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JOURNEY TO THE NJÁLA COUNTRY, 7TH AUGUST 1973

PARTS 1 and 3 of the following paper were delivered during the course of a short excursion to the Njála country made under the auspices of the Saga Congress of 1973. These parts are substantially as then delivered, with only some minor verbal alterations. At the time I had also intended to say a few words about Gunnars-hólmi and the approximate locality which I believed the saga-writer to have had in mind in this context, but owing to circumstances which need not be discussed here, and in which lack of time was a factor, this part of my talk was never given. However, it seems to me appropriate to include it here in the form intended. It is printed in brackets.

1. AT HLÍÐARENDI

When foreign scholars come to Iceland they see with their own eyes the country where the Sagas of Icelanders took place. Instead of imaginary scenes, they have the reality; sometimes bright and vivid with a rare beauty of sunlight and landscape. This reality, though changeable, will be cherished by most, for in it they find themselves encompassed by the very scene where the sagas are said to have happened.

At this, and other sites of Njála we shall visit today, I propose to consider how far the landscape and local features harmonize with the saga narrative, and whether there are any discordant notes to be detected.

My *first point* is made by the Icelandic poet Bjarni Thorarensen in lines composed early in the nineteenth century:

Söm er hún Esja,	Unchanged Esja,
samur er Keilir,	and Keilir also;
eins er Skjaldbreið	Skjaldbreið the same
og á Ingólfs dögum.	as in Ingólf's day.

This will apply to most mountains in Iceland: they will not have changed much since those times. Of course, there are some, such as

Hekla, that will have changed a great deal. I need hardly mention Heimaey in the Vestmannaeyjar. Then there were the eruptions in Skaftafellssýsla 1783, which covered a large area with lava. It is interesting to compare this area as it is now with what Njála tells us about it before the eruptions; evidence of the changes is so plentiful that a fairly clear picture may be obtained—and at the same time it can be seen how well what the saga has to say about local features agrees with information from other sources. For instance, from the saga we learn that Kringlumýri in Meðalland was once surrounded by lava; a fact which was unknown in modern times up to 1947.

A brief glance at Þingvellir in the light of what Njála has to say about it shows that the author appears to have known every detail of the landscape like the back of his own hand. Only the islet in the river Öxará has changed, of course, owing to the action of the river.

We are now at Hlíðarendi, and it is clear that the view from where we are standing must have been much the same in the days of the saga-writer as it is now. *There* is Eyjafjallajökull; *there* is Fljótshlíð; we even see the meadows newly mown as they were when Gunnar turned back—and most years there are pale cornfields on the slopes too; though of course for many centuries there were none. At our feet lie the Landeyjar, and from here we can see Bergþórshvoll near the coast, though not so distinct as it was a few years ago, for the hill there has since been changed by the hand of man.

But if you ask whether the Landeyjar area is unchanged, the answer must be, no. When I travelled for the first time through Rangárvalla-sýsla, or Rangárþing, a great river, Þverá, ran below here, constantly eroding the foot of the slope. This river has since been dammed and redirected into Markarfljót, which flows to the east of Dímon, or Rauðaskriður, just as one may suppose to have been the case in the days of the saga-writer. At that time, too, Þverá was a clear-water river (not glacial) with its source to the west of Hlíðarendi, and it flowed into Rangá.

The late Professor Ólafur Lárusson, who was one of our greatest jurists, but had studied natural sciences for a time in his earlier years, once pointed out to me the fact that during the period when all water flowed into Markarfljót there was a chieftain's residence at Hlíðarendi,

at all events from the 16th to early 18th century; but during the 18th century a large volume of water began to flow into the Þverá, and Hlíðarendi went into a decline, as may be seen from the poems of Bjarni Thorarensen.

With regard to other farms on the slopes of Fljótshlíð, most of these will be found with the same names and on the same sites as when the saga was written, though of course the buildings are very different. A few names have disappeared, though the locations of some of the farms that have been abandoned are known. The only roads then were horse-tracks, except perhaps for causeways across the marshes; bridges were few, though ferries were by no means uncommon.

