

Visual translation's of Njáls Saga

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I

One windy summer's day in 1872, Samuel Edward Waller was sitting in the shelter of a decrepit sheepcote by the slopes of Fljótshlíð, looking up at Hlíðarendi farm. The previous day this British artist in his early twenties had drawn a scene of the farm site from the slopes above it, with a view over Rangárvellir plains. Now he wanted to depict the landscape upwards from the farm. Waller was absorbed in his task, but before he managed to complete it he suffered an unexpected intrusion:

I became conscious, firstly, of the noise of something rapidly approaching, and then of a series of the most terrific bellowings I ever heard in my life. I looked up, much alarmed, and saw one of the savage little brindled bulls coming up the hill at me as fast as possible, his eyes glaring savagely, and his tail in the air. I dropped my brushes and crept inside the hut, and the brute, close at my heels, attempted to follow. Fortunately, the doorway was much too narrow; so, after a good deal of pushing and blustering and tearing the turf with his horns, he left off trying to force an entrance, and contented himself with marching up and down outside.¹

Waller had been prompted to visit Iceland that summer by reading *The Story of Burnt Njal*, Sir George Webbe Dasent's translation of *Njáls saga*, published in 1861.² He was particularly captivated by the first half of the saga and regarded the heroic last stand made by Gunnar Hámundarson, who lived at Hlíðarendi, as its artistic climax. In fact, *Njáls saga* had such a powerful effect on the young artist that he felt compelled to see its setting for himself, and particularly the place where Gunnar lived. His aim in undertaking the journey was to acquire the clearest possible picture of the closing scene in the life of the most noble character in the history of Iceland. And in that respect, it is difficult to cap Waller's experience in his dramatic episode with the bull. There he found out for himself what it is like to sit inside a fortress of turf and rock, conscious of a ferocious enemy at the door. The only difference was that the bull eventually gave up, unable to strip away the roof. Unlike Gunnar from Hlíðarendi nine centuries before, Waller escaped from this episode with his life.

Two years after his sojourn in Iceland, Waller published a travelogue which he entitled *Six Weeks in the Saddle*. Besides a journal of his travels, the book contains fourteen drawings, including two that Waller sketched in the vicinity of Hlíðarendi. These illustrations served a dual purpose. They were valuable for the travel story as such, and were also intended to make it easier for British admirers of *Njáls saga* to realize the topography of the saga's setting. In

more general terms, Waller's attitude to Iceland is in many ways typical of that of many British travel writers and artists who have followed in his footsteps over the past 140 years. Their acquaintance with the Sagas of Icelanders and Icelandic culture has not infrequently shaped their perspectives on the Icelandic landscape and the people who live in the country, and in some instances has been the main impetus behind their visit in the first place.

As an illustrator Samuel Edward Waller paved the way for publications of works, such as *A Pilgrimage to the Saga Steads of Iceland*, which W. G. Collingwood and the Icelander Jón Stefánsson produced in 1899. The stated aim of this splendid picture book was to supply 'the background of scenery' for several major Icelandic family sagas, to help 'the modern reader, out of Iceland' to 'stage these dramas, to visualise the action and events'.³ One chapter is devoted to south Iceland – the 'Country of Burnt Njal' – and alongside its retelling of the relevant chapters of *Njáls saga*, and an account of their voyages through these settings, it includes Collingwood's landscapes of (1) Knafarhólar, (2) the view from Þríhyrningsháls to Mt. Hekla, (3) the view from Breiðabólstaður to Bergþórshvoll and (4) Gunnar's cairn at Hlíðarendi.⁴ Collinwood also painted the scenery of Thingvellir, one of which did not end in his book but is interesting as it features members of the ancient parliament.

