



The Story of Burnt Njal

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The Story of Burnt Njal *Anonymous , Robert Cook (Editor) , George Webbe Dasent (Translator)*

This classic Icelandic saga hails from the 13th century provides a stunning look into a culture long past. Divided into three parts, this prose epic deals with friendship, tragedy and retribution and is a breathtaking look at Medieval Norse culture.

The Story of Burnt Njal Details

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From Reader Review The Story of Burnt Njal for online ebook

Rikkert Kuijper says

The original Kill Bill

Abi says

One of the best sagas, without a doubt. Epic in scale, but still intensely human, the story of burnt-Njal is dramatic, moving and highly entertaining. The saga style takes some getting used to if you've never experienced it before. It is terse, to the point, characterisation and description is kept to a bare minimum, the plot races along at break-neck speed, there's a plethora of characters (a lot of whom have very similar names). It requires... concentration, and you'll almost certainly have to resort to consulting the family trees so thoughtfully included. It made me laugh when I saw a family tree included in One Hundred Years of Solitude. "Six generations!" I scoffed, "That's nothing, even if they do all have the same names." Njal's Saga has seven Thorsteins, eight Thorkels, six Thorgeirs, six Thorgerds and about forty other characters whose names begin with Thor. Although to readers of modern literature, the difficult style can be off-putting, it is definitely worth persevering because this is one of the greatest stories ever told.

Jan-Maat says

[established in this story thanks to bribery apparently (hide spoiler)]

Nikki says

I really enjoyed this one. There's some likeable characters -- even from my soft-hearted modern point of view -- who I really got to care about, which isn't always the case with sagas. I was kind of sad when they went out of the saga. The translation is good, clear and easy to read, and there's helpful footnotes, a good introduction, and other helpful supplementary material. As with all sagas, there's an awful lot of names, but it's still pretty easy to follow.

I found some of it amusing in a somewhat macabre way -- especially at the beginning, with Hallgerd's bloodthirsty nature. In the end, the "eye for an eye" mentality of the characters becomes amusing because of the excess of it, to me. Gunnar and Njal are refreshing in their refusal to feud with each other.

A lot of the saga is based on the points of the law, as well as the killing, which is interesting. Someone compared it to a John Grisham book for the Norse, which... well, I can see their point.

ETA: I can confirm from doing my own translations that the Penguin edition has a very good translation: reasonably accurate, and idiomatic while keeping a good flavour of the original style.

Duntay says

A legal saga with gratuitous violence, revenge, strong characters and what I would call magical realism. It makes me want to visit the site of Njal's farm in Iceland - a country I am fascinated by but only get to pass through .

And our cat is now called 'Ragnar Hairy - Breeks'

Czarny Pies says

Beware you need to do a lot of research to make any sense out Njal's Saga. If you just pick it up and start reading, it seems like "100 Years of Solitude" in that it describes a long multi-generational cycle of violence in which all the murderers and all the victims have the same name. The difference is that Gabriel Marquez is parodying a situation which he desperately wants to change whereas the author of Njal's Saga is describing what he considers to be a well-ordered world.

Regretfully, I have very little to say to help you with this dizzying saga of retribution. It is clearly a historical document of extraordinary value as it describes a people who are attempting to make the transition from the Iron Age to the Middle Ages. Iceland converts to Christianity in the course of this yarn but the social mores, government and literary culture are behind where the Mediterranean countries were in 1000 BC.

Andrew says

It is one of the greatest crimes of recent literature that Penguin has replaced this -- one of the truly great English translations of any work by anyone -- with a horrendously execrable translation whose only distinguishing characteristic is that it was done more recently. Seek out Magnus Magnusson's translation (thankfully there are oodles and oodles of them second hand due to it being assigned in college courses for decades) at all costs.

This book is really in a class by itself. It might be an epic poem in Icelandic, but in English it behaves like a real novel, which is jaw-dropping, considering it was written about 750 years ago -- 350 years before DON QUIXOTE, which is generally considered the first "real novel" -- and is in contrast to other poetic epics such as THE ILIAD which even in prose translations can hardly be mistaken for "real novels".

