Commonwealth runs the risk of falling into the crag that has opened in their social system. It embodies a form of trauma which, “disrupts our notions of fixed personality traits and draws attention to reactive behavior.”⁷⁰ The Christian faction disrupts an otherwise homogenous entity, the law. The legal proceedings threaten to destroy the order that the Alþing represents. Law is a crucial portion of the Icelander’s identity. The assertions that the Christians will not recognize the laws of the pagan, shows the pressure this divide applied to the society. Both sides are fighting to stave of the erasure of their ways of life. The Christians want to continue living in peace, while the pagans do not want a disruption of the status quo.

The conflict is reconciled when Hall of Siða, chosen by the Christians as their law speaker, pays Þorgeir Goði, a pagan, to mediate the problem. Þorgeir lies under a cloak for

⁶⁹ *IF XII*, p. 271. “and they declared themselves no longer bound by law of the other, and there was such an uproar at the law rock that no one could hear anyone else’s speech”

⁷⁰ Laurie Vikroy, “Introduction” in *Reading Trauma Narratives* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.), p. 8.

a day and speaks with no one. Miller speculates that he is composing the statutes of the law.⁷¹ After the passage of the day, Þorgeir emerges and proclaims:

Svá lízk mér sem málum várum sé komit í ónýtt efni, ef eigi hafa ein lög allir, en ef sundr skipt er lögnum, þámun ok sundr skipt friðinum, ok mun eigi við þat mega búa. Nú vil ek þess spyrja heiðna men ok kristna, hvárt þeir vilja hafa lög þau, er ek segi upp.’ Því játuðu allir. Hann kvazk vilja hafa svardaga af þeim ok festu at halda. Þeir játuðu því, ok tók hann af þeim festu. ‘Þat er upphaf laga várara,’ sagði hann, ‘at menn skulu allir vera kristinir hér á landi ok trúa á einn guð.’⁷²

Þorgeir’s speech address the concerns of social fracturing that would occur if two law codes were to exist in Iceland, he gains the men’s oaths that they would not challenge his ruling and finally he enacts the legal transition from one system to the other. Hall’s employment of Þorgeir as declarer of the law makes this passage work. If Hall and the Christians attempted to implement social change in this way, it would have failed, but since a pagan law speaker who is widely respected makes this judgement, the legal changes remain effective and are less likely to be challenged.

Þorgeir’s insistence upon the oaths of fidelity displays a savvy understanding of the social tensions that were at work leading up to this legal battle. Miller notes that the conversion tale is a story about, “their respect for their law, of the practical and symbolic

⁷¹ Miller, p.191.

⁷² *IF XII*, p. 271-2.

“‘It seems to me that our discussion would come to an evil plight, if we all do not have one law, if our law is split asunder, then peace will be split asunder and we will not be able to live with that. Now I want to ask this of the heathen men and the Christian, whether they will have the law that I proclaim?’ Thus, they all agreed. He said, he wanted to have oaths from them, and they would hold them fest. They agreed thusly and he took their oaths. ‘This is the foundation of our law’ he said, ‘that all men in the land are to be Christians and believe in one God.’”

importance of its being one.”⁷³ Their law code is as sacred to them as religion. So long the law is unified, the people will be with it. This is the hope that the legal conversion implies. This is not always the case because the system still is a feud driven society, that centers around reciprocity. Familial and external conflicts still exist and go on, but now with a changed sense of morality and a changed system of arbitration, that reconciles the old ways with a more compassionate form of living.⁷⁴ The conversion complicates these matters as now a traumatic crisis of identity has been inserted into society. The population who did not immediately convert over to the new faith are now operating against time. For them, every moment that passes threatens to erase another moment from their past existence as pagans.

Conclusion

Njála supplies a complex and nuanced view of the conversion of Iceland. The text de-escalates from the climax of Gunnar’s death and the violent repercussions stemming from his death and provides the reader with an excursus before the escalation that leads to the burning of Njal. The excursion is not just a narrative tool, it also adds some concrete historical value to the text which is crucial for the rhetoric of the saga. These events are narrative portrayals of history, but they did occur and are attested elsewhere. The conversion, as Richard Allen puts it, “is properly emphasized and properly strikes one as a major pause because it marks a decided extension of the saga’s range of values.”⁷⁵ The

⁷³ Miller, p. 186.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p.190.

⁷⁵ Allen, p. 117.

saga expands the range of its value systems by introducing not only new religious ideas about mercy and compassion, but also new laws that reflect these ideological values. The conflict of the new value system becomes a pressing question precisely because of this “pause.” The influx of Christianity changes the morality and ethics of the Norse system, so the Christian values of compassion and repentance begin to conflict with the honor-based system. This creates a traumatic experience at the social level that too prevails throughout the remainder of the narrative.

The saga compiler had his own apprehensions about the conversion as the text as displayed shows a level of ambivalence towards the Christian religion. The figure of Pangbrand has moments of respect for the pagan. At other junctures, the language used alludes to a more continental view of paganism. What is decidedly lacking are the overtly magical and righteous deaths of pagans. As Miller again is astute in pointing in the death scene of Valgard to the lack of “black dogs or demons drag him to hell, leaving a sulfurous stench.”⁷⁶ These generic examples would be what one finds in more traditional Christian literature. Where the souls of the damned, pagans, or those are blasphemers are treated visibly in the text as such. The berserk case provides a form of inversion to that motif but is in some way an attempt to reconcile his pagan ways to this system the compiler is building.

Most importantly, these passages illuminate something crucial about traumatic experiences. Even in a world that is emanating with violence and killing, trauma can still originate in the most unexpected of places. The threat of legal and systemic fracture created trauma and the enactment of the new religion affirms that the traumatic effects will live on

⁷⁶ Miller, p. 182.

as the society transfers from the old ways to the new, but will keep seeking to affirm itself as the pagans identities are slowly erased through the course of time. The loops of trauma stay open and reaffirm themselves as people attempt to remember what history continually pushes to erase from its future.

CHAPTER III

THE ASCENTION OF ST. NJAL

Ek rið hesti
hélugbarða,
úrigtoppa,
ills valdanda
Eldr er í endum,
eittr er í miðju;
svá er um Flosa ráð
sem fari kefli,
ok svá er um Flosa ráð
Sem fari kefli⁷⁷

A mysterious rider clad in black carrying a burning torch in his hand appears along with a “brest mikinn” riding from the west through a ring of fire.⁷⁸ As he rode past Hildiglum, a man of Reykir, he recited this verse warning of what was to come. After his recitation, he casts the torch to the east and a wall of flame radiates out from it and the rider disappears into the flames. Hildiglum is struck by weakness and later after recovery he relays the message to his father and Hjalti Skeggjasson.

