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Feel the Burn: *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* as Literary Type-Scene

But like all fireworks and all sunsets, we all burn in different ways.

Spencer Krug

Some Like It Hot: Introduction

Medieval Icelanders did not live by the Machiavellian/Old Klingon saying “Revenge is a dish best served cold.” As such, burning in homesteads was their never-quite-successful go-to solution for the ultimate destruction of their enemies. The most famous of the saga burnings is of course the *Njálsbrenna*, where a vengeful father led his sons, wife, and grandson to their untimely deaths. Another famous burning is the 1253 *Flugumýrarbrenna*, where Gizurr Þorvaldsson hid in a barrel of whey while his sons, wife, kinsman, and loyal household members were liquidated by the spears and fires of their enemies. But these are hardly the only cases of death by house-fire in Old Norse literature; people burn everywhere in the saga corpus. In the year 1197, Northern chieftain Guðmundr dýri fell upon his enemy Önundr’s farmstead and had it burned down, as related in the *samtíðarsaga* (contemporary saga) *Guðmundar saga dýra*. The description of this burning bears resemblance to those of other saga burnings, both in the secular *samtíðarsögur*, which are considered to have been written in a more historical mode, and the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of

the Early Icelanders / Family Sagas), a corpus that is considered to be more fictional. This article will examine these similarities, and suggest that we approach them as literary constructions rather than reflecting a necessary historical truth. If we are to recognize this fact, the manipulations done by the author of *Guðmundar saga dýra* will become much more apparent.

Lönguhliðarbrenna — The Burning of Langahlið

The *Lönguhliðarbrenna* (burning of Langahlið) is one of the major climaxes in the power struggles of the peninsula that lies between Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður in Northern Iceland, during the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century,¹ as described in *Guðmundar saga dýra*. The burning itself and the events that anticipate it take place in chapters 13–14 of the saga.² Guðmundr Þorvaldsson dýri and Öundur Þorkelsson are the two major power-holders in the Western part of Eyjafjörður, and as such they frequently quarrel over legal issues (though sometimes they also find themselves cooperating). Tensions rise after Öundur's men mock Guðmundr dýri, targeting his masculinity and comparing him to a hornless ram. In saga literature, comparisons to female animals frequently end with a bloody response.³ Following this intolerable act, Guðmundr dýri enlists the help of prominent chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason, and together they plan an attack on Öundur's farmstead in Langahlið. A few days before the attack, a few strange occurrences happen: First, Öundur's men search for him but cannot find him although he is sitting in his usual spot, and then, at a farm allied with Guðmundr dýri, the axes start to make a high noise from the beam where they are hung, and need to be sparkled with holy water. It is then related that a supporter of Öundur named Erlendr rides to Langahlið, and encounters Söxólfr Fornason, one of Guðmundr dýri's men, who in a typical Hollywood villain style reveals their plot to attack Langahlið, but also successfully forces Erlendr to turn back, and thus stops him from warning Öundur. The attacking party arrives at the area, and once the people

¹ See J.L. Byock: *Feud in the Icelandic saga*. Berkeley 1982, pp. 83–86, for a summary and a helpful map of the five chieftains mentioned in *Guðmundar saga dýra* and their territories.

² *Sturlunga saga I*. Eds. J. Jóhannesson et al. Reykjavík 1946, pp. 187–192 (hereinafter Sts I, or Sts II).

³ See, for example, F. Amory: *Speech Acts and Violence in the Sagas*. “Arkiv för nordisk filologi” 1991, Vol. 106, pp. 75–76.