Using more-or-less factual events that took place between 960 AD and 1020 AD, the book is a long but utterly entralling history of a few families (mostly about two in particular) and the cycle of violence and murder that self-perpetuates between them, unable to be quelled because of the way the legal system and ethics are instituted in pagan Iceland. It isn't until Christianity is brought to Iceland in 1000 AD and its precept of forgiveness is introduced to the islanders' morality that the violence can at long last end. The last scene of the book, when both sides have forgiven each other, is incredibly moving.

[Oh, and a good portion of the plot is a courtroom legal thriller. I know, right?]

Hannah Notess says

So engrossing that I missed my bus stop once while reading on the bus. I think that is a good sign.

Basically guys hack each other to pieces for 50 years until eventually the only two dudes left finally make peace. People who are all like "Oh our culture is so violent nowadays" should read this for a little perspective. Because a guy will be like "Where's so-and-so?" And another guy will be like "Oh, I severed his head." And the first guy will be like "Oh, that seems like something you'd do." And then life moves on and somebody owes somebody money.

All that being said, it was very gripping!

And here is a life lesson: If a bunch of armed men come to your house to kill you, and you are standing there with a bunch of other armed men... do NOT go inside your house.

I now present to you a list of extremely delightful names from this book (mostly from the genealogies):

Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye
Ragnar Hairy-Breeks
Ketil Flat-Nose
Ulf the Unwashed
Mord Fiddle
Orm Wood-Nose
Thorolf Creek-Nose
Hraerek the Ring-Scatterer
Olvir the Child-Sparer
Bork Bluetooth-Beard
Olaf the Peacock
Thorfinn the Skull-Splitter
Eystein the Noisy
Killer-Hrapp
Hamund Hell-Hide
Hjorleif the Lecherous
Grim Hairy-Cheek
Gunnstein the Beserk-Killer
Eirik Bristle-Beard
Asbjorn the Bald of Myrkriver
Thorstein Hollow-Mouth
Hallbjorn Half-Troll
Bjorn Butter-Box
Thorstein Cod-Biter

Terry says

Njal's Saga is one of the classics of the medieval genre of the Family Saga, if not perhaps *the* classic. It

has everything you could want in a saga: extended genealogies of multiple families, inter-family conflict between said families through the generations, shifting loyalties, intrigue, bloody battles, crazy nicknames, sardonic witticisms, and enough legal jargon to keep Perry Mason happy. It is populated with characters that seem real and often multidimensional even when they are larger than life and gives an intriguing insight into the way of life of medieval Iceland with its unique culture and political & legal system.

Despite being named after Njal Thorgeirsson, the saga is wide-ranging and seems to support a fair number of protagonists. We start, not uncommonly for a saga of this kind, a generation prior to the ‘main events’ and see how the marriages and relationships of a completely different set of families will come to bear the seeds of destruction for others. After this brief introduction centring around the families of Mord Fiddle and the brothers Hoskuld and Hrut (and more importantly their daughters Unn and Hallgerd) we meet the titular Njal, a man known for his keen legal mind, tendency towards prescience, and the fact that he cannot grow a beard, and his best friend Gunnar Hamundarson. This segment of the saga could actually be said to be about Gunnar who is in many ways the consummate saga hero: good-looking, rich, and unbeatable on the field of combat (think Chris Hemsworth as Thor). Many adventures and events ensue, but the most important part is that Gunnar is smitten with the aforementioned Hallgerd (a beauty known also for her ‘thieves’ eyes’) and her pride and enmity with Njal’s much more staid wife Bergthora leads to a feud (not to mention a few murders) that tests, but does not break, the friendship of the two men. Hallgerd is an intriguing figure, a woman of wit and complexity, generally something of a villain, though not without cause or some elements of sympathy. She is also an excellent motivator for much of the action in this section of the saga, sowing the seeds for the ultimate climax.

We come to see that both Gunnar and Njal are pre-eminent men: no one can beat Njal in the law courts (a fact that he often uses to his and his friends advantage) while Gunnar is a peerless warrior of high reputation. In the end they are virtually unbeatable when they work together and this of course leads to jealousy, especially given the fact that neither of them is an actual chieftain despite the fact that they effectively lord it over their region (and much of Iceland). The tensions this causes can only bear so much strain and in the end Gunnar is made to pay with his life for his high position when he refuses to abide by the terms of an exile imposed upon him.