This apocalyptic scene invokes the coming violence of the burning which will cause great trauma among the Icelandic people. The rider in black motif provides a complicated

⁷⁷ *IF XII*, p. 321.

I ride a horse
with hoarfrost mane
and dripping forelocks
wielding evil;
fire on the ends,
posion in the middle;
so is Flosi's plan
flung like torch;
So is Flosi's plan
flung like a torch

⁷⁸ *IF XII*, p. 320. “great clash”

conglomeration of both folk and Christian traditions. Richard Allen identified this motif in Christian literature where each component represents a different facet of the body as a collection of “similar associations, the rider was equated with the mind and soul of a man, the horse with the body”.⁷⁹ In the verse scene, the blackness of the rider and the hoarfrost of the horse’s mane are representative of a man intending evil and cold deeds in both mind and body. The rider connects with imagery of Thanatos, or death, the fourth horseman of the apocalypse. He is said to ride a pale horse and bring death with him.⁸⁰ The saga compiler clearly could have been envisioning this as his horse is also “grey” (*grár*)⁸¹ a color in Norse which portends impending death.⁸²

The second tradition relayed in this brief poet is the *Prose Edda* version of Ragnarök. *Njala* describes when the rider appears, “þótti honum skjálfa bæði jörð ok himinn.”⁸³ The *Prose Edda* tells during Ragnarök that “the whole earth, together with the mountains will start to shake so that the trees will loosen from the ground.”⁸⁴ The quotation the two apocalyptic traditions in conjunction and displays the importance the death of Njal brings to the saga. This event will be so significant the entire earth will rumble and tear

⁷⁹ Allen, p. 156.

⁸⁰ 6. Revelation 7:8 (NASB). “‘Come.’ I looked, and behold, an ashen horse; and he who sat on it had the name Death; and Hades was following with him.” Thanatos is the Koine Greek term given to the rider.

⁸¹ *IF XII*, p. 321.

⁸² Kirsten Wolf, “The color Gray in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108, no. 2 (Apr. 2009): 235.

⁸² *IF XII*, p. 321. “it seemed to him as if both earth and sky were shaking.”

⁸⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* trans. Jesse Byock (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005.), p. 71.

asunder. The use of these apocalyptic references stages the weight of the coming scenes and their deep implication on the saga.

The escalation of the narrative up to this prophecy is demarcated by a change in narrative attention. The saga becomes less episodic and centrally focused around the feud of the Njalssons leading up to the burning.⁸⁵ The narrative re-escalates violence as it moves away from the conversion but is clear that some of the characters have a vastly different countenance towards life following the adoption of Christianity into the legal code. Njal becomes the embodiment of these social changes.

Njal was notably one of the first people to adopt the new religious practice due to his prescience. His character then gradually changes over the next thirty chapters until his death. His comportment to the happenings around him begins to notably shift towards a Christian world view. These changes are happening on a metatextual level, where the compiler write Njal in a way that gives a sense of Christianity taking hold. After the death of his foster son Hoskuld, Njal claims, “þótti mér slökkt it sætasta ljós augna minna.”⁸⁶ This type of phrasing is not stylistically typical for saga writing and as Lönnroth points out, this follows a quote from the Vulgate where David feels himself estranged from God and says “even the light of my eyes has left me.”⁸⁷ He further adds that it is a commonly used

⁸⁵ Lars Lönnroth. *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.), p. 29.

⁸⁶ *IF XII*, p. 309. “It seems to me that the sweetest light of my eyes has been put out”

⁸⁷ Lönnroth, *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction*. p. 114.

phrase in medieval hagiography as well.⁸⁸ Lönnroth illuminates the saga compiler's movement towards the suggestion that Njal is a potential martyr.

Njal's character portrait is one of the most complex in the saga. He is a man driven by an adherence to his belief in fate and honor. Einar Sveinsson's study *Njal's Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, summarizes the character by stating that the melding of his moral sense of duty with "his prophetic powers transform the prudent man into a sage, so that sight of the falcon is fused with or gives way to the gift of second sight. The battle of worldly wisdom develops into a profound ethical and spiritual struggle."⁸⁹ Njal without prescience is one of the most astute and well-versed lawyers in Iceland. With the addition of his foresight, he becomes the wisest man in the region. This conflict, as pointed out by Sveinsson, creates a struggle within the man. He must always reflect and choose on his advice and at times the prescience adds an overtly spiritual element to his thoughts. He often is able to stave off overreactions and control those around him through his advice, but even Njal finds himself honor bound to participate in the system. For example, Njal agrees to the killing of Þrain as it is his civic duty, although he can see the consequences of any actions that are taken.

Njal's early conversion to Christianity adds to his struggle but also that at certain moments, his prophetic ability allows him to make decisions that will cause him grief in the future (see chapter 2). Njal, before the conversion, is what Lönnroth labels as the "noble

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njal's Saga: A Literary Masterpiece*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.), p. 159.

heathen.”⁹⁰ A term stemming from Augustinian theology meaning a man who, although not of the faith, teaches morals that befit a Christian morality. The noble heathen is a reconciliation between Christianity and pagan beliefs embodied. His mannerisms are worthy of exemplifying as although pagan in faith, he lives a life dictated by divine precepts, a natural religion.⁹¹ The noble heathen represents a bridge between the important native values and Christian ones that were relatable to a wide audience. Njal’s pursuit of excellence, sage wisdom, and sense of benevolence allow the saga compiler to paint Njal as a man following a saintly path.

One of the key components of the ascension to saintly status is martyrdom. Hildiglum’s prophecy functions as an excellent introduction to the burning scene as it implicates, as previously discussed, the apocalyptic weight of the burning while intermingling the religious battle pertinent throughout the scenes of the burning. Njal’s martyrdom functions as a vessel where the obligations of law, traumatic violence and the domestic religiosity come together to express the penultimate scene of the saga.

The burning is often considered and contrasted in relation to the death of Gunnar of Hlidarendi in the first half of the saga (chs. 75-77). The comparison is often considered a portrait of the pagan ideal world versus that of the new Christian world.⁹² The two scenes do reflect one another but have vastly different outcomes. The saga compiler notes the comparison at the arrival of Flosi and his men. Skarphedin says, “Gunnarr sóttu heim þeir

⁹⁰ Lönnroth, *Njal’s Saga: A Critical Introduction*. p.141 Other noble heathens include Plato, Aristotle, and Marcus Aurelius.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p.138.