In a sense, Waller also paved the way for the artists who have illustrated various editions, translations and retellings of the sagas over the past 100 years. Most of them, however, follow the example set by Collingwood in his historical painting from Thingvellir and dramatize individual episodes of the saga.⁵ The primary exception is the Danish artist Johannes Larsen, who travelled around Iceland in 1927 and 1930 and drew landscapes and farm sites associated with individual sagas. These illustrations originally appeared in a large collection of saga-translations published in Danish in the early 1930s.⁶ Larsen's illustrations for *Njáls saga*, which had been translated by Ludvig Holstein and Johannes V. Jensen, include angelica in bloom at Bergþórshvoll, horse-riding tracks at Hlíðarendi, haystacks in the meadow at Hof in Rangárvellir and the farmhouses and timber church at Keldur, not to mention the road through Almannagjá chasm at Þingvellir, but nowhere are characters from *Njáls saga* or any other human figures to be seen. These illustrations were published again as a part of Bjarni Niclasen's Faroese translation of the saga in 1966. Some of them were also reprinted in Magnús Finnbogason's Icelandic edition of *Njáls saga* in 1944, along with illustrations by Collingwood and Daniel Bruun and a few Icelandic photographs.

My favorite illustrator is, however, Eiler Krag, who contrary to Larsen focuses on the characters of the saga, paying little attention to landscape and environment. His illustrations were published in two different Danish editions of the saga, with 32 years between them. In 1948, N.M. Petersen's nineteenth-century translation of *Njáls saga* was reissued by Ellen Olsen. This edition of contains 51 pictures drawn by Krag. In 1980, when Holstein's and Jensen's translation was reissued, Krag illustrated the saga again, now with 29 new pictures.

Before discussing Krag's work in detail, I would like give a short summary of the development of illustrations of *Njáls saga* prior to the year 1948. The oldest of these were done for abridged versions of the saga and date from the last decades of the nineteenth century. We do not know the name of the first artist working in but this field but his pictures were published in Jules Gourdault's French rewriting of *Njáls saga* in 1886. The Swede Jenny Nyström-Stoopendaal followed his lead in 1895 when four of her illustrations appeared in 1895 A. Ekermann's summary of the saga in the collection *Från Nordens forntid*. A year later, they were reprinted in another saga-collection, Hedda Anderson's, *Nordiska sagor*. In 1898, nine *Njáls saga*-illustration by the Norwegian Andreas Bloch were published in Nordahl Rolfsen's saga-collection *Vore Fædres Liv*. Bloch's saga illustrations, all in all 50 of them inspired by various sagas, became well known in Iceland, and were for instance reprinted on popular postcards.⁷ In the first decades of the twentieth century, new illustrations were done for English and American translations and versions of *Njáls saga*. The American painter E.W.D. Hamilton did, for instance make four illustrations for Allen French's abridgement of the saga, *Heroes of Iceland*, published in 1905. Two years later, anonymous artist did twelve illustrations Beatrice E. Clay's children's version of the saga, *The Story of Gunnar*. And the list is considerably longer. In the 1926, for instance, A. E. Haswell Miller did two *Njáls saga*-illustrations for Donalds A. MacKenzie's, *Tales from Northern Sagas*, in 1935 the Dane Sigurd Olrik published five pictures inspired by the in his *Børnenes danske læsebog* og two illustrations by K. J. Blisch can be found in Lydia Kath's *Uhrmutter Unn* from 1936.

The artists that I have mentioned so far generally elevate the world of the sagas. The works of Nyström-Stoopendaal and Bloch are particularly romantic, depicting the heroes at their moment of truth or their destined hour. We see Gunnar and Hallgerður first meeting and Thingvellir (ch. 33), Skarphedinn's killing of Thrainn (ch. 92) and the scene in which Hildigunnur gives Flosi the bloody cloak of her husband Hoskuldur (ch. 116). The environment, the clothing and the buildings are depicted in a realistic but yet beautified way. Njáll sits in his best attire at his farm of Bergthorshvoll (ch. 20), Gunnar fights with his enemies from within his nineteenth century Norwegian "hytte" (ch. 77). Hamilton's illustrations are done in the same spirit, with glaciers, sublime mountains and water-falls in the background. The most curious detail is how old and fat some of the saga heroes are in pictures, in particular Gunnar of Hildarendi (ch. 77), and Skarphedinn, son of Njal (ch. 77). Perhaps, the idea was to contrast the dying heathen heroes, and with the youthful Christian hero, Hoskuldur Thrainsson, in the last illustration of *Heroes of Iceland*.