Coming to *point two* in our examination of differences between Njála and present reality, where the saga places and place-names do not appear to agree with those of later times we should bear in mind the fact that, right up to our own times, Njála has always been a *living literature* in this country. As a result people have been possessed by a burning urge to identify all the places mentioned in the saga or to name them after its characters. There is evidence of this both at Hlíðarendi and Bergþórshvoll, and you will find most of it mentioned in my edition of Njáls Saga. To take one or two instances: in the saga we read of Gunnar's burial mound. Up here on the crest of the slope there is a feature known as 'Gunnarshaugur'; however in the 18th century Eggert Ólafsson pointed out that this 'mound' was not made by the hand of man. Besides, there is a tradition probably dating from the beginning of the same century to the effect that Gunnar's burial-mound was somewhere at the foot of the slope below the farm, which could well fit in with the Reykjabók manuscript reading on the subject. It is quite possible that this feature was obliterated when the water from Markarfljót began to flow into Þverá, and inevitably a new grave-mound was substituted.

Again, people have been very anxious to find the site of Gunnar's 'skáli'. Some have located it in a hollow in the slope to the north-east of the farm. But the ground there is sloping and unsuitable for a house, and in fact archeologists have shown that no traces of human building are to be found there. It is a natural surmise that the 'skáli' stood on the site where the old farm was formerly located, a portion of which is still visible. There, under a heap of earth and rubbish, perhaps the floor of

Gunnar's house is hidden; though whether the ground would reveal it, or anything else that could be identified as from Gunnar's time, we cannot tell.

Another place I might mention is 'Sámsreitir' where, according to popular tradition, Gunnar's dog Sámr is buried. Excavation has in fact produced the bones of a dog, but underneath these were the remains of a smithy, so the bones are probably from later times.

The church of Hlíðarendi was what was known as a 'half-church', i.e. services were held there only on alternate Sundays. From this it can be assumed that the farm was no longer the residence of a chieftain at the time when the churches of the districts were organized.

From all this some might conclude that what can be known of Gunnar is rather meagre. But it should be remembered that he is mentioned by many written authorities apart from Njála, the most outstanding of these being Landnámabók.

Finally we come to *point three*: the saga writer's knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of local features.

Here one may mention the 'geilar' used by Gunnar's enemies when they approached the homestead. The word 'geil' is cognate with 'gil', and the reference is most likely to the little gorge or ravine to the east of the farm. This would argue in favour of the author having visited Hlíðarendi at some time or other. I also like to think that the description of Fljótshlíð in the story of Gunnar's turning back was based on a personal experience of the saga-writer. The same applies to what he has to say about Þingvellir, Lómagnúpur (in Flosi's dream), and probably also Kringlumýri in Meðalland. As we move further away from Fljótshlíð, into Þórsmörk or on the coastal plain between the rivers Affall and Þjórsá, his knowledge seems to become less accurate. But east of Seljalandsmúli, and far to the eastern part of the country, what he has to say about local features seems to be correct. In Rangárþing, however, it is as if there were a strip of country with which he is familiar, and an examination of this shows it to lie to either side of the route to the Alþingi. It is evident, moreover, that he knows this route west of Þjórsá as well. Of course, one should not think of this strip as being too narrow: for example, the author is aware that there are tuff flagstones in the ford at Hof. He may also have visited Oddi at one time or other, though this is not so certain.

Some details of the author's topographical knowledge will be discussed later on our journey, so I shall end here for the while.

2. AT GUNNARSHÓLMI

In Njáls Saga, ch. 75, there is an account of Gunnar's plan to go abroad, and how he changed his mind on the way.

Gunnar sent his own and Kolskegg's goods down to the ship. When everything was on board, and the ship almost ready to sail, Gunnar rode to Bergthorshvoll and other places to thank all those who had given him support.

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

They rode down towards Markar River. Just then Gunnar's horse stumbled, and he *leapt* from the saddle. He happened to glance up towards his home and the slopes of Hlidarendi.

'How lovely the slopes are,' he said, 'more lovely than they have ever seemed to me before, golden cornfields and new-mown hay. I am going back home, and I will not go away.'

Kolskegg said, 'Do not make your enemies happy by breaking the settlement, something that one would never expect of you. For you can be quite sure that all of Njal's predictions will come true.'

'I am not going away,' said Gunnar. 'And I wish you would stay, too.'

'Never,' said Kolskegg. 'I am not going to dishonour my pledge over this nor any other matter I am trusted in. Tell my kinsmen and my mother that I never mean to see Iceland again; for I shall hear of your death, brother, and there will then be nothing to draw me home.'

With that they separated. Gunnar rode home to Hlidarendi, but Kolskegg carried on to the ship and sailed abroad.

Here I follow the excellent translation of Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, 1960—with one exception, of which more later.

Many have written about this brief passage of narrative, the present speaker among them. On this occasion, however, I propose to say a few words on only three points.