⁹² Einarsson, p. 149.

höfðingjar, er svá váru vel at sér. At heldr vildu frá hverfa en brenna hann inni. En þessir munu sækja oss með eldi, ef þeir megu eigi annan veg.”⁹³ The morality of the posse against the Njalssons is implied to be more corrupt. The men who came after Gunnar had a character that would not allow them to commit such a heinous action because the rulings of fate are harsher than the judgement of God.⁹⁴ There is an implication that people’s value systems have been corrupted due to the influx of Christianity. Skarpeheðin’s statement displays a rhetoric that is not only active in the saga after the conversion but is cognizant in the thirteenth century. The act of saga creation looks back on the pagan past as a better time, where men had integrity. The compiler testifies to his time being corrupted through the words of Skarpeheðin and attempts to reconcile this with the past. The rhetoric of nostalgia spurred forward by the will to avoid traumatic erasure.

The type of statement shows a deep concern with not only erasure of the past, but the futurity of the past. The attempt at remembering a past trauma repeats the traumatic event itself and through this repetition erases the future memory of this event. The act of remembering departs from the true past creating a new history through erasure.⁹⁵ Skarpeheðin’s memory of the death of Gunnar is manipulated by cohabitating traumas. The death of Gunnar was naturally a very pertinent source of trauma for Njal’s family, as well

⁹³ *IF XII*, p. 326. “They, the chieftains, who attacked Gunnar at home, were so well considered that they would rather turn back than burn him in. But these men will attack us with fire, if they cannot do it another way.”

⁹⁴ This is a recall to Þangbrand and Hall’s conversation, where Þangbrand told Hall that the archangel Michael places more weight on good deeds than bad. *IF XII*, p. 257. “hann skal meta allt þat, sem þú gerir, bæði gott ok illt, ok er svá miskunnsamr, at hann metr allt þat meira, sem verl er gort”

⁹⁵ Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. p. 87. This is a synthesis of the conclusions found at the end of her book.

as the trauma of the conversion. Skarphedin's nostalgic view betrays that some of the men who were responsible for the death of Gunnar, also played roles in egging on the men who now stand at their doorstep waiting to burn them in their house. What has changed in earnest is the role of fate between the two deaths. Christianity brings mercy and compassion into the fold manipulating the perception of fate.

Mercy was one of the Christian virtues that is regarded little in the saga landscape. Mercy is crucial to the change in morals from the honor and fate-based system found in Germanic paganism. Einar Sveinsson points out that in the fate driven system, "although honor can exist side by side with peace and good will, the two concepts are so diverse, that they can easily collide with each other".⁹⁶ Honor based actions can seem to the non-pagan as barbaric and violent, but they are actually mapped out according to a system of good and bad action. As Allen notes, "mercy can redress this old balance in which bad deeds were as telling and in fact as memorable as noble deeds".⁹⁷ This shift explains how the burning can be justified in the transition from the time of Gunnar's death and the preamble to the burning. The two traditions are enjambed together allowing a loophole in the systems. The honor code gets manipulated with its introduction into the Christian system, which allows horrific actions to be atoned for before God. In the pagan system, the massacre of unarmed men would bring too much dishonor to have any hope of cosmic redemption. Afterwards the men need only to atone for their actions and then their salvation is preserved regardless.

⁹⁶ Sveinsson, p. 167.

⁹⁷ Allen, p. 118.

Atonement and mercy become voiced very quickly as the burning begins. One of the clearest examples is the speech Njal briefly makes as the burners begin to set the house ablaze. Njal, attempting to comfort the women in the house declares, “Verðið vel við ok mælið eigi æðru, því at él eitt mun vera, en þó skyldi langt til annars slíks. Trúið þér ok því, at guð er miskunnsamr, ok mun hann oss eigi bæði láta brenna þess heims ok annars.”⁹⁸ This speech shows a decided change in Njal’s understanding of the world. He has moved away from the idea of fate as the driving factor of events in the universe and given himself over to the Christian idea of providence.⁹⁹ Njal views the burning as a corporeal way of expressing penance. His understanding of mercy is that God is making him suffer now, instead of later in the next world. His reaction to the burning will decide whether he is granted mercy or not. This is a decided digression from pagan fate which is prescribed, leaving the individual little opportunity to change it.

The saga compiler intermingles the ideas as Flosi only wants revenge on Njal’s sons and grants the women, children, and Njal safe passage from the burning home. Njal refuses the generous offer stating, “Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigilifa með skömm.”¹⁰⁰ Njal maintains his pagan sense of duty to the value system of honor and to the law. Both are conceptually represented in the will of Njal to not be shamed by being the sole survivor of this ordeal and unable to

⁹⁸ *IF XII*, p. 328-9. “Keep heart and speak not of fear for it will be just a passing storm, and it shall be long until another like it. Have faith that God is merciful, and he will not let us burn in both this house and the other.”

⁹⁹ See Sveinsson. p. 176. for a full discussion of this transformation.

¹⁰⁰ *IF XII*, p. 330. “I will not leave, because I am an old man and am short to live to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame.”

fulfill his duties as patriarch. Njal, above all else, was a lover and proponent of the law and this remains with him to the end, neither faith nor values shake his belief in the law. This is the chief factor driving his choice to stay, while the other main factor is his interest in providence manifesting as the Freudian death drive. Legally he could name a proxy to take revenge for him, as ultimately happens with Kari, but instead he chooses to die.

Njal's ultimate decision to accept his demise is attached to the sequences of death and retribution that plagues not just saga but the entire medieval Icelandic social system. The repetitions of trauma have taken their toll upon Njal's psyche. His response to Flosi indicates that he has seen enough blood shed in the name of the law and honor, and would rather die than restart another cycle of the senseless violence that seems to simultaneously remember and forget the violence of the past. Cathy Caruth's analysis of Freud's observation of the *fort/da* game elucidates Njal's reaction.

She states the game is an "understanding by the child of the mother's inevitable death which reflects the traumatic process through repetition".¹⁰¹ Every time the game is finished and restarted, it is a new game, with a kernel of old knowledge and experiences. Njal chooses to quit the game altogether to break the cycle, and due to his religious epiphany and his sense of civic duty. His attempt is unsuccessful as Kari escapes and keeps the traumatic looping in motion.

After Njal's refusal of Flosi's offer he returns into the house with his wife Bergþora and his grandson, who refuses to leave the side of his grandmother. They lay down in bed with the boy between them and are covered with the hide of a recently slaughtered ox. This has an air of a shamanistic ritual merging the pagan into the overt Christian motifs that are

¹⁰¹ Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. p. 7.

attached to Njal's death. In their final moments, "Þá signdu þau sik bæði ok sveininn ok fálu ǫnd sína guði á hendi."¹⁰² With the final crossing of their bodies Njal and Bergþora exit their trail of faith. Their death scene becomes overtly Christian as the saga compiler is sanctifies Njal on his deathbed. The crossing of his body assures that his final prophecy will come true and he will ascend into paradise after burning in the corporeal world. The great noble heathen is saved from eternal agony through this final act of religiosity and martyrdom. The martyrdom of Njal is set up to break the cycle of revenge and honor killings allowing for the adoption a new way of mercy and compassion. This fails ultimately, but the weight of Njal's sacrifice imprints on the rest of the text.