Halldór Laxness' Icelandic edition of *Njáls saga*, published by the Helgafell-publishing hous in 1945, signalled a new period in the history of saga illustrations. This expensive coffee-table edition features 70 illustrations by Gunnlaugur Scheving (25 pictures), Þorvaldur

Skúlason (25 pictures) og Snorri Arinbjarnar (21 pictures).⁸ Instead of the heroic spirit of earlier illustrators, the three Icelandic artists are more personal and pessimistic in their translation of the saga-text, in particular Scheving and Skulason. Scheving focuses on the violence in the saga; we see the blood gushing from the head of farm-hand Kolur (ch. 36), a spear stuck in the neck of one Aslakur from Lang-island (ch. 89), Skarphedinn's uncanny grin in the fire of Bergthorshvoll (ch. 130), and the head of Gunnar Lambason rolling on the table in the feast of the earls in Hrossey (ch. 155). Similarly, Skulason is preoccupied with death in his illustrations. We see Sigmundur and Skjold bury Thordur, farm-hand from Bergthorshvoll (ch. 42), Hildigunnur next to the corpse of her husband Hoskuldur (ch. 112) and Kari and his band examining the corpses of Njall, Bergthora and their grandson Thord after the burning of Bergthorshvoll (ch. 132). But Skulason, also highlights some erotic scenes, as when the villain Hrappur is courting Gudrun Gudbrandsdottir (ch. 87).

Art historian Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson has suggested that Scheving and Skulason were stylistically influenced by illustrations that Norwegian artists had produced for an edition of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, released in Norway in 1898. These illustrations had been reproduced in an Icelandic edition of *Heimskringla*, published by the Helgafell publishing house in 1944. In particular, Scheving's pictures resemble the illustrations of Gerhard Munthe og Halfdan Egedius in the Norwegian translation, but in some of Skulason's pictures, like the one depicting Atli's one the ship of Hrutur (ch. 5) one can furthermore detect the same cubist influence as in his paintings from this period, as can be seen.⁹

I am not ready to make any bold statements about direct influence, but I see these Icelandic artists as the predecessors of Eiler Krag. Like the Skulason and Scheving, Krag pays little attention to realistic backgrounds in his older illustrations from 1948. The main emphasis is on the body language and the facial expressions of the characters. We see Thjostolf raising his axe, after having killed Thorvald (ch. 12), Gunnar consulting Njall (ch. 64) and Asmund the blind asking Lytingur for compensation for the death of his father (ch. 106). These characters stand on an empty, white stage. *Njáls saga* is being interpreted by Krag as a story about people and their emotions, rather than an historical document taking place in Iceland in the Middle-Ages.

Krag is even more abstract in the black-and-white water colours he produced for the Danish edition in 1980. The pictures are more symbolic and humorous than his pictures from 1948. By comparing the older and the younger illustrations, one can assume that Krag has carefully reread *Njáls saga* before illustrating it again. The saga, for instance, depicts the parting of Hrutur and queen Gunnhildur, after the Icelander has decided to leave the Norwegian court and go back to Iceland, where Unnur Mardardottir, his bride-to-be, is waiting. Instead of the couples loving kisses in the older illustration, the younger illustration

is focused on their faces and shoulders, in particular the dark expression on Gunnhildur's face. This is keeping with the saga's description of this event

She put her arms round his neck and kissed him, and said, 'If I have as much power over you as I think, the spell I now lay on you will prevent your ever enjoying the woman in Iceland on whom you have set your heart. With other women you may have your will, but never with her. And now you must suffer as well as I ... (ch 6).