of Langahlíð realize that an attack is imminent, they suggest to meet the attacking force outside the house. Önundr, however, prefers another strategy, and advocates rather that they fight from inside. When his supporters argue that this will only allow their enemies to burn them inside: “Önundr lét sér þat ekki skiljast ok vildi ráða.”⁴ The attacking party then arrives at the buildings themselves and encircles them, ensuring that those who were inside cannot easily leave. Önundr asks for the identity of the attackers and Guðmundr responds by reference to the aforementioned insult and calls himself a ewe. Önundr then asks for his men to be spared, which Guðmundr bluntly refuses. Guðmundr’s men quickly realize that taking over the house would be a very difficult task because it was so well defended, so they decide to set fire to it. Since fire is not available at their present location they move to search the neighbouring farms, and find some in a farm called Grund. The attackers then find it hard to set fire in front of the doors so they set fire to the roof and stuff hay into the windows. The besieged request that women and men unrelated to the fight be let go, and the attackers grant this. One of Önundr’s men, Þóroddr, uses the opportunity to try and carry out weapons, perhaps in order to bring the fight to the attackers, and is immediately dispatched.⁵ It is related that the rich man Gálmr Grímsson, who is friends with both the attackers and defenders — especially Kolbeinn Tumason — is present at the house burning. He offers to give up all of his wealth if the attackers leave and let everyone exit the house. In response the burners offer him whatever reward he pleases so that he leave, which he refuses with the often quoted reply: “Lengi hafið þér hlegit at því, at mér hafi þótt það gótt ok ek hafa opt drukkit mikit. Nú mun kostr baðs, en ósýnt þykkir mér nú, hversu um mjöðdrykkjuna ferr.”⁶ Afterwards Þorfinnr, Önundr’s son and Guðmundr dýri’s son-in-law, says that it is a shame that his daughter Ingibjörg is not present inside the house. To this Guðmundr dýri responds that it is in fact good that she is not there, but that it would not change his course of action. We are then told of a series of people who try to escape the burning house: Halli Nikulásson cannot stand the heat so he runs out of the house and falls into a river, where he is killed. Önundr’s follower Tjörvi is given a fatal blow as he rushes from the house, only to be given truce by Guðmundr dýri who does not notice the wound. Tjörvi retorts with “vættka ek um griðin,”⁷

⁴ Sts I, p. 189: “Önundr would not be convinced and decided on the course of action.” — unless stated otherwise, all the translations from Icelandic are by the author of the present article.

⁵ The narrative finds it necessary to clarify that: “ok miskenndist hann ekki, því at þeir höfðu honum ætlat líflát” (“and he was not misidentified, because they had intended for him to be killed”) (ibidem, p. 190).

⁶ “Long have you laughed at me that I thought it good to take hot baths, and that I have often drank mead. Now a hot bath is at hand, but I am unsure how the mead-drinking will fare.” — ibidem, p. 191.

⁷ Ibidem: “I have no need for a truce.”

and falls down dead. Leifr Nikulásson then runs out and survives because he uses another man as a shield, and manages to run to the church despite being wounded. Fire threatens to engulf the church, but Guðmundr dýri promises to give a cow to the church if the building is not burnt and the fire is blown away by a change of the wind. Something then falls from the house that startles the men, and they realize that it is Þorfinnr Önundarson. The man appointed to kill him refuses to attack because he is all burnt, so others take up the task but cannot get to him before he reaches the church; it is related that he died after three days from his wounds. It is then related that Önundr and Gálmr were killed. A poem about the burning is recited by Kolbeinn Tumason, and we are then told how the burners ride off.

If this description rings any bells, it indeed should. As Jacqueline Simpson points out, the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* and *Njálsbrenna* both share “[t]he fatal decision to fight from indoors; the kindling of fire in the roof when attempts to start a blaze in the doorway have failed; the killing of a man who tries to smuggle weapons out when quarter is given to women and servants; the voluntary death of some whom the attackers wished to spare (Gálmr in *Guðmundar saga dýra*, Njáll, Berþóra and young Þórðr in *Njála*).”⁸ Þorfinnr’s escape from the burning house while still being on fire also corresponds with Kári’s escape from the burning house in Bergþórshváll.⁹

The fact that there was a connection, in a sense, between burnings in medieval Iceland has been pointed out as early as in the late 13th-century *Íslendinga saga*, written by Sturla Þórðarson: “Þá er brenna var á Flugumýri, var liðit frá Önundarbrennu fjórum vetrum fátt í sex tigu vetra, en frá Þorvaldsbrennu hálfri þriðri tigr vetra.”¹⁰ Old Norse scholars have also discussed the connection between burning scenes in saga literature, most recently Lisa Bennett, who examined how the Christian Icelanders dealt with these violent episodes in the far and most recent past. The lengthy burning descriptions, she argues, are connected to the negative attitude of the Christian 13th-century towards burning down as an act of violence.¹¹ Peter Hallberg has looked at both the *Njálsbrenna* and the *Flugumýrarbrenna* with the conclusion that while they share much, the former is written in a far more relaxed literary mode, while the latter sticks to the facts of recent history.¹² Scholars such

⁸ J. Simpson: *Advocacy and Art in “Guðmundar saga dýra”*. “Saga Book of the Viking Society” 1961, Vol. 15, p. 343.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 344.