The next section of the saga centres more firmly on Njal and his family, especially his sons, and their feuds and (mis)adventures. Suffice it to say that these boys do not lack in pride and manage to make enemies enough to bring trouble down upon their house. Add to this the manipulations of the wily Mord Valgardsson, the enduring spite of Hallgerd, and the jealousy and enmity of large and powerful factions and we have the makings of a tragic end for the family.

This is barely scratching the surface of everything that is going on in the saga and the number of interesting characters is impressive (most noteworthy to me were Njal’s ill-starred and sardonic son Skarp-Hedin who you would *not* want to meet in a dark alley and Njal’s son-in-law Kari Solmundarson a swashbuckling hero much in the mould of Gunnar). The main storyline is peppered with many side adventures and digressions, some of which a reader will likely find entertaining, while a few others...not so much (such as a fairly long digression on the introduction of Christianity to Iceland or the chapters at the Althing centring on the legal minutiae of the case against the burners of Njal and his family). Characters come and go and things can occasionally feel disjointed and take away from the narrative pace, but overall this is an excellent read and for the most part the narrative pulls you along with it. If you’re looking for a saga to read you probably won’t find a better one than Njal’s Saga.

Jessica says

An amazing, tragic family drama and one of the greatest works I read in college. In fact, as you will note from my shelving, it's one of my favorite books of all time. This has everything: romance, heartbreak, action, legal drama. And it introduced me to Njal's son Skarp-Hedin, the greatest warrior of all time. Full of snappy one-liners, able to decapitate five men with one blow, I tried to name my firstborn after him, but my husband said no. Alas!

Annie says

-----GENERAL THOUGHTS-----

Okay, so this ancient Icelandic saga is confusing but also strangely engrossing and kind of funny (one memorable line: “He will ask you whether there are a lot of good men up [where you’re from]; to which you reply, ‘A lot of perverts, that’s about all.’”).

Names: these get real confusing. There are multiple characters with the same names, and the long-dead author, whoever it is, usually doesn’t bother to make an effort to clarify which Mord (grandfather and grandson, plus another random Mord) or Thjostolf (unrelated, I think?) or Ozur (definitely unrelated) or Olaf (there are so many goddamn Olafs) or Hoskuld (great-grandfather and his great-granson, plus an unrelated Hoskuld) or Thorhall (brothers, oddly enough—and they have a sister named Thorhalla because their parents had zero creativity) or Grim (brothers-in-law) or Thorgerd (unrelated) they’re talking about.

On the plus side, you get wonderful epithets like “Sigurd the Dragon-Killer” and “Ulf the Unwashed” and “Hroar the Tongue-Priest.”

Culture: You get some interesting glimpses to the unique features of High Middle Age-era Icelandic society. For instance, women can inherit, own their own property, marry without male relatives’ consent, and divorce their husbands without much trouble, even for things like “he doesn’t make me orgasm enough.”

-----PLOT SUMMARY-----

Here’s what you need to know: there’s a beautiful young woman named Hallgerd. Her nickname is Longlegs (yes really). She’s a spoiled rotten daddy’s girl with “thief’s eyes” but she’s also feisty, smart, and the most entertaining character in the saga. Her father Hoskuld has a brother named Hrut.

Hrut gets married to a girl named Unn, who promptly divorces him because he doesn’t make her orgasm enough. Unn has a relative named Gunnar; he’s important and will come up later. Gunnar’s best friend’s name is Njal, a wise and somewhat clairvoyant lawyer; he’ll be important later on too.

Got all that? Good.

Here we go.

-----BLOODFEUD #1-----

Hallgerd's dad Hoskuld sets her up with husband #1 and makes her marry him without asking if she wants to.

Predictably, because Hallgerd is Hallgerd, she and her new husband fight all the time, and once he slaps her for being disobedient. Hallgerd isn't the kind of girl to take this lying down, so she calls godfather Thjostolf to come kill him. Thatta girl.