A day later Kari, the only man to escape the fire, returns with Hjalti Skeggjasson to Njal's farm to survey what happened and to try find the bodies of his kinsmen. They find the ox hide after digging through the rubble and at its removal find that the two of them, Njal and Bergþora were unburnt. The child that lies with them had one burnt finger that he had stuck out from the hide. Many who gathered around to see the corpses named this a miracle. Hjalti is asked his opinion and states, "Líkami Bergþóru þykki mér at likendum ok þó vel. En Njál's ásjána ok líkami sýnisk mér svábjarte, at ek hefiengan dauðs manns líkama sét jafnbjartan."¹⁰³ Njal's saintly status is confirmed once his corpse is revealed. His body and countenance are reminiscent of the cult of saints of continental Europe whose

¹⁰² *IF XII*, p. 331. "they both crossed themselves and the boy and put their soul's in God's hands"

¹⁰³ *IF XII*, p. 343. "Bergthora's body appears to me as I expected, though well preserved. But Njal's countenance and body seem to me so bright that I've never seen a dead man's body as bright as his."

bodies do not decompose.¹⁰⁴ The case can be made for Njal being the saint of Icelanders due to his legal prowess and respected status among most characters in the saga. Njal is the figure that negotiates the conversion via the semiotics of the law. His knowledge of the law and his role in constructing the fifth court allowed for the legal system to adopt Christianity.¹⁰⁵ Njal's influence was often backgrounded in this manner, which gave him appearance of a semi-innocent bystander. His hands-off approach suggests innocence and affirms his martyrdom. The burning in either capacity looms large on both the consciousness of the burners and that of his kinsmen.

As the burners watch the house fall into embers, Flosi makes a prescient statement that looms over the remainder of the saga. He says, “Bæði munu menn þetta kalla stórvirki ok illvirki. Ok þó má nú ekki at hafa.”¹⁰⁶ Flosi's ambivalence displays the level of unsurety that Njal's death brings to the text. Njal's wisdom give trajectory to the text. Without him, the world becomes unstable. The killing of Njal affirms that the repetitive violence will continue. The conversion created ambiguity into the moral system, so the figures lose their compartment to the admissibility of their actions in the two competing ethical systems. What is clear, is that the burning is presented as a traumatic departure from the old ways, that will remain tumultuous in the social psyche of Iceland for generations.

¹⁰⁴ June Macklin, “Saints and Near Saints in Transition: The Sacred, The Secular, and The Popular,” *The Making of Saints*, ed. James F. Hopgood (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005.), p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, p.168.

¹⁰⁶ *IF XII*, p. 334. “Men will call this both a great and evil deed. But that can't be helped now.”

CHAPTER IV

FLOSI'S DREAM OR THE APPARITIONS OF TRAUMA

“Alles, was man vergessen hat, schreit im Traum um Hilfe”

-Elias Canetti *Die Provinz des Menschen*¹⁰⁷

Dreams portray the greatest fears of the psyche. Repressed traumas can resurface and pester the dreamer forcing them to relive their experiences. In premodern literature, dreams provide visions of the future or portend the doom of a figure, revealing latent fears within the figure. Lars Lönnroth in his essay, *Dreams in the Sagas*, gives dreams three primary functions. First, they may involve a prophecy of doom to the dreamer or their social surroundings. Secondly, they may be driven by the presence of a metaphysical force behind the stage. Finally, “Dreams may also, at least in some cases, tell us something about the character of the dreamer.”¹⁰⁸ Lönnroth’s pinpointing of the function of dreams outlines the precise layering of Flosi’s dreams in Chapter 133. This layered structure, reveals the psychological state of Flosi and foretells traumas to come.

Flosi’s dream is of a premonitory nature as interpreted by Ketil of Mörk, who indicates the dream spells doom for Flosi. On the secondary level, the guiding force is the metaphysical being Iron-Grim, who prophesizes the death of Flosi’s companions and the fracturing of the Icelandic court system. Finally, the third function provides a glimpse into the mind of the Flosi and reveals his traumatized and fractured psyche. For Lönnroth, rarely

¹⁰⁷ Elias Canetti, *Die Provinz des Menschen (Aufzeichnung 1942-1972)* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 1973.), p. 269. “All that one has forgotten screams for help in dreams.”

¹⁰⁸Lars Lönnroth, “Dreams in the Sagas,” in *Scandinavian Studies*, 74. no.4 (2002): 456.

do all three elements occur in a saga dream simultaneously. They are presented in a respective frequency order meaning the first occurs most and the last occurs least. This three-pronged functionality makes Flosi's dream significant as it makes use of all three functions.

Further significance is added to this passage by the unique pastiche of elements that are utilized to construct Flosi's dream. Elements from Christian, Pagan, and folkloric sources are blended to create a textual moment that feels uncanny. Additionally, the dream itself provides a narrative break from the world of the saga, while also advancing the narrative through foreshadowing. The saga compiler's composition of Flosi's dream testifies to a traumatic breakdown of the text, where the textual elements are painfully aware of their differences in tradition. This breakdown provides a fourth function to Flosi's dream and that is a performative aspect of his traumatic resurfacing. Flosi's trauma resurfaces in his dream due to the conflict of moral systems within him about the deeds he committed.

Flosi's dream comes after he has returned home from the burning of Njal and his family. In his sleep, he is tormented by a dream and when he awakes, he narrates it to Ketill of Mork, who is Flosi's closest confidant. Flosi narrates:

Mik dreymði þat," segir Flosi, "at ek þóttumsk vera at Lómagnúpi ok ganga út ok sjá upp til gnúpsins. Ok opnaðisk hann, ok gekk maðr út ór gnúpinum ok var í geitheðni ok hafði járnstaf í hendi. Hann fór kalandi ok kallaði á menn mína, suma fyrr, en suma síðar, ok nefndi á nafn. Hann kallaði fyrstan Grím inn rauða ok Árna Kolsson. Þá þótti mér undarliga: mér þótti sem hann kallaði Eyjólf bolverksson ok Ljót, son Síðu-Halls, ok nokkura sex menn. Þá þagði hann stund nokkura. Síðan kallaði hann fimm menn af váru liði, ok váru þar Sigfússynir, broeðr þínir. Þá kallaði hann aðra fimm menn, ok var þar Lambi ok Móðólfr ok Glúmr. Þá kallaði hann þrjá menn. Síðast kallaði hann Gunnar Lambason ok Kol Þorsteinsson. Eftir þat gekk hann at mér; ek spurða hann tíðenda. Hann kvezk segja mundu tíðendin. Ok spurða ek hann at nafni; hann nefndisk

Járngrímr. Ek spurða hvert hann skyldi fara; hann kvezk fara skyldu til alþingis. ‘Hvað skaltú þar gera?’ sagða ek. Hann svaraði: ‘Fyrst skal ek ryðja kviðu, en þá dóma, en þá vígvoll fyrir vegondum.’ Síðan kvað hann þetta:

16. Höggorma mun hefjask herði-Þundr á landi;
sjá munu menn á moldu margar heila borgir;
nú vex blára brodda beystisullr í fjöllum;
koma mun sumra seggja sveita dogg á leggi.