¹⁰ Sts I, p. 493: “When Flugumýrr was burnt, fifty six winters had passed from the burning of Önundr, and twenty five winters had passed from the burning of Þorvaldr.”

¹¹ L.L. Bennett: “*The Most Important of Events*”: *The “burning-in” motif as a site of cultural memory in Icelandic sagas*. “Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association” 2007, Vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 69–86.

¹² P. Hallberg: *Två mordbränder i det medeltida Island*. “Gardar” 1976, Vol. 7, pp. 25–45.

as Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Jacqueline Simpson have suggested that the author of *Njáls saga* had borne in mind the burning-ins in his recent history when he dealt with the *Njálsbrenna*,¹³ while Björn Sigfússon and Barði Guðmundsson have both indicated that the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* was on the author of *Ljósvetninga saga*'s mind as he composed the scene of a failed burning-in attempt.¹⁴

What Are Type-Scenes?

One explanation for these similarities could stem from the traditional nature of the Icelandic saga narratives. As Scholes and Kellogg have pointed out:

The parallel passages that many critics cite as examples of literary borrowing by one saga author from another are more easily explained as elements common to an oral tradition. That the sagas were written down cannot be denied. That a single writer must be thought of as standing behind each of the individual saga texts is also reasonable. But that the writer depended upon either books or his own individual invention for the major elements of his story does not seem justified by the evidence. The sagas would not be as good as they are if they were individually created compositions in anything like the modern sense.¹⁵

The concept of type-scene in Old Icelandic literature has been examined by Fredrik J. Heinemann, using Old English scholar Donald K. Fry's definition:

A type-scene is a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event, requiring neither verbatim repetition nor a spe-

¹³ *Brennu-Njáls saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 12). Ed. E.Ól. Sveinsson. Reykjavík 1954, pp. CXIV—CXXV. See also J. Simpson: *Advocacy and Art...*, p. 344.

¹⁴ *Ljósvetninga saga með þáttum, Reykdæla saga ok Víga-Skútu. Hreiðars þáttur* (Íslenzk fornrit 10). Ed. B. Sigfússon. Reykjavík 1940, p. XXXVIII, and B. Guðmundsson: *Höfundur Njáls: Safn ritgerða*. Reykjavík 1958, p. 154. Guðmundsson has also looked into the connection between the *Njálsbrenna* and the *Flugumýrarbrenna*, as part of his general approach to *Njáls saga* as a *roman-à-clef*, which deals with events from the 13th century through events that took place in the 10th and 11th century (ibidem, pp. 225—234. Cf. P. Hallberg: *Två morbränder i det medeltida Island...*, pp. 26—27, 45).

¹⁵ R. Scholes, J. Phelan, R. Kellogg: *The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded*. Oxford 2006, p. 43.

cific formula content; and a theme is a recurring concatenation of details and ideas, not restricted to a specific event, verbatim repetition, or certain formulas, which forms an underlying structure for an action or description.¹⁶

Heinemann, who tried to settle Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr in *Hrafnkels saga* with his alleged change of *lund* (character), showed that it was Eyvindr who provoked Hrafnkell and sealed his own fate, and exemplified this through an analysis of the author's use of type-scene conventions. Hrafnkell's hesitancy to respond to the provocation, and the author taking time to describe Eyvindr's approach use type-scene convention to assign blame. Heinemann showed even stronger evidence for use of type-scenes as a means of creating irony in an earlier article discussing the Old English approach-to-battle type-scene.¹⁷ There Heinemann illustrated how small changes in narrative conventions help to mock the Assyrians before these are slaughtered by the Israelites, and create the feeling that they are cowards who deserve their awful fate. It would be possible, then, to treat the burning-in descriptions as type-scenes and find meaning within the variations they represent. To view the sagas through the perspective of the type-scenes is somewhat similar to Richard Allen's structural approach,¹⁸ or to Lönnroth's Action Patterns, like descriptions of feuds or travels abroad. Lönnroth argues that each Action Pattern carries with it certain expectations from the audience, based both on their own and others' experiences, and on literary conventions.¹⁹

Type-Scene Analysis

Many elements in the events that come before the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* can be found elsewhere in burning scenes in saga literature. The mocking of Guðmundr dýri that leads him to the act of burning-in Önundr bears close similar-

¹⁶ D.K. Fry: *Themes and Type-Scenes in Elene* 1—113. "Speculum" 1969, Vol. 44, no. 1, p. 35.