1) In the first place it is difficult to establish clearly where the saga-writer supposes Gunnar to be when his horse stumbles and he leaps from the saddle and gazes up at the slopes and farm of Hlíðarendi. In most manuscripts it is said that they rode 'fram at Markarfljóti' (down to Markar River), whereas in two manuscripts, each of a different group, the words used are 'fram með Markarfljóti' (along Markar River), which complicates matters. In various places in the saga it may be seen that the author considers the Markarfljót to flow east of Dímon (Rauðaskriður). But the further eastwards Gunnar went, the less clearly would he have seen the farm at Hlíðarendi and details of the actual slopes, though the shades of colour on them might be clear enough, as by Gunnar's account they were. Now it is possible that an arm of the Markarfljót once flowed further west than the main river (in the area later known as Álarnir), which would make everything much simpler. It is unlikely, on the other hand, that Gunnar could have been on the far (southern) side of Dímon when he gazed up at the slope. It may be assumed that the grassy islets in these glacial streams would hardly remain unchanged. Anyone who has seen them will realise this, and how they shift in the ground flats.

It is also possible that the saga-writer telescopes the distances, especially if the saga was written far from the district and perhaps a long time after he had last seen Fljótshlíð.

2) It is clearly stated in the saga that Gunnar's horse stumbled 'ok stókk hann ór sǫðlinum' (and he leapt from the saddle). Here I have diverged from our translation, changing the words 'had to leap' to 'leapt' in accordance with the original text. The first translation ever made of saga, the Latin version of 1812, has, correctly, *desilit*. Many have since followed this, though some have interpreted it in the sense that Gunnar fell off his horse. The present translators adopt a compromise. They are doubtless aware that some have seen in the stumbling of the horse the call of Destiny. But of this the saga says nothing; only that *Gunnar leapt off his horse*. Now a man who 'vaults into the saddle' when mounting, using his halberd, does not fall off his horse. It was said earlier (ch. 54) that, when setting off for the fight at Hof, Gunnar 'vault-

ed into the saddle', and that when the brothers rode over the river flats after the killing, they rode fast, and Gunnar then 'leapt off and landed on his feet'. The saga-writer would undoubtedly have considered it undignified for Gunnar to fall off his horse. Heroes do not fall off.

3) The third point is the cause of Gunnar's turning back. In the verse said to have been spoken by him in the burial mound there is the declaration that he chose rather to fall before his enemies with weapon in hand than yield; as in the case of Gunnar and Högni, the Burgundian kings. But in the actual account of his turning back it is assumed that he was overcome by love for his native district and its beauty. 'Fögr er hlíðin' (fair is the slope) are his words in the saga. It may well be supposed that here we have a case of two divergent opinions regarding the incident, but to me it seems more likely that the author envisaged a mixture of feelings. Such occurs frequently in the saga.

It is likely, too, that here we have echoes from an incident in Alexanders Saga.

King Alexander has sailed eastwards over the ocean to Asia, which he intends to conquer. At daybreak he climbs a high mountain, whence he surveys the land.

There on every side he sees *fagra völlu, bleika akra*, great forests, flower-gardens, fortresses, strong cities. And as the king surveyed all this *fairness (fegrð)*, then spoke he thus to his chosen band: 'This kingdom, that I now behold, do I intend for myself. But Greece, my patrimony, will I now give up to you,' said the chief, and so did he now trust in his fortune that it seemed to him as though this lay at his disposal.

The words of Njála: '*Fögr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafn-fögr sýnzkr, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek heim ríða ok fara hvergi*' are very reminiscent of the text of Alexanders Saga. The two narratives are linked here by the words *fögr . . . fögr*, and *bleikir akrar*, but at the same time it should be noted that whereas Alexander talks of planes which he sees *looking down* from the mountain, Gunnar *looks up* to the slopes and farm at Hlíðarendi. Alexander has left home and gives away his patrimony; Gunnar turns back homewards and rejects all that other lands may have to offer him. His homesickness is obvious. Both heroes express a sense of beauty, but Gunnar's is purer, being unmixed with any desire for wealth and possessions.

Njála is undoubtedly later than Alexanders Saga, and there is no obstacle to its author having been inspired by the narrative of the earlier work. It seems as though he took the springtime dream of the young warrior king, surveying his land of heart's desire, and in Njála transformed it to the autumnal vision of the weary champion who returns home to die.

3. AT BERGPÓRSHVOLL

We are now at Bergþórshvoll. At this point in our journey the best thing we can do is to read the account of the burning of Njáll in the saga.

Let us begin with the arrival of Flosi and his men on the evening of the attack.