Hoskuld is like "okay, lesson learned" so when this guy named Glum asks if he can marry Hallgerd, he wisely decides to ask Hallgerd herself for her preference ("You must now say frankly, since you have a will very much your own, whether it is at all to your liking; and if you are averse to such a contract, we do not wish to discuss it further"). She says sure, he seems like a nice guy.

Off go Hallgerd and Glum to their new home. Thjostolf comes with them, because he is a super creepy godfather who clearly has the hots for his goddaughter and doesn't want anyone else to have her. And Hallgerd is all "Hey Godfather, don't kill this husband, I actually like him, ok?" Thjostolf does a little wink-wink-nod-nod: "LOL ya I gotchu." And he promptly goes and kills Glum.

Thjostolf comes back to Hallgerd and goes "Um idk how to tell you this, but Glum's dead." Hallgerd asks, "So you killed him?" And Thjostolf is all "...kinda, yeah." And Hallgerd laughs (seriously, she does) and says the equivalent of "LOL WOW you really don't halfass anything, do you?" ("There's nothing half-hearted about your way of doing things.")

But secretly, Hallgerd is really pissed he killed her husband when she *specifically told him not to* so she tells him to run so he doesn't get in trouble for the murder, and go to her Uncle Hrut who will "take care of him." Uncle Hrut actually hates Thjostolf, which Hallgerd knows perfectly well, so she's really sending him there to get killed. Which is what does indeed happen.

Later on, when Njal's bestie Gunnar asks to marry her, she coyly says "I may be a little particular about husbands." LOL clearly. They get married, and Gunnar's friends (Njal and Njal's wife Bergthora) hate her because she acts like a twat to them. Gunnar tries to make them get along ("Don't try any mischief on my friends"), but Hallgerd's all "The trolls take your friends." Yeah! That's my girl!

So Bergthora and Hallgerd start hiring hitmen to kill each others' servants, picking them off one by one. This feud is the initial crux of the saga.

Gunnar's not happy, and he slaps Hallgerd during an argument. Gunnar and Njal start paying each other cash for the deaths of their respective servants, but it quickly spirals out of control. As, you know, blood feuds tend to do.

Gunnar gets a reputation, through this feud, for being a badass, and he gets a big head. People start challenging him to fights, and he's too proud to refuse, so he basically starts multiple unnecessary feuds with other people.

When some of those people come to get him, his bowstring breaks and he asks his wife, Hellgerd, if he can have a strand of her hair to make a new bowstring, and that his life depends on it.

Hellgerd lols and goes "Hey remember that one time you slapped me? Bisssh bet you wish you hadn't done that now." (You may have noticed Hellgerd *really does not like being slapped* and people who slap her tend to end up dead). Gunnar is killed and Njal is super sad. Hallgerd, of course, is not.

-----BLOODFEUD #2-----

Njal's sons get in an unrelated argument with Thrain, who's married to Hallgerd's daughter and who also happens to be Gunnar's uncle. This is the secondary big feud, since the Hallgerd vs. Bergthora one is mostly over.

Njal's sons kill Thrain, and Njal adopts Thrain's son Hoskuld (yes, named after the earlier Hoskuld- this Hoskuld is the great-grandson of that Hoskuld). This Hoskuld becomes a great chieftain.

-----BLOODFEUD #3-----

Remember Unn? The divorcee? Right, so her son Mord gets worried his own status as chieftain is threatened by Hoskuld's success, so he starts trying to convince Njal's sons to hate their foster brother, which is bizarrely easy, and they end up killing Hoskull which was Mord's plan.

Hoskuld's wife convinces her kinsmen to get blood vengeance. They surround Njal's house to burn it. They tell Njal and his wife Bergthora they can go, but they choose to die with their sons and grandkid. They all lie down, commend their souls to God, and burn to death, except for Kari, who's married to one of Njal's daughters.

He escapes and later enacts revenge for his burned family, but after his wife (Njal's daughter) dies, he marries Hoskuld's widow and brings peace to the families.