¹⁷ F.J. Heinemann: *Judith 236-291a: A Mock Heroic Approach-to-Battle Type Scene*. "Neuphilologische Mitteilungen" 1970, Vol. 71, no. 1, pp. 83—96.

¹⁸ R.F. Allen: *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls saga*. Pittsburgh 1971, pp. 57—94.

¹⁹ L. Lönnroth: *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley 1976, p. 75. Lönnroth cites in this context Theodore M. Andersson (*The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge, MA 1967) and Joseph C. Harris (*Genre and Narrative Structure in Some Íslenðinga Þættir*. "Scandinavian Studies" 1972, Vol. 44, pp. 1—27).

ity with that of Skarphéðinn's attack on Flosi's masculinity in the infamous *alþingi* scene in *Njáls saga*. There, Skarphéðinn throws a pair of trousers at Flosi and says that he should wear these in a sexual encounter where he is to play the passive role with a giant.²⁰ The *Flugumýrabrenna* is also preceded by an attack on Eyjólfur Þorsteinsson's masculinity launched by his wife Þuríðr Sturludóttir.²¹ The omens that are harbingers of the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* are common occurrences before a burning-in as well.²² These appear in the very vivid and disturbing visions of *Njáls saga*,²³ the attack on Ketilbjörn's farm in *Gull-Þóris saga*,²⁴ as well as the burning-in of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson,²⁵ and a dream dreamt by Blund-Ketill's son Hersteinn in *Hænsna-Þóris saga*.²⁶ One house burning in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* is prevented thanks to an ominous dream by the burner's sister Þorbjörg, who is married to the head of the household that he intends to burn.²⁷ Erlendr's failed attempt to warn Önundr of Guðmundr dýri's advance could be compared with *Njáls saga*'s Ingjaldr, who is convinced to break his oath and not join the attack on Bergþórshváll, but also refuses to warn about the attackers' plans.²⁸ By the same token, the awkward Gizurr glaði who forgets to warn Gizurr Þorvaldsson about the plan to burn down his farm can also be invoked.²⁹

It is when the burning-in scene itself starts that we find the most similarities between the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* and other burning-in cases. When the farm is surrounded by its enemies the head of the household goes to the door and asks for the identity of the attackers as well as for a pardon for his people. This happens in the *Njálsbrenna*, in the *Flugumýrabrenna* (though notably not by the head of household),³⁰ in *Hænsna-Þóris saga*,³¹ in the burning-in of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson,³² and during/upon the attack of Ketilbjörn's farm in

²⁰ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., p. 314.

²¹ Sts II, p. 481.

²² Indeed, they are a common occurrence before many important battles and deaths in the sagas.

²³ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., pp. 320—321, 324—325.

²⁴ *Harðar saga* (Íslenzk fornrit 13). Eds. Þ. Vilmundarson, B. Vilhjálmsson. Reykjavík 1991, p. 218.

²⁵ It is important to note that that burning-in is stopped by Hrafn's surrender, yet the house is already lit by his enemy Þorvaldr Snorrason.

²⁶ *Borgfirðinga sögur: Hænsa-Þóris saga, Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu, Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa, Heiðarvíga saga, Gísels þáttir Illugasonar* (Íslenzk fornrit 3). Eds. S. Nordal, G. Jónsson. Reykjavík 1938, p. 24.

²⁷ *Harðar saga*..., p. 77.

²⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., p. 319.

²⁹ Sts I, p. 487.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 490.

³¹ *Borgfirðinga sögur*..., p. 24.

³² Sts I, pp. 225—226.

Gull-Póris saga.³³ In *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* it is Þorbjörg — the sister of the burner Hörðr — who does the negotiations with him from the farm's entrance.³⁴