Þá hann laust niður stafnum, ok varð brestr mikill; gekk hann þá inn í fjallit, en mér bauð ótta.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ *IF XII*, p. 346-348.

“I dreamed, said Flosi, ‘that I was at Lomagnupr and walked outside and looked up to the peak. It opened and a man walked out from the peak. He wore a goatskin and had an iron staff in his hand. He walked and called out, called to my men, some first, some later and he named them by name. First, he called Grim the red and Arni Kolsson. Then it seemed strange: I thought he called Eyjólf Bolverksson and Ljót, Hall of Siða’s son, and another six men. The he stood in silence. After that he called five men from our host, and your brothers the Sigfussons were there. He then called another five men, including Lambi, Móðólfr, and Glúmr. Then he called three men. Finally, he called Gunnar Lambasson and Kol Þorsteinsson. After that, he walked to me. I asked him for tidings. He said he will tell me the news and I asked his name. He was named Iron-Grim. I asked him where he will go, he said he will go to the Alþing. ‘What will you do there?’ I said, He answered, ‘First, I will clear the jury, then the court and the battlefield of the battlers. Afterwards he said this:

16. The viper will raise
Great difficulty in the land,
Men will see upon the earth
Many brain dwellings,
When the tips of spears grown black
Sound in the hills,
One will come to tell of the sea
dew of blood sweat at their legs

then he struck down with his staff and there was a great clash. Then he went into the mountain and I was bound by fear.

After he narrates the dream, Flosi asks Ketil his thoughts about the dream, to which he replies, “at þeir muni allir feigir, er kallaðir váru. Sýnisk mér þat ráð, at þenna draum segi vit engum at svá búnu.”¹¹⁰ Ketil provides Flosi with the most direct answer according to Lönnroth’s three functions of saga dreams. He reads the dream as a premonition that dooms those explicitly named in the dream, Ketil’s surface level interpretation is correct as all the named men perish, but deeper machinations seem to be at work in this short passage of text.

The narrative follows the course of action as called out by Iron-Grim in the dream. At the Alþing, Flosi and his backers engage in some deceitful legal maneuvering pushing the trial for the murder of Njal and his family to another court. This essentially fractures the entire court system in two parts. Flosi’s claims are successful and the case is redirected to the Fifth Court. The trauma of the conversion resurfaces, as now the legal system seems to create social divisions among the people. Þorhall, a backer of Kari, initiates these events by killing Grim the red. All the men named by Iron-Grim fall each time investigating the traumas of the conversion and burning. Flosi’s prophetic dream becomes reality.

Flosi’s dream provides a detailed look into the construction of a saga. As wonderfully expressed by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Flosi’s dream draws parallels with the *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory.¹¹¹ In the *Dialogues*, there is a recounting of a scene about a certain monk named Anastasius. Anastasius lived at a monastery tucked below a high cliff. One night, an ethereal voice called out to Anastasius from the high cliff for him to come.

¹¹⁰ *IF XII*, p. 348. “that, they who were called, are fated to die. I think that it is good council, to tell no one of this dream, as matters stand.”

¹¹¹ Sveinsson. p. 15.

Likewise, seven other monks were called followed by a moment of silence, then an eighth was named. Unlike Flosi's dream, this happened for all to hear, and the people knew that these men would die. The men did so in the order they were called, with the eighth dying after a couple of days as expressed in the pause of the voice's speech.¹¹² As claimed by Sveinsson, this story was circulating in 12th Century Iceland and Árni Magnússon collected a version of it from a monastery near the mountain Lómagnúpr.¹¹³ This piece of evidence displays the crucial role Christianity was playing in the compilation of the saga texts.

The usage of Gregory's dialogues causes a disruption to the natural course of the saga. This moment reveals the saga compiler to the audience. The trauma of the compiler coagulates at his attempted portrayal of the supernatural. The dream unsettles the reader forcing them to meditate on the passage and its meaning similar to St. Gregory's *Dialogues* which invite the reader to ponder them. This contemplative moment draws the readers attention to the words of Iron-Grim, revealing not only Flosi's, but the compiler's greatest fear, the fracturing and subsequent division of the commonwealth. For the compiler, the Norwegian crown's annexation of the commonwealth and for Flosi the bifurcation of the legal system. A legal system that has been undermined by the introduction of a second belief system.

The reconciliation of the trauma of the conversion to Christianity weaves in and out of the foregrounded narrative. Scenes such as Flosi's dream show how Christian narratives seeped into the foundational structure of the text providing a hybridized narratological system based on Latin learning and native storytelling. This stylistic combination shows

¹¹² Ibid, "Appendix A," p. 205-6.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 15.

not only there is trauma being processed and testified to on the textual level, but the metatextual as well. On the figural level, Iron-Grim embodies the enigmatic blending that is occurring around the supernatural in *Njála*.

Iron-Grim is a scarcely known figure. He seems to only appear twice in the entire saga corpus, once in *Njála* and again in *Sturlunga saga*.¹¹⁴ The Iron-Grim of *Sturlunga saga* appears a drifter, who is also tied to prophecy and the death of a figure. The Iron-Grim in *Njál's Saga* synthesizes the Odinic figure in *Sturlunga Saga* and the folkloric motif of the earth-dweller. These figures are attributed responsibility for much of the activity that occurs on the extremely geologically active island. For example, they cause the tide by kicking rocks off cliffs into the sea and are often reasoned to be the cause of earthquakes.¹¹⁵ These beings tend to be neutral or chaotic beings with sparse human interaction. The Odinic portion of the Iron-Grim synthesis is responsible for the naming of the men who will die and the “clearing” of the neighbors, court, and battlefield. The last component is a reference to the function of Odin’s Valkyries, who clear the battlefields of the worthy dead to bring them to Valhalla. Odin’s primary godly function is presiding over the dead and deciding their ultimate fate.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. *Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.); Lars Lönnroth, “Dreams in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 74, no.4 (2002); William Ian Miller. *Why Is Your Axe Bloody: A Reading of Njáls Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Christopher Crocker, “To Dream Is to Bury: Dreaming of Death in *Brennu-Njáls Saga*.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 2 (April 2015): 261–91.

¹¹⁵ Oren Falk. “The Vanishing Volcanoes: Fragments of Fourteenth-Century Icelandic Folklore [1],” *Folklore* 118, no. 1 (April 2007): 10.