They meet at Þríhyrningshálsar, a very suitable rendez-vous, and leave for Bergþórshvoll at about 6 p.m., reaching the homestead 'fyrir náttmál'—that is, a little before 9. This would be a reasonable time for the journey according to knowledgeable men who lived in the age of horse-transport. One may suppose that Flosi and his party rode fast, to get to their objective before news of their coming reached the friends of Njáll and counter-measures could be taken.

Here they enter the 'dalr í hválinum'—the valley in the hill, as the saga puts it—tie up their horses, and wait 'til þess er mjök leið á kveldit'—until the evening was far advanced. They intended to use the cover of darkness for their work. This account cannot be understood in any other way than implying that Flosi and his followers hid there: a hundred men and about two hundred horses. Admittedly there is a depression in the hill, but it is hardly more than fifteen by twenty metres. It might have been deeper once and its banks might have been higher, but this does not help: a hundred men and two hundred horses could never have found room there.

But since Njála has always been what I call *living literature* the people of the district have corrected the saga: they maintained that Flosi waited east of the hill, and named the place Flosalág (this was once larger than it is now, for it has been reduced by the river Affall). But of course this correction of a later age will not do. It is unsupported by any ancient authority. It is mere wishful thinking, like all the names from later times at Bergþórshvoll associated with Njáll, Höskuldr, Flosi etc. I shall be returning to the 'valley in the hill' later. But apart from

this, other topographical details about Bergþórshvoll in the saga seem to be right; especially, for instance, those relating to the flight of Kári. On the other hand words used of the sons of Njáll in chapter 44 could be taken as evidence of unfamiliarity, for there we are told that Njáll went out one evening and saw his sons 'stefna upp á hválinn', which suggests that the hill was higher and larger than it actually is. Of course it could have become lower since that time, but the words 'stefna upp á' still suggest a bigger hill than is ever likely to have existed here, and are therefore suspicious, arguing against the saga-writer having himself seen the place.

Earlier scholars and other knowledgeable men have adopted one of two expedients to explain the 'valley in the hill'.

One way out of the dilemma was to incline to the Flosalág hypothesis. The other was to admit that there was an error in the saga. This, for example, was the course favoured by Finnur Jónsson, who declared roundly that the author had obviously never been to Bergþórshvoll; an admission that must have gone against the grain with him.

But accepting this view, the problem is then to explain the many *correct* topographical details about Bergþórshvoll found in the saga, especially in connexion with the burning. Now, the author's imagination is in good working order, and is given full play in the burning episode. However, correct topographical details are not generally the product of the human imagination. The most natural explanation would appear to be that the author based his account on the detailed description of a man who was thoroughly familiar with the place, some of it possibly in narrative form. But in the author's mind details became magnified. He had heard of the valley in the hill and assumed it to be much bigger—for example, like the valley at Oddi, behind Gammabrekka, which he might have seen. And possibly he was influenced by similar hiding-places used when attacks were made on men in Laxdæla and Heiðarvíga Saga.

Recently another explanation of the valley in the hill was put forward by Professor Trausti Einarsson in the periodical *Saga*, 1967. His arguments are mainly geological. He maintains that the present bed of the river Affall was once dry, and that this was the 'valley' used by the burners to approach and hide in the eastern side of Bergþórshvoll.

Now I am not a geologist. However, I could not avoid dealing with

the Landeyjar and Bergþórshvoll in the introduction to my edition of the saga. And before doing so I discussed the matter with experts. In this way I learned a great deal from my friends the late rector Pálmi Hannesson and Professor Sigurður Þórarinnsson. The same applies in the case of the late Professor Ólafur Lárússon and his observations on the changes in the river courses in this area. But naturally I alone am responsible for what I have written on the subject.

It is a pity that no other geologists have expressed any views on the subject in recent years. The lack of a thorough-going geo-chronological study is especially to be regretted.

Furthermore I should like to point out that *farvegr* or *árfarvegr*—the dry bed of a river—is not, to the best of my knowledge, normally called *dalr* in Icelandic. The bed of the Affall would presumably have appeared as a long line in the landscape; but *dalr* is not a line. Besides, it would of course be nonsense to describe the bed of the Affall as being *in* the hill. For this reason the editor of the periodical in question ventured the conjecture that the text of the saga was corrupt here, *at* being replaced by *í*. But ‘dalr at hválinum’ is by no means a good—and in my opinion not an elegant—text. And at this point I would like to consider the text a little further. We find that all the parchment manuscripts with this passage have the reading ‘dalr var í hválinum’, not ‘at hválinum’. There are five of these, and they represent all three groups among the parchment manuscripts. Their consensus is therefore very important. But in addition, in this part of the saga the manuscript Reykjabók (AM 468, 4to) has a number of variants, some of them additions, which appear to be related to some variants in the fragment AM 162b, folio, δ and kindred texts. Owing to the excellence of some of these δ readings I have been tempted to surmise that they may have been later additions or emendations by the master himself to a manuscript a little later than his original. But here there is no such emendation. All the parchments agree in giving ‘dalr var í hválinum’.