During a burning-in, there is almost always a certain passivity of the father or head of household whilst the ensuing battle. These acts of passivity have often been read as indications of “Christian heroism,” as Lisa Bennett puts it.³⁵ The *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* is no exception: Önundr's only actions during the burning are to insist that his men fight from inside, and to plead unsuccessfully with Guðmundr dýri for their lives. As pointed out above in the quote by Simpson, this is not unlike Njáll's actions during the burning-in of his farm, which consist in his seemingly irrational insistence on fighting from the inside of the, even though his sons clearly warned him of being burnt and pleading half-heartedly for the lives of his sons, and for other people of his household.³⁶ Several students of Old Norse have argued that by exhibiting such a behaviour Njáll was intentionally dooming his sons to die.³⁷ This puts Önundr and his choice in an awkward position, as he essentially becomes responsible for his household's tragedy. This would fit with Simpson's interpretation that *Guðmundar saga dýra* is biased towards its eponymous hero's side of the conflict;³⁸ if Guðmundr dýri is forced to burn his enemy, it is perhaps due to Önundr's insistence to fight from inside despite his men's better judgment.³⁹ Gizurr Þorvaldsson is also not very active throughout the *Flugumýrarbrenna*, and although he is described as being one of the farm's defenders, he does not achieve much and appears rather passive during the fire and the battle surrounding it, trying to compose himself and praying, never exposing himself to his enemies, and eventually saving his own life by hiding in a barrel of whey.⁴⁰ Similarly, Þorvaldr Snorrason in *Íslendinga saga* is not reported to have done much prior to his somewhat suicidal death — he jumps

³³ *Harðar saga*..., p. 218.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

³⁵ L. Bennett: “The Most Important of Events”..., p. 72.

³⁶ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., pp. 326—331.

³⁷ E.Ó. Sveinsson: *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*. Trans. P. Schach. Lincoln, NE 1971, p. 175; Y. Tirosh: *Víga-Njáll: A New Approach Toward Njáls saga*. “Scandinavian Studies” 2014, Vol. 86, no 2, pp. 208—226; W.I. Miller: “Why Is Your Axe Bloody?” *A Reading of Njáls saga*. Oxford 2014, pp. 225—231.

³⁸ J. Simpson: *Advocacy and Art*...

³⁹ In *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* we get a taste of “What if?,” since it is there where Atli, the head of a household who is until then portrayed as rather sly and cowardly, insists on fighting outside rather than inside after he senses that an attack is imminent (*Vestfirðinga sögur: Gísla saga Súrssonar, Fóstbræðra saga, Þáttur Þormóðar, Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings, Auðunar þáttur Vestfirzka, Þorvarðar þáttur krákunefs* (Íslensk fornrit 6). Eds. B.K. Þórólfsson, G. Jónsson. Reykjavík 1943). It befits the subversive and perhaps parodic nature of that saga.

⁴⁰ Sts I, pp. 492—493.

into the fire with his hands held in the form of a cross.⁴¹ In *Hænsna-Póris saga* we are told that Blund-Ketill dismisses the people present at his farm before his farm's burning, and compromises (its) the defence thereof.⁴² Compared to this, the case of *Ljósvetninga saga* is quite interesting. When Guðmundr inn ríki's cowardly spy and "hot-pot" companion Rindill is murdered, he is angered and wishes to exact revenge immediately. Rindill's assassin, however, flees to a house where Guðmundr's wife and son are present. Guðmundr demands that they both leave the house so he may burn it with the killer inside. When they refuse, Guðmundr in his rage declares/promises to burn the house with them inside, and is only stopped by the intervention of other people.⁴³ Here the author reverses the roles in the convention — therefore, instead of dying with his family members, or at least exhibit passivity, Guðmundr here becomes the most active of patriarchs. But this activeness is so misguided that he is willing to burn his family together with his target. This fits in well with the spirit of *Ljósvetninga saga*, which is seen as a pamphlet of sorts against Guðmundr inn ríki, and his lack of moderate behaviour.⁴⁴ In *Egils saga*, Þórólfr, the head of the household in his burning scene, shows his fighting skills and thus his activeness rather than passivity. But in addition, rather than fighting inside as Njáll, Önundr and Þorvaldur suggest, he goes outside to fight the king and dies with his face towards his attacker's feet, which actively invites an act of revenge.⁴⁵ Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, who insists that his men keep watch and who is caught off-guard because of their incompetence is another exception. But rather than punish his men for neglecting their duties, he surrenders himself to his enemy Þorvaldr, so that their lives are spared.⁴⁶

The *Ljósvetninga saga* scene is reminiscent of Þorfinnr and Guðmundr dýri's conversation about Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir. Guðmundr dýri states that he would continue the burning-in even if his daughter was present at the fire. This can also be compared to a scene in the *samtíðarsaga Þorgils saga skarða* where Eyjólfur Rögnvaldsson demands that his father leave a house that is being burnt, but the father refuses unless quarter is given to a certain Vigfúss. Like Guðmundr inn ríki's wife, the father also refuses to leave, and Eyjólfur is set on burning his father in.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 322. It could be significant that he is killed in the *eldahús* (kitchen), which is associated with women.