¹¹⁶ John Lindow. “Odin” *Norse Mythology: A Guide to Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.) For further in-depth study on Odin see

The concept of predestination ruled over the thought of early Christianity.¹¹⁷ The calling of names in Gregory's *Dialogues* displays Christianized ideas about this concept rather clearly. The monk Anatasius and his colleagues are called to heaven, "When omnipotent God had decided to reward the venerable Anastasius for his labors".¹¹⁸ Anastasius is born into heaven from the voice of God himself. This is reflective of the dominance of Augustinian predestination. Anastasius was comported to arrive at a certain point as predetermined by God and when he achieved satisfactory progress, God calls him to heaven. Flosi's dream inverts this concept and as has been shown with the structure of the text, blends the concept of predestination, with that of the Old Norse concept of fate.¹¹⁹

The Norse concept of fate is a prescription to life. The course of one's life is decided at its establishment and one can do little to alter it. The person or people are fated to take responsibility for their actions. This pattern plays out most frequently with dream narratives but can be established elsewhere, usually with oaths and premonitions. Iron-Grim's role as the namer of names, brings doom upon those into the world, but he is not operating under his own accord. His calling is steered by another metaphysical force, either fate as dictated

Annette Lassen, *Odin Pa Kristent Pergament En Teksthistorisk Studie* (København: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2011.)

¹¹⁷ There was no mind that dominated the early medieval and the medieval period so much as Augustine of Hippo.

¹¹⁸ Sveinsson, p. 206. "Quadam vero nocte cum jam onipotens Deus ejusdem verabilis viri Anastasii labors remunerare decrevisset"

¹¹⁹ Lars Lönnroth's, *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction* has an entire chapter devoted to the clerical mind and the power of Augustinian theology in *Njal's Saga*. M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij's *The Saga Mind* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973.) also explores the effects of Christianity on saga narrative and psychological readings of the sagas. As counterpoint, see William Ian Miller's *Why's your axe bloody? a Reading of Njals Saga*, which takes up a more ambivalent view towards Christianity's effect on the saga figures.

by the Norns, or a kind of paganized form predestination that condemns the burners to death.¹²⁰ Iron-Grim's news about clearing the panel of neighbors and jurors as well as the battlefield then becomes doubly foreboding as it implies not only Flosi's social system is being removed from him but that the gods are also abandoning him.¹²¹ Metaphysical forces move against Flosi for the deeds he committed. Recalling the burning, Flosi states, "Bæði munu menn þetta kalla stórvirki ok illvirki. Ok þó má nú ekki at hafa."¹²² God has judged Flosi for burning Njal in his dream. So too will man in the following chapters of the text. This pre-judgement issued by the chaotic being Iron-Grim also plays out as foreshadowing of Flosi's exile from Iceland as he, the earth dweller, gives the ominous prophecy as a proxy of the landscape itself.

This betrayal by his own land indicates a fear of abandonment projecting Flosi's psyche through the dream state. Arriving now at Lönnroth's third function of saga dreams, the dream reflects the mental state of the dreamer. For Flosi, this dream is an expression of trauma that has been lying dormant in him. It is the wish to see justice done for the burning of Njal and as a result the suffering that will be endured in the events to come.

Flosi is seen throughout most of the saga as an ambivalent figure. Saga compilers often utilize physical characteristics to give hints to the internal nature of a character.¹²³

¹²⁰ It should be noted that the Norse concept seems to be strongly associated with the Augustinian concept of predestination and may even be modeled after it, since most Norse materials stem from monastic sources.

¹²¹ *IF XII*, p.348.

¹²² *IF XII*, p. 334. "Men will call this both a great and evil deed. But that can't be helped now".

¹²³ Sveinsson, p. 85.

These markers are relatively absent from the text where Flosi is concerned. As has already been stated he is described as big and strong and a great chieftain, but these are rather general characteristics for one who plays such a significant role as Flosi does. One just needs to look towards the physical descriptions of Skarpheðin, in particular the focus on the ugliness of his mouth that metonymically indicates his quick wittedness and sharp tongue. Flosi's ambiguous appearance fits with his ambivalent nature throughout most of the text. Such as the previously mentioned scene from the burning, where he cannot provide an answer as to whether their actions at Bergþorshvól were indeed justified or not.

William Ian Miller assesses Flosi as, "some type of proto-Hamlet- cursing the spite that put him in the role as avenger of his niece's husband. At times he seems to overplay his role, at times he appears mystified as to why he is even in the saga."¹²⁴ Miller's succinct summary of Flosi's character highlights further the ambivalence of the figure. He plays the role of reluctant hero when avenging his niece and acts in line with one who is predestined to be, not an actor in the story. He turns and twists with the plot and at times seems to be acting with some agency, but he often reads as an empty vessel. The dream sequence is the moment where the reader gains access to the internal nature of Flosi and finds him conflicted.

Just as the mountain Lómagnúpr opens to release Iron-Grim, so too does the dream sequence open up Flosi's internalizations. Flosi is haunted by the actions he and his cohort have committed. The burning looms over his conscience, just as Iron-Grim looms over the landscape under the mountain. The most telling portion of the effect of the burning on Flosi comes with the verse recited by Iron-Grim:

¹²⁴ Miller, p.201.

16. Hoggorma mun hefjask herði-Þundr á landi;
sjá munu menn á moldu margar heila borgir;
nú vex blára brodda beystisullr í fjollum;
koma mun sumra seggja sveita dogg á leggi.¹²⁵

This verse shows Flosi's guilty conscience as it foretells the revenge undertaken by Kari. The raising viper is a metonym for Kari, who ultimately gets his revenge and attempts a reconciliation with Flosi at the end of the text. The rest of the poem displays the chaos that will come while also reflecting on the chaos that has just occurred. The poem functions as a telling of history that, "bears witness to the newness and alterity, to the shock of a history it cannot assimilate, but only repeat."¹²⁶ The poem is foreshadowing the future, by explaining the past. The ambiguity given in the poem can be read as the traumatic looping that is incurred by the system of revenge killing that has ravaged much of Iceland through the saga and its future repetition as interpreted by Ketill of Mork. The course of action that led to the burning was typical for Norse pagan society. The burning itself was extraordinary but as heinous as the burning episode is, it does not seem to be the only trauma that is affecting Flosi.

¹²⁵ *IF XII*, p. 348.

16. The viper will raise
Great difficulty in the land,
Men will see upon the earth
Many brain dwellings,
When the tips of spears grown black
Sound in the hills,
One will come to tell of the sea
dew of blood sweat at their legs

¹²⁶ Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. p. 80.