It is dangerously easy, if you do not like a text, to assert that it is corrupt. But this expedient should not be lightly used. The text of the saga is ‘dalr var í hválinum’, and until some better text is found—for example, some paper manuscript preserving an older text—we must accept it. But I believe that the hope of finding anything of the kind is a forlorn one.

While we were at Hlíðarendi I mentioned the help given by archeology in distinguishing between fact and fiction.

The results of excavations at Bergþórshvoll have been much more impressive.

The most important were those of the late Professor Matthías Þórðarson, director of the Museum of National Antiquities, in the years 1927–28, and especially those of his successor in that post, now president of Iceland, Dr. Kristján Eldjárn, in the years 1951–52. With the collaboration of Gísli Gestsson, curator of the Museum, Dr. Eldjárn has published the conclusions of both Matthías Þórðarson's and his own work. These excavations provided ample proof of a fire at Bergþórshvoll, and carbon-14 tests showed it to have taken place during the saga-age, about the time indicated by the saga itself and by annals.

The farm-buildings were excavated by Matthías Þórðarson. He was disappointed to find little ash, but I agree with Dr. Eldjárn that this could be explained by subsequent clearing of the site, similar to that being carried out at present by the people of Vestmannaeyjar, preparatory to rebuilding. And then one house was built after another on the site, so the ash disappeared.

On the other hand, to the north of the farmhouse remains were found of a drying-oven (*sofnhús*) where there were obvious signs of destruction by fire, while to the west Dr. Eldjárn discovered what had been a byre for thirty cows, also giving clear signs of fire. Here I mention only the most important discoveries. All this provides sufficient evidence to support the written record of Njáll's death by burning on this spot at about the time indicated.

But now we must leave such absorbing matter and return to the author of Njála. Should anyone ask how wide a horizon he may have had, the answer must be: he was a typical man of the Sturlunga-age and, like others of his time, had travelled widely about Iceland. Thus his knowledge of the eastern region is considerable, especially the southernmost parts of it, while some localities in the Strandir district of the north-west are mentioned with strange precision. However, one must suppose that various places were only known slightly, by hearsay, or by what he had read about them in sagas or other written sources. He probably never visited Norway; there are too many mistakes in what

he says about places there. But on the whole his knowledge of Northern Europe is not bad, and the same applies to the British Isles. In Iceland his knowledge is most accurate at Þingvellir and in the Skaftafellssýslur, while the route from the east to Þingvellir was thoroughly familiar to him.

In the classical Sagas of Icelanders it is not usual to find more description of nature than is demanded by the narrative. Though the author of *Njála* does not diverge from this convention, he has, nevertheless, a rare visual talent and, in his own way, a feeling for nature, both wild and gentle. Like other Sagas of Icelanders, though, *Njála* is pre-eminently an anthropocentric work. The author's subject is man—first and foremost as an individual, but sometimes also as a member of a group. The physical appearance of his characters is important, but their personalities still more so. He is a tireless delver into the depths of the human soul, and he is a master of language and style; whether in narrative, description, or the nuances of dialogue. The reader must have a sensitive ear, but given this he will be granted an astonishing insight into these characters, though the writer rarely allows himself to overstep the strict limits of the classical style.

Not only has the author of *Njála* an exceptional visual talent, a wonderful mastery of language, and a knowledge of psychology. He is also an enquirer into the deepest laws that govern the relationship between men and events; the concepts of luck, fate, and finally providence are involved. While describing people he is ever grappling with these ideas. Also with the relationship between a man's morality and the course of his life. In the author's moral attitude we may detect a constant interplay between the old and the new. We should never forget this when trying to understand his outlook. His whole work is an endless conflict of opposites. He is an Icelander of the thirteenth century, endowed with all the breadth and depth of his age. He belongs to a civilization in rapid transition.

But he is deeply rooted in his own land and in the heritage of his own people. This is what makes his work uniquely regional and Icelandic, while it still remains of universal validity.