Aubrey says

3.5/5

There are a lot of written works out there that were never composed solely for the sake of entertainment. Today, these are customarily churned through for philosophical/social/religious/historical/various other noble concerns. All very well, but more rare are the ones through which one can get a firm grip on the origin of 'How to Get Away with Murder' in all its sordid glory: abusing circumstantial technicalities, citing obscure parts of archaic rulings, fighting fire with fire, all in the effort to, leastwise in terms of the main story, continue the toppling dominoes of a revenge tragedy. I won't pretend I didn't find the TV show far more engaging than the saga, but that's a natural consequence of modern taste and modern law. You won't find habeas corpus or DNA evidence or drone surveillance in the world of Njal. Instead, you'll get outlaws, premonitions, fifty bajillion witnesses, hundreds of judges, gigantic religious shifts, lawyers, and the kind of evidence based foresight that Sherlock would kill to have if he ever found himself the head of an 10th-11th century Icelandic household. One would think having multiple instances of a character uttering a string of events that are later replicated exactly in the narrative would dull rather than sharpen the intensity of the events, but often the logic is so strangely engaging that you wouldn't be surprised if such crafty plots of social manipulation had actually worked all those centuries ago.

The great thing about anonymous narratives is that the entire point is no one is supposed to know who wrote them. This isn't a case of an Unknown, of course. One could take the onanistic route and assume that a narrative filled with characters that look like you was necessarily written by someone who looks like you (bear in mind both characters and writer were composed/writing in the era before White People™ were

invented), but that would turn a conscious denial of obsession with the individual into indoctrination. The common route is commonly taken by those who confuse common sense with anything but the current hegemony of a dominant paradigm, which is why I subvert it when I can by reading anonymous works during Women in Translation Month of the Summer of Women. You could argue with this if you really wanted to, but then you'd have to take on the OED as part of your set of claims, although from the looks of it, their staff is too uniformly incompetent to give 'anonymous' as pure and self-effacing definition as it deserves. This all has very little to do with Vikings and blood feuds and clairvoyance and everything to do with my own reasons for reading really old stuff, but as long as I'm prolonging its survival by reading it, no one has any credible reason to complain.

As much as I am intrigued by and have been advised to pursue, my heart lies in literature, not law. This is why I liked *Beowulf* more, as it is, in one simplistic sense, prettier, as well as more poignant. One can admittedly extract far more juicy material from this saga's treasure trove of sociocultural norms of the period both written of and writing, but that would have been best served by reading this in academia, and I already spent my one work classes on *Middlemarch*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. I would love to come back however, to see what I could see. Grad school, perhaps.

Larou says

Njal's Saga is by far the longest of the sagas of the Icelanders, and it appears to be the general agreement that it is also the best among them, an assessment that I am not going to deviate from. In principle, *Njal's Saga* is just like the other sagas (The Sagas of Icelanders) - it has their freshness and immediacy that are striking for texts that are hundreds of years old, it has their sparse, laconic style, their reliance on action and dialogue, their absence of psychology and their emphasis on geographical and genealogical placement of their characters. In short, it has everything the other sagas have - only more so.

This is not just a matter of length - what I found most striking about *Njal's Saga* is how very vivid it is. Its language is not any more florid than of the other sagas, but just as reduced and simple, and yet it somehow manages to paint a much more colourful picture of the events it relates - it rather feels like the widescreen Technicolor version of a saga. It probably does have something to do with its length, and that it dwells just that tiny but decisive bit longer on what a character is dressed in or what exactly he does in a fight, but I don't think that quite suffices to explains why people and events in this sage possess such an immense plasticity that makes their down-to-earth-ness almost tangible for the reader as if the book's pages were just a thin, icy mist behind which we catch glimpses of the untamed, violent Norsemen feasting, sailing and fighting each other.

Njal's Saga is also somewhat clearer structured than most other sagas - it consists of two quite distinct parts, the first being about Gunnar, the various strifes he got involved in and his final downfall, and the second the story of his friend Njal, his death and the vengeance for it. The first part takes place before the arrival of Christianity in Iceland, the second after its Christianization, in the first part most conflicts are solved peacefully, in the second most end in violence - one can't help but wonder whether there might not be some implied reflection on Christianity on part of the anonymous author implied in that. Another thing that places *Njal's Saga* apart is the uncommon emphasis it puts on the law - not only is it stated several times that it is the law that keeps a society together and that it will come apart if the law fails (as is demonstrated by events in the saga), not only are there an uncommon lot of trials in this saga, but they are also described in unusual (and, it has to be said, occasionally tiresome) detail, to the point where *Njal's Saga* reads almost like the Medieval Icelandic version of courtroom drama.