⁴² *Borgfirðinga sögur...*, p. 23.

⁴³ *Ljósvetninga saga...*, p. 57.

⁴⁴ *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: "Ljósvetninga saga" and "Valla-Ljóts saga"*. Eds. and trans. T.M. Andersson, W.I. Miller. Stanford, CA 1989, pp. 98—115.

⁴⁵ S. Nordal: *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* (Íslenzk fornrit 2). Reykjavík 1933, pp. 51—54.

⁴⁶ Sts I, p. 226.

⁴⁷ Sts II, p. 160.

During the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* Þorfinnr Önundarson escapes the farm while being on fire, and this is not without precedent. A similar scene is described in *Njáls saga* when Kári runs out of the fire scene himself s in flames?⁴⁸ As already mentioned, many details in the description of the two scenes are highly similar,⁴⁹ including the confusion regarding what it was that fell from the house. In the *Flugumýrabrenna* we are told of the boy Þorlákr who runs out of the fire with his clothes on fire.⁵⁰ Moreover, both Þóroddr in the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* and Helgi Njálsson in the *Njálsbrenna* try and use the quarter given to women to escape, smuggling out weapons. In the *Flugumýrabrenna* it is Hallr Gizurarson and Árni beiskur (the killer of Snorri Sturluson) who escape from the burning house only to be killed as a result,⁵¹ and in *Gull-Þóris saga* both Ketilbjörn and Ásmundr who escape the burning farm. Halli Nikulásson who falls into a stream next to the house can be compared with *Njáls saga*'s Kári jumping into a river after he flees the burning-in. Similarly, in *Gull-Þóris saga*, Ketilbjörn escapes his burning farm to make a final last stand in a river.⁵²

This importance of nearby water invites also the comparison between the burning-in and a bath or a storm. In the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* this is done by Gálmr. Before the burning-in of Þorvaldur this is done directly by an anonymous character, who takes fire with the intent of warming Þorvaldr's bath.⁵³ In the *Flugumýrabrenna* the bath metaphor could be implied by Gizurr hiding in the barrel of whey, especially when he describes the warmth that came upon him,⁵⁴ and in the burning of Njáll it is also implied by a speech where he calls the burning a passing storm.⁵⁵ The Christian element in this fire is evident, especially in light of Njáll's final words to his household.⁵⁶ The poem recited by Kolbeinn following the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* is also not unique. Such poems appear also in the *Njálsbrenna*,⁵⁷ and the *Flugumýrabrenna*.⁵⁸ The author of *Hænsna-Þóris saga* makes ironic use of this convention, by having a poem recited *before* the burning-in, as the incentive for the act itself.⁵⁹

Following this comparison we see that rather than only sharing characteristics with the *Njálsbrenna*, the *Flugumýrabrenna*, or Guðmundr inn ríki's failed attempt to burn down the farm Saurbær, the burning-in of Önundr shares many

⁴⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., p. 332.

⁴⁹ J. Simpson: *Advocacy and Art*..., p. 344.

⁵⁰ Sts I, p. 491.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² *Harðar saga*..., p. 219.

⁵³ Sts I, p. 322.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 493.

⁵⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., pp. 328—329.

⁵⁶ I wish to thank Antje Hertmann for this observation.

⁵⁷ *Brennu-Njáls saga*..., pp. 335—336.

⁵⁸ Sts I, p. 496.

⁵⁹ *Borgfirðinga sögur*..., p. 23.

features with the burnings in *Gull-Þóris saga*, *Hænsna-Þóris saga*, *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, and the burning of Þorvaldr in *Íslendinga saga*. While different details appear in every case, it is hard to pinpoint a specific burning-in scene that has complete correlation with the *Lönguhlíðarbrenna*. Rather, it seems that the burning-in of Önundr seems to have a certain shared framework with these other scenes.