The epistemological change by the conversion introduces a ripple in the social fabric of medieval Iceland. The conflict of the two traditions interject a traumatic ambivalence into all facets of society. The reconciliation of this problem remains a concern over the next four centuries as even the saga compiler cannot seem to reconcile and synthesize the traditions. Flosi's dreams captures that moment in both structural form as well as character development as an expression of the trauma that is incurred.¹²⁷

The question of Flosi's ambivalent nature seems to be one that has yet to be reconciled in scholarship. Flosi is ambivalent because he is stuck between two worlds. He occupies the space between the new Christian morality and the pagan past. His dream gives the reader an introspective look into this problem primarily through the structural ambiguity. The blending of the two traditions is happening within the psyche of the man Flosi, not just extra-textually. Flosi brings ambiguity into the text through his unsure nature. This is brought to light in his statements after the burning. He should be able to say if the actions he had committed there were wrong or right, but instead he defers this judgement call by giving an either/or statement. He cannot reconcile if it is right or wrong due to the conflicting moralities in his mind. On one hand, he avenged the killing of Hoskuld and fulfilled the honorific duty as the kin of Hildigunn, Hoskuld's wife. By Norse pagan standards this is a good action, even if it was accomplished in a particularly heinous manner. On the other hand, in the new Christian terms, he not only is responsible for the murder of innocent people but allowed his ego to triumph over his responsibility to his

¹²⁷ See above conversation about the Dialogues of St. Gregory for example. See also Lönnroth's chapter "The Clerical Mind" in *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction*. pp. 104-164.

fellow man. He allows the escalation of events to overrule his judgement and that is why he has this terrible dream and restless sleep.

Flosi's dream expresses the desire to endure the future trauma that is coming.¹²⁸ Iron-Grim reminds him of the three events that are coming to challenge him. First, the death of several of his compatriots. Second, the mishandled trial that fractures the legal system and will leave Flosi essentially without a support system. Finally, Iron-Grim prophesizes the retribution of Kari. All these events are repetitions of the past, which stem from the legal codification of pagan society, but will have new implications with the Christianized code of morality and ethics. This new code will essentially scrub away the past, to replace it becoming something unrecognizable to Flosi. These erasures are never fully removed; leaving behind detritus that indicates a portion of the past. Flosi is never able to escape the burning or the pagan past. In his final attempts to do so, he makes a pilgrimage to Rome and pays for absolution from the Pope. He cannot, however; escape the wrath of Kari, who stalks him wherever he travels.

Flosi lives to be an old man, which is a form of cosmic punishment in the Old Norse religion, but as Flosi is conflicted about the Christian religion his entire life, he must suffer through his misdeeds as well as a fluctuation between the desire to live and to die. Flosi's death is left in ambiguity. He winters over in Norway, taking a late start in Summer to return to Iceland. The final lines about Flosi read, "Rœddu menn um, at vânt væri skipit.

¹²⁸ Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. p. 87. "the traumatic event is its future, is its repetition as something that returns but also returns to erase its past, returns as something other than what one could ever recognize."

Flosi sagði, at væri ærit gott gømlum ok feigum.”¹²⁹ The Norse *feigr* conveys a final sense of fate or doom, showing that Flosi still holds onto the Norse conception of being fated. His death plays out as the final ambiguous action in the life of Flosi.

Flosi’s dream through a short passage in *Njal’s saga*, provides a deep look into the construction of the text, the function of dreams in saga literature, as well as the traumatic experience of the conversion on the psyche of Icelanders. Flosi was torn between two ethical systems which brought ambivalence with him in the text. The traumatic repetitions that played through Flosi’s life manifested in the content of his dream and exposed the deep trouble that the conversion brought into the Icelandic consciousness. This problem being pertinent well into the time of the compilation of the text in the 1270’s. The conversion is a wound that never fully healed, and one continuously reopened by the act of writing.

¹²⁹ *IF XII*, p. 463. “Men talked about, how the ship was lacking. Flosi said that it would be sufficient for one old and destined to die.”

CHAPTER V

CLOSING TRAUMATIC LOOPS: THE BATTLE OF CLONTARF AND DARRAÐLJÓÐ

Sjá er orpinn vefr
ýta þormum
ok harðkléaðr
höfðum manna;
eru dreyrekin
dorr at skoptum,
járnvarðr yllir,
en orum hrælaðr;
skulum slá sverðum
sigrvef þenna.¹³⁰

This stanza from the *Darraðarljóð*, found at the end of *Njal's Saga*, grotesquely portrays the motif of the weaver woman. The domestic sphere is brought into conversation with the battlefield, as Valkyries weave the fated tapestry constructed from the intestines and bones of fallen men. The action of weaving such a monstrous creation performs a repetitive cycle of violence. It embodies a traumatized society, a society doomed to repeat its mistakes. The proximity of the disfigured imagery to the home indicates a traumatized sense of identity since identity originates in the home.¹³¹ The *Darraðarljóð* brings the

¹³⁰ *IF XII*, p. 455.

So, the warp is woven
With intestines
And hard weighted
With the heads of men
Blood spattered spears
Are our heddle rods
Iron-clad is the loom
Arrows are the weaving rods
We will beat with swords
This victory weave.

¹³¹ Lönnroth, “Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas” p. 83.

traumatic themes of *Njála* back into a microcosmic world, recounting the entire saga through an extended poetic interlude recapping the battle of Clontarf.

The Battle of Clontarf was fought on Good Friday April 23rd, 1014.¹³² The Christian Irish forces lead by Brian Boru defeated the Norse pagan forces of Sigtrygg Silkbeard outside of Dublin effectively ending pagan Norse influence in Ireland. The episode is important to the role trauma and the conversion play together in the saga. The hyper violent episode ultimately displays the triumph of Christianity over paganism. The battle of Clontarf episode presents itself much differently than the rest of *Njal's saga* as supernatural and Christian imagery coagulate around the interpolator story. This has led many scholars to believe that the Clontarf episodes belong to a now lost Brjan's Saga.¹³³ The Clontarf episodes reaffirm several themes in the saga such as the battle between fate and providence, the Christian-Pagan debate and feud culture.

Darraðarljóð is unique in its positioning within the saga. It forms a break in the narrative prose. The extend verse quotation dislodges the audience and redirects their focus to the tighter composition of poetry. If something is stated in poetry, it must be important. Judy Quinn in her article "*Darraðarljóð* and *Njal's Saga*" notes, "this is, in fact, the only instance where an apparently complete, anonymous poem is quoted."¹³⁴ The saga compiler purposefully chose to include the poem in its entirety to make a rhetorical statement. A

¹³² Benjamin Hudson, "Brján's Saga," *Medium Ævum* 71, no. 2 (2002): 241.

¹³³ See Lönnroth. *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction*. pp. 226-236. for a detailed analysis of the sources of the Clontarf scenes in *Njála*.