There are some issues with this saga for the modern reader, chiefly its repetitiveness - basically, events here consist of a seemingly endless succession of slayings, trials, and vengeance which causes more slayings, more trials and more vengeance. There is not much difference in the way those events unfold either, so things can get somewhat tedious if one tries to read too much of the saga in one go, and therefore judicious rationing is strongly recommended. And with the length of the saga, it becomes even more difficult to keep track of all the persons and their relations to each - thankfully, the Penguin Classics edition I was reading is not only excellently translated (as far as I can judge that, of course) but also very well-edited, with a helpful introduction and footnotes.

This is definitely the saga one should read if one wants to read only one of them, although it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to stop after this one, they're as addictive as crisps (at least unless they tried to read the whole thing at once - just like crisps one can easily overstuff oneself), but significantly more nutritious. And while I don't usually do quote, I just have to put in this one, showing how just names mentioned in passing already are stories in a nutshell:

"A man named Hoskuld lived there, the son of Dala-Koll. His mother was Thogerd, the daughter of Thorstein the Red, who was the son of Olaf the White, the son of Ingiald, the son of Helgi. Ingiald's mother was Thorn, the daughter of Sigurd Snake-in-the-eye who was the son of Ragnar Shaggy-breeches. Thorstein the Red's mother was Unn the Deep-minded; she was the daughter of Ketil Flat-nose, the son of Bjorn Buna."

I doubt that ever before or after genealogy has been more fun. And maybe that is the reason why *Njal's Saga* impresses itself so vividly on the reader's mind: with all the fighting, the deaths and the maimings (there is an astonishing amount of limbs getting cut off in the course of the saga), with all the underlying fatalism, there also is an air of joyousness blowing through these tales, a boundless glorying in life and its pleasures; and no matter how rough those might appear to the modern reader some of that exuberance jumps over like an electric spark across the centuries and makes this saga so much fun to read.

Clif Hostetler says

Njáls saga is a 13th century Icelandic saga that describes events between the years 960 to 1020. It deserves respect because of its antiquity. But I found it to be a challenge to get through.

It is a long collection of stories about "so-and-so" of "such-and-such" family killing "so-and-so" of "such-and-such" family. The names were all exotic to my English language ears; thus it all passed through my memory as a blur. In this regard it reminded me of my reaction to the *Iliad*. However this book is much longer than the *Iliad*. It seemed to go on forever.

The importance of vengeance as a defense of family honor is a prominent theme in the saga. One description I thought of for the book was "Hatfield-MaCoy with swords." Insults involving a character's manliness are especially prominent in the saga. Also, fate and omens figure prominently in the stories.

At the very end there is a description of reconciliation. But based on the earlier stories the reader has to wonder how long that will last.

In my opinion if you don't have a special interest in Icelandic history and literature, don't read this book. However, I can see some lessons of human nature in the stories, so perhaps a researcher of gang warfare in modern cities could find source material here.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"Gunnar got ready to ride to the Thing, and before he left he spoke to Hallgerd: 'Behave yourself while I'm away and don't show your bad temper where my friends are concerned.'

'The trolls take your friend,' she said.

Gunnar rode to the Thing and saw that it was no good talking to her."

The events of Njal's Saga took place between 960 and 1020 in Icelandic society and were written about in the thirteenth century. What was so unexpected for me was to discover, in such an ancient culture, the power that women had in, what I assumed was, a patriarchal society. Before I started reading Icelandic sagas, I had the image in my mind of the stereotypical, he-man, Viking Icelander, who ruled his home with an iron fist. That was not the case at all.