The *samtíðarsögur*'s Use of Literary Technique

When encountering similarities such as these, the possibility of *rittengsl* (literary borrowings) should of course be considered. Indeed, as already pointed out, it certainly has been discussed by students of Old Norse. It seems, however, that the oral element has been somewhat missing from the discussion of these burning-in descriptions. As Önundr's farm was burnt down, and as its story was written down, the story of the burning of Njáll had already been in circulation, even if it had indeed only been written at the end of the 13th century. Lars Lönnroth has stated: "As indicated by the studies of the oral-formulaic school, it appears more natural to assume that most saga parallels resulted from the influence of the same oral tradition over a long period on saga-writers who could use similar motifs and techniques without necessarily reading any manuscripts produced by their colleagues."⁶⁰ It seems obvious that a reading of a text would influence an author composing a saga, whether we speak of an *Íslendingasögur* or a *Samtíðarsögur*; but so would hearing a story related orally. Hayden White has aptly pointed out that even a modern historian uses different literary frameworks when constructing his or her narrative,⁶¹ and this of course applies to a medieval historian such as Sturla Þórðarson and his anonymous contemporaries.⁶²

Lars Lönnroth noted that the stories that the medieval Icelanders knew from the sagas rang true due to the stories they knew from their reallives and

⁶⁰ L. Lönnroth: *Njáls saga*..., pp. 101—102.

⁶¹ H. White: *The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory*. "History and Theory" 1984, Vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 1—33. Cf. T.H. Tulinius: *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*. Trans. R.C. Eldevik. Odense 2002, p. 187, and cf. R. O'Connor: *History or fiction? Truth-claims and defensive narrators in Icelandic romance-sagas*. "Mediaeval Scandinavia" 2005, Vol. 15, pp. 104—105.

⁶² Ú. Bragason: *Ætt og saga: um frásagnarfræði Sturlungu eða Íslendinga sögu hinnar miklu*. Reykjavík 2010, pp. 145—153.

the real lives of people around them.⁶³ To quote Richard F. Allen: “Much of the power and effect of this literature comes from its ability to stir in the memory thoughts of actions similar to the story being heard.”⁶⁴ As William Ian Miller suggested, when people read and hear about the behaviour of historical and heroic characters of the past, they might consciously or subconsciously choose to imitate it.⁶⁵ Interestingly, the knowledge of how alleged historical burnings took place could, then, provide the sagas’ audience and listeners with a framework of behaviour that would guide their actions throughout a real house burning; either in the side of the people being burnt, or the side of the burners. Thus, when Guðmundr dýri chooses to let women and children leave the burning house, he is perhaps doing this because he has in his mind the literary constructed convention of how a burner should behave. When Þorvaldur Snorason jumps on the fire in the form of a cross, he perhaps driven by the association between burning and Christian behaviour on his mind as well.

As Úlfar Bragason has pointed out,⁶⁶ the literariness of the secular *samtíðarsögur* has been acknowledged as early as W.P. Ker’s *Epic and Romance*. Ker has argued that while the material Sturla and his fellow *samtíðarsögur* authors restricted their artistic freedom, “[t]he scenes of Sturlunga come into rivalry with the best of those in the heroic Sagas. No one will ever be able to say, much less to convince anyone else, whether the burning of Njal’s house or the burning of Flugumyri is the better told or the more impressive. There is no comparison between the personages in the two stories. But in pure art of language and in the certainty of its effect the story of Flugumyri is not less notable than the story of Bergthorsknoll.”⁶⁷ The saga as a literary form, according to Ker, was modified to fit the contemporary material, but in its essence the treatment of the material remained the same. In his discussion of the paranormal-filled *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* Ármann Jakobsson suggested that “historical criticism has changed drastically since the saga was composed.”⁶⁸ What we now consider fiction could have been initially written as history.⁶⁹ Through an understanding that burning-in descriptions were highly constructed and functioned as type-scenes rather than tightly bound to the concept of

⁶³ L. Lönnroth: *Njáls saga*..., p. 75.

⁶⁴ R.F. Allen: *Fire and Iron*..., pp. 68—69.

⁶⁵ W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago 1990, p. 47.

⁶⁶ Ú. Bragason: *Sagas of Contemporary History (“Sturlunga saga”): Texts and Research*. In: *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Ed. R. McTurk. Hoboken, NJ 2005, p. 434.

⁶⁷ W.P. Ker: *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature*. London 1926, p. 259.

⁶⁸ Á. Jakobsson: *History of the Trolls? “Bárðar saga” as an Historical Narrative*. “Saga-Book” 1998—2001, Vol. 25, p. 69.