¹³⁴ Judy Quinn, "*Darraðarljóð* and *Njal's Saga*," *Die Faszination des Verborgenen und seine Entschlüsselung: Rāði sār kunní. Beiträge zur Runologie, skandinavistischen Mediävistik und germanischen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed. Jana Krüger et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017.), p. 299.

statement about the traumatic nature of the conversion as Clontarf is one of the final battlefields to demarcate along pagan and Christian lines. *Darraðarljóð* condenses the Clontarf episode into a hybridized form blending Eddaic style poetry and Christian content.

The imagery of *Darraðarljóð* is purposefully grotesque. It textually performs the trauma not only of the battle of Clontarf, but of the entirety of *Njál's saga*. It comments on the brutality of the perpetual violence of the feud system, the religious upheaval, and the burning of Njal. The violence found in the poem is a repetition and reemergence of textually experienced trauma. The brutal imagery sets to affect the audience. The detailed and brutal images of the loom strung up with intestines and images of bloodied warriors and scattered dead are included to evoke a reaction upon the receiver of the saga. A reaction about the death of the old world, a reaction to the death of the commonwealth. The content of the poem relays the fears and traumatic reflexes that the compiler hinted at throughout the text.

Darraðarljóð and the Battle of Clontarf are exercises in the role of fate. The *Darraðarljóð* shows the process of the Valkyries creating the tapestry of fate with the spoils of the war dead. For their supernatural purposes, the war is beneficial as it fills the halls of Vahalla. In the prose account, fate places two brothers, Óspakr and Bróðir, on opposite sides of the battlefield. This Eddaic reflex plays on the apocalyptic motif of brother clashing with brother as seen in *Völuspá*. The author creates a chiastic structure where the Christian, but morally corrupt brother (Bróðir) fights on the side of the pagans, and the pagan, but “noble” heathen side with the Christian Brian Boru. The anxiety about a society traumatically divided, introduced in chapters 100-106, returns and the audience is able to experience the results.

Darraðarljóð is a poem about survival.¹³⁵ It is about surviving division, social unrest, and surviving trauma. It speaks to the perseverance of those who survive. It is also a poem of reconciliation, as it reconciles the trauma of the conversion by testifying to it. Valkyries control the fate of those away in a Christian land, Ireland. The Valkyries feed on struggle and violence. *Darraðarljóð* brutalizes war, Christianizing sacred Norse Pagan traditions. The poem is another pastiche which brutally brings two traditions together and leaves a scarred traumatized object behind. *Darraðarljóð* represents a memory that is, “tottering between remembering and erasure.”¹³⁶ This teetering is the result of an attempt to create a new history. A history where Christianity wins, but the pagan world is not lost. Pieces of it become exposed as the text expresses the trauma within it.

The tapestry of trauma woven by the Valkyries is vicariously spread throughout the world. The text states, “Rifu þær þá ofan vefinn ok í sundr, ok hafði hver þat, er helt á. Gekk hann þá í braut frá glugginum ok heim, en þær stigu á hesta sína, ok riðu sex í suðr, en aðrar sex í norðr.”¹³⁷ The Valkyries tear up their gruesome project and each takes a piece with them. Six of them head north and the other six south. In this way, they are responsible for spreading not only carnage and death, but also trauma with them. The exodus of the Valkyries displays the very function of trauma.

Trauma can begin in a localized setting then spread vicariously to encompass a much larger space. *Darraðarljóð* performs this process as it begins in a small room and

¹³⁵ Quinn, p. 312.

¹³⁶ Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History*. p. 79.

¹³⁷ *IF XII*, 458-9. “They ripped it down from the loom and tore it into pieces and each one kept a piece. He went broke away from the window and went home, then they climbed upon their horses and six rode to the south and the other six to the north.”

expands to the larger world as the women ride out from their tower. The weaving of the cloth simulates the processes of trauma in the mind. It is a cycle of repetition that constructs a narrative. Trauma can completely alter the memory of the experiencer through repetitions and erasures. In the *Darraðarljóð* the original shape of a man is rearranged into a tapestry of the several men's fates. The unified tapestry is then torn to pieces and scattered into the world, just as trauma narrative penetrate their audience and grow into further creations.¹³⁸

William Ian Miller speculates that the Clontarf episode exists to legitimize *Njáls Saga*. He states, "we go to Clontarf, to kill off more burners, possible anti-Bergthorsknoll tale-tellers."¹³⁹ Miller points to the controlling and manipulation of the narrative by the saga compiler. He becomes the Valkyries. He weaves a bloody tale of feud, murder, law, and social upheaval. As Miller adds, "There is only one true *Njáls saga*, and it turns out to be the one we have."¹⁴⁰ The version portrays a world divided, interrupted and ultimately a testimony of thirteenth century trauma.

The compiler of *Njáls Saga* used the saga to testify to the trauma of the loss of the Icelandic commonwealth. He utilizes the turbulence of the tenth and eleventh centuries to draw parallels between the two time periods. Overall, *Njáls saga* tells the reader today more about the anxieties and concerns that were occupying the minds of thirteenth century monks. The *Njáls saga* compiler makes this known at the end of the saga with his, "Ok lýk ek þar Brennu-Njáls sögu."¹⁴¹ In this moment the compiler lets the audience know, that he

¹³⁸ Alexander, *Cultural Trauma: A Social Theory*. p. 15.

¹³⁹ Miller, p.299

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 300

¹⁴¹ *IF XII*, p. 464 "And here I end Burnt Njal's saga."

is telling the tale. In a rare moment in the family sagas, the author makes himself visible. As if to say, this is my testimony to the burning of Njal and my testimony to the end of the old Iceland. He illuminates the complexities that the religious transition placed on the Icelandic society and the way in which the great men overcame that obstacle, and moreover, the death and destruction that stemmed from that change. Furthermore, the stories of Flosi, Gunnar and Njal instilled a source of pride as his own cultural identity that was threatened with erasure. Under the pressure of this social trauma, the corpus of family sagas come into existence. The written documents are living proof of the fear of cultural erasure. The Christian monks took care to transfer down and compile the history of the great pagan men and women from the early days of Iceland. In doing so, they not only reinstated those past traumas but erased them and replaced them with their own.

Njal's saga shows the processes of social trauma. It portrays it through the conversion of Christianity. The text represents a landscape of various traumas interacting and overlapping with each other. Characters are traumatized by the conversion to Christianity and the threat it poses to their ideal way of life. Others are upset by the perpetual violence of the feud-based system, which also threatens to divide the people. Trauma surfaces in the breaks and moments of social ambiguity, especially when identity is questioned. The conversion disrupts the national sense of self. This sense of cultural trauma born of the conversion and the burning of Njal and his family forever marred Icelandic identity. The saga compiler made sure that their story was told. Through his narrative the story was passed down, so every generation of Icelander must relive the trauma of their ancestor. *Njal's saga* testifies that traumatic loops never fully close.

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