Hallgerd was famous to scholars of the sagas because she was such a diabolical character. She took any slight against her honor very seriously, meddled in others affairs without fear of impunity, manipulated, connived, and ultimately cost seven men their lives in a feud with Bergthora, the wife of Gunnar's friend Njal. There was an inordinate amount of goading by women of their husbands in the sagas to push men into conflicts to defend family honor. The women, for the most part, did not really come off that well. They were depicted as shallow, petty, and quite willing to start an all out blood war over some perceived insult, even if the slight was unintended.

If a man did raise his hand to his wife, he risked having her burly male relatives appearing on his threshold to give him an attitude adjustment.

Most disagreements between men, some of them caused by women, were settled at a gathering called Althing. Men would get together and discuss who did what to whom and how much compensation was expected to be paid to make up for the loss of a life or of property. Again, surprisingly more civilized than anything I would have expected. Because of the alliances between people, either through blood or marriage or friendship, blood feuds were taken seriously. If things were not settled amicably between families, all of Iceland could find themselves in a civil war.

In these sagas, there were several moments when things became very precarious. As Hallgerd and Bergthora sparred with one another and convinced either their relatives or men who worked for their husbands to kill someone from the other family, the possibility of a savage blood feud erupting became precariously plausible. If not for the peaceable nature of their husbands, even more lives would have been lost as these women conducted their own bloody chess match where the pawns were men's lives. Njal and Gunnar kept passing the same bag of silver back and forth as compensation for the deaths of their kinsmen to keep the peace.

Njal was considered one of the wisest men in Iceland, but though many came to him for consul, including Gunnar, his own sons frequently avoided asking him for advice, which eventually led to disaster. **”I’m not in their planning’ said Njal, ‘but I am seldom left out when their plans are good.”**

Gunnar was level headed and anticipated problems before they actually materialized, but found himself often unable to stop the consequences. He was so mild mannered, but once his ire was raised he could become a fierce and formidable warrior. I really grew to appreciate his character as his story was told.

Throughout the sagas were foreshadowings or prophecies of what the future would hold. When Thorvald, son of Osvif, decided to marry Hallgerd, yes that Hallgerd, the future wife of Gunnar, his father couldn’t help but feel the match would be a costly one for his son. *”Her laughter doesn’t seem as good to me as it does to you,’ said Osvif, ‘and the proof of this will come later.”*

Indeed, it did.

Hallgerd had a couple of marriages before Gunnar and was known for being difficult to get along with, but she was beautiful, and men continued to be dazzled by her appearance and thought they could handle her conniving and manipulations.

Despite the very civilized manner with which compensation was handled in this society, there were still plenty of points in the saga where bloody conflict broke out, and there was much lopping of hands, arms, legs, and heads off. Skulls were split. Torsos were skewered. Scars were made. One of my favorites was when:

”This is the first time I have laughed since you killed Thrain.”

Skarphedin said, ‘Then here’s something to remember him by.’ (Terminatoresque)

He took from his purse one of the molars he had hacked out of Thrain and threw it at Gunnar’s eye [different Gunnar from the main character] and knocked it out onto his cheek. Gunnar then fell off the roof.”

Or how about this encounter with **THE** Gunnar.

”Gunnar saw a red tunic at the window and he made a thrust with his halberd and hit Thorgrim in the waist. The Norwegian lost his grip on his shield, his feet slipped and he fell off the roof and then walked to where Gizur and the others were sitting on the ground.”

Gizur looked at him and spoke: ‘Well is Gunnar at home?’

Thorgrim answered, ‘Find that out for yourselves, but I’ve found out one thing--that his halberd’s at home.’

Then he fell down dead.”

I’ve heard that some people find these sagas tough to read. Within a few pages, I found a rhythm with the way the stories were told and within a few chapters I was caught up in the lives of Gunnar and Njal. The introduction was a great prep for reading the sagas and provided me with insights that helped me enjoy my reading even more. There were many creatively described, bloodthirsty moments as well as some detailed

legal proceedings that confirmed for me the importance of laws to balance the scales between the strongest and the weakest. This Icelandic culture around 1000 AD was a society trying to evolve away from their bloody, barbaric past and move toward a civilisation where every life was precious, and the arts could be appreciated as much as the glitter of a sharp sword blade.

Also see my review of The Saga of the Volsungs

and my review of King Harald's Saga

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