⁶⁹ Ibidem, p. 70. For a definition of the concept of Fiction in Old Norse literature and scholarship see R. O’Connor: *History or fiction?*..., pp. 104—107.

historical fact, we will be a step closer to comprehensively understand these sagas. As Úlfar Bragason notes: “Only by studying the laws of the narrative in Sturlunga is it possible to ascertain what kind of interpretation of contemporary events is contained in the sagas and the compilation, and why.”⁷⁰

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⁷⁰ Ú. Bragason: *Sagas of Contemporary History...*, p. 440.

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Yoav Tirosh

**Poczuj swąd
Lönguhliðarbrenna jako typowa scena literacka**

Streszczenie

Obecne w islandzkich sagach sceny spalenia domostwa wraz z jego mieszkańcami w szczególny sposób stanowią o dramaturgii poszczególnych opowieści. Ze względu na swój radykalizm, odczuwalny także przez ówczesnych, wydarzenia te na długo pozostawały w ludzkiej pamięci, stopniowo stając się integralnym elementem uprawianej tam sztuki literackiej. Sceny tego typu okazywały się bardzo dobrą okazją do uwypuklenia nie tylko intensywności konfliktów opisywanych w sagach oraz bezwzględności osób w nie zaangażowanych. Odbiorcy sag mogli przy tej okazji szczególnie dobrze ujrzeć przymioty i cechy (lub ich brak), których oczekiwali po bohaterach sag, takie jak: lojalność, honor, poszanowanie prawa.

Autor nawiązuje do dyskusji na temat roli tego typu scen w poszczególnych opowieściach. Artykuł tym samym stanowi próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, na ile były one jedynie fikcyjnym elementem wpływającym na kształt narracji (eliminacja poszczególnych bohaterów, zarzucie konfliktu, podżeganie do zemsty), na ile zaś nawiązywały swoją literacką aranżacją do autentycznych przypadków, znanych odbiorcom sag. Opierając się na konkretnych przykładach, wziętych z sag rodowych (Saga o Njalu) czy też tzw. sag współczesnych (Saga o Gudmundzie Szlachetnym), autor przychylił się do zdania, że sceny spalenia były konstruowane w sposób, który pozwalał odbiorcom wierzyć, że fikcyjna opowieść mogła rozegrać się w przeszłości. Kluczowa rola przypadała tu odpowiednio nakreślonym postawom ludzi, których owe sceny spalenia dotyczyły, chociażby w kwestii ratowania za wszelką cenę kobiet i dzieci czy też pomśzczenia zamordowanych.

Yoav Tirosch

Den Brandgeruch riechen

Die Verbrennung der Siedlung in *Lönguhlíðarbrenna* als eine typische literarische Szene

Zusammenfassung

Die in Isländersagas vorhandenen Szenen der Verbrennung des Hauses samt dessen Bewohner bilden auf besondere Art und Weise die Dramatik von den einzelnen Szenen. Wegen ihres Radikalismus wurden diese Ereignisse im menschlichen Gedächtnis behalten und sind allmählich zum integralen Element der dortigen literarischen Kunst geworden. Die Verbrennungsszenen waren eine sehr gute Gelegenheit, die ganze Intensität von den in den Sagas geschilderten Konflikten und von der Rücksichtslosigkeit der daran beteiligten Personen hervorzuheben. Die Leser konnten sich dabei solche bei den Sagahelden erwünschten Charaktereigenschaften, wie: Loyalität, Ehrgefühl, Beachtung der Gesetze besonders gut sehen oder auch deren Mangel spüren.

In seiner Studie knüpft der Verfasser an die Bedeutung derartiger Szenen in den einzelnen Geschichten an und versucht die Frage zu beantworten, inwiefern sie als ein fiktives Element die Form der Erzählung (Beseitigung von einzelnen Helden, Konfliktherd, Anstiftung zur Rache) beeinflussten und inwiefern sie sich durch ihre literarische Bearbeitung auf authentische, den Lesern bekannte Umstände bezogen. Sich auf konkrete, den Familiensagas (Saga vom weisen Njál) oder den sog. gegenwärtigen Sagas (Saga vom edelmütigen Gudmund) entnommene Beispiele stützend, kommt der Verfasser der Meinung nach, dass die Verbrennungsszenen auf solche Weise konstruiert wurden, damit die Leser daran glaubten, die fiktiven Szenen in der Vergangenheit wirklich spielen mochten. Die größte Bedeutung wurde dabei der richtig geschilderten Haltung der Menschen zur Verbrennung ihres Hauses wie z.B.: ausdauernde Bergung von Frauen und Kindern oder eine Rache für Ermordete, beigemessen.