In some instances Krag elaborated in 1980 upon the same themes as in his 1948 pictures. And illuminating example is his illustrations of the horse-fight between Gunnar and the sons of Starkadur (ch. 59). The younger picture is more powerful; notice the facial expression of the sons of Starkadur who are losing the fight.

Additionally, Krag is interested in the erotic aspects of *Njáls saga*. I have already mentioned that Skulason drew a picture of Hrappur and Gudrun Gudbrandsdottir for Laxness' 1945 edition. Krag illustrates the same scene, both in 1948 and 1980, and is much more explicit than the Iclander. This is how their love-making is described in the saga:

One day [Gudrun] asked leave to go to amuse herself in the nutgrove. Asvard accompanied her. Hrappur went to look for them and found them in the wood; he caught her by the hand and drew her away by herself. Asvard went in search of her and found them lying together in a thicket. He rushed up with his axe raised and swung at Hrappur's leg, but Hrappur quickly twisted away and dodged the blow. Then he jumped to his feet and snatched up his own axe; Asvard tried to get away, but Hrappur's axe bit clean through his backbone. (ch. 87)

In 1948 Krag showed us the couple in intercourse in the nutgrove, and Asvard with his raised axe, but in 1980 the perspective is different, both more humorous and dramatic.

In my view, Krag's illustrations represent the most interesting visual translation of *Njáls saga* to date; at the same illuminating and challenging the medieval text. The only other artist that has truly contested Krag in later years is Maria Hiszpansku-Neuman, who produced twelve illustrations for a Polish translation of the saga in 1968. Other illustrators that have been trying their hand in this field in recent years are Uno Stallarholm who made 15 pictures for Åke Ohlmark's Swedish translation of the saga in 1964, Odd Brochman who illustrated Zinken Hopp's Norwegian children's version in 1983 and Robert Jensen who illustrated Keld Belert's Danish children's version the same year. Finally, Povl Christensen produced in 1998 21 pictures for a new edition of N.M. Petersen's translation of *Njáls saga*.

Of these artists, Stallarholm emphasized the heroic aspects of the saga (ch. 77), Odd Brochman on the other hand focuses on the reality of landscape and environment. The only artist who truly follows in the footsteps of Eiler Krag, focusing on the body language and the facial expressions of the characters, is Povl Christensen. But as we can see from this example, where Thjostolfur is raising his axe (ch. 12), some of his illustrations seem to be visual

translations, not on the text of the saga, but Krag's earlier illustrations (see also ch. 124 and 54/37).

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¹ S. E. Waller, *Six Weeks in the Saddle* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1874), p. 117.

² On Dasent's translation cf. Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 142-82; and Jón Karl Helgason, *The Rewriting of Njáls saga: Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas* (Clevedon, Buffalo, Toronto, Sydney: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1999), pp. 47-64.

³ W. G. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland* (Ulverston: W. Holmes, 1899) p. v.

⁴ Collingwood and Stefánsson, pp. 20-32.

⁵ Cf. Jón Karl Helgason, *Höfundar Njálu: Þræðir úr vestrænni bókmenntasögu* (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, háskólaforlag Máls og menningar, 2001), pp. 111-25.

⁶ *De islandske sagaer; paa dansk ved Selskabet til udgivelse af islandske sagaer*, transl. by Ludvig Holstein and Johannes V. Jensen, illustr. by Johannes Larsen, 3 vols (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk forlag, 1930-1932)

⁷ Sýnishorn af þessum kortum má finna í bók Jóns Karls Helgasonar, *Hetjan og höfundurinn* (1998), s. 15-16.

⁸ Um þessa útgáfu er fjallað ítarlega í bók Jóns Karls Helgasonar, *Hetjuni og höfundinum* (1998), s. 115-31.

⁹ Aðalsteinn Ingólfsson, „Icelandic Sagas and Saga Interpreters,“ óbirtur fyrirlestur (2000).