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## Gunnarr, his Irish Wolfhound Sámr, and the Passing of the Old Heroic Order in *Njáls saga*

As envious rancour toward Gunnarr Hámundarson swells to its fatal climax in *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr makes a visit to the Dales in the west of Iceland. He has just left the Althing after a settlement concerning the failed expedition against him by the two Þorgeirrs has been brokered to his advantage by his friend and counsel, Njáll. He visits his brother-in-law, the powerful and influential Óláfr *pái*, a descendant through his mother Melkorka of the Irish king, Myrkjartan (OIr. *Muirchertach*). The saga continues:

En at skilnaði mælti Óláfr: “Ek vil gefa þér þrjá gripi: gullhring ok skikkju, et átt hefir Myrkjartan Írakonungr, ok hund, er mér var gefinn á Írlandi; hann er mikill ok eigi verri til fylgðar en roskr maðr. Þat fylgir ok, at hann hefir manns vit; hann mun ok geyja at hverjum manni, þeim er hann veit, at óvinr þinn er, en aldri at vinum þínum; sér hann ok á hverjum manni, hvárt honum er til þín vel eða illa; hann mun ok lifit á leggja at vera þér trúr. Þessi hundr heitir Sámr”. Síðan mælti hann við hundinn: “Nú skaltú Gunnari fylgja ok vera honum slíkr sem þú mátt”. Hundrinn gekk þegar at Gunnari ok lagðisk niðr fyrir foetr honum. Óláfr bað Gunnar vera varan um sik ok kvað hann marga eiga ofundarmenn, — “þar er þú þykkir nú ágætastr maðr um allt land”. Gunnarr þakkaði honum gjafir ok heilræði ok reið heim. Sitr Gunnarr nú heima um hrið, ok er kyrrt.<sup>1</sup>

When they parted, Olaf said: “I want to give you three gifts: a gold bracelet, a cloak that once belonged to King Myrkjartan of Ireland, and a dog I was given in Ireland. He is a big animal, and will make as good a comrade-in-arms as a powerful man. He has human intelli-

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<sup>1</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 173 f. (Ch. 70).

gence, and he will bark at every man he recognizes as your enemy, but never at your friends; he can tell from a man's face whether he means you well or not. He would lay down his life rather than fail you. His name is Sam". Then he said to the dog: "Go with Gunnar and serve him as well as you can". The dog went to Gunnar at once and lay down at his feet. Olaf warned Gunnar to be on his guard, and said that there were many who were envious of him — "since you are now considered the most outstanding person in the land". Gunnar thanked him for his gifts and good advice, and rode back home. He stayed there for a while, and everything was quiet.<sup>2</sup>

We may note that *Laxdæla saga*, our chief source for Óláfr's legitimizing voyage to Ireland, makes no mention of the acquisition of a dog, and a dog acquired then, as Finnur Jónsson noted, would be dead by the time of Gunnarr's visit to the Dales many years later.<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of such an incident with its specific coloring — the Irish origins of the dog — then invites our attention. This study examines 1) the linking of Gunnarr's fate with his dog's, 2) the inner sight that in humans is called conscience, and 3) Iceland's awareness of entry into a new ethical order with the conversion to Christianity.

Although it is less the historicity of the gift of the hound than its symbolic reach and significance that interests us, it is worth noting something of the status of such large dogs that the Norse would have met in ninth- and tenth-century Ireland. Even in the prehistoric period, the aristocracy in Ireland appear to have bred dogs for size, and the remains of animals as large as modern Alsatians have been found at sites likely to have been residences of the upper classes.<sup>4</sup> Symmachus, in the latter half of the fourth century, mentions Irish dogs imported to Rome for combat in the arenas and early tradition had that St. Patrick escaped from Ireland on a ship bound for Gaul with a cargo of dogs (McCormick). Dogs seem to have had an assigned, if difficult to determine, role in pre-Christian religion, and Anne Ross claims their association with votive wells.<sup>5</sup> Old Irish epic literature makes reference to the *árchú*, literally 'slaughter hound' or 'war hound' but the use of dogs in war is not assured and this may simply be a literary motif and part of the descriptive vocabulary ap-

<sup>2</sup> *Njal's Saga* 1960: 160.

<sup>3</sup> The observation is quoted in *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954: 173, n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence from Haughey's Fort, part of the Navan complex; see Mallory and McNeill 1991: 121, citing R. B. Warner.

<sup>5</sup> Ross 1967: 339.

plied to the warrior.<sup>6</sup> In the later period, the existence of a variety of types and sizes points to specific hunting, guarding and companionship functions. Breeds suggested by the archaeological evidence after AD 500 include wolf- and deer-hounds, sheepdogs, large terriers, spaniels and lapdogs.<sup>7</sup> There appears to have been a homonym or semantic extension of *árchú* designating the 'watchdog'. Some dogs would have had several duties: tracking, capture of game and fugitives, and the defence of property. Those whose size, strength or training made them most suitable for guarding farmsteads were highly valued.<sup>8</sup> According to early Irish law tracts, the fine for the death or destruction of such an animal was between five and ten cows plus replacement with a dog of comparable worth (Kelly pp. 143 f., 146).

*Cú* 'hound' (at times with overtones of 'wolf') is a frequent component of Irish personal names and references martial qualities.<sup>9</sup> Its most celebrated bearer was *Cú Chulainn*, the paramount Ulster champion, who won this name after killing the smith *Culann's* ferocious guard dog, then agreeing to take its place until a replacement had grown to maturity.<sup>10</sup> In later life *Cú Chulainn* also became the guard for all of Ulster in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*). Among his *gessa* or tabus is a prohibition against eating dog flesh.<sup>11</sup> Such injunctions exist in storytelling tradition in order to be violated. In a typical honor-related quandary the hero judges himself

<sup>6</sup> *Táin Bó Cúailnge* 1976, ll. 2264, 5316, 6463. War dogs are also mentioned in the Old Welsh *Y Gododdin*, l. 246.

<sup>7</sup> de Paor and de Paor 1958: 88; cf. the recognizable form of a deerhound in the early bronze figurine from Lydney Park, Gloucestershire in Ross 1967: 340, Fig. 193.

<sup>8</sup> Discussion of the role of canines in the early Irish economy in Patterson 1994: 67, 76, 86, 151, Lucas 1989: 22 f., McCormick 1991. The explicit areas to be guarded, according to the legal tracts, were: dwelling house, sheep-fold, calf-pen and cow-shed. Hounds were employed by the *aire échta* or 'lord of vengeance', the designated enforcer of legal claims according to the Irish law tracts (Patterson 1994: 350 and 364, n. 40). Thus in *Njáls saga* we have the ironic reversal of such a tracking hound being made the guard dog of a man who will shortly be condemned to outlawry.

<sup>9</sup> As a sample, the *Dál Cais*, the people to which King Brian belonged, are described with the following simile in the Irish account that deals with the same events at the Battle of Clontarf as the chapters in *Njáls saga*: "They were . . . the terrible, nimble wolf-hounds of victorious Banba [a traditional name of Ireland] for strength and for firmness"; *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaimbh* 1867: 160 f.

<sup>10</sup> The story of the smith *Culann's* dog, part of the *Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn*, also has a marginal reference to other fabled hounds, all ferocious.

<sup>11</sup> See the general discussion of the relationship between Irish heroes and hounds in McCone 1984. Dog flesh, normally proscribed, may have been eaten in warriors' cultic ceremonies. According to Cormac's gnology dog flesh was also one of the substances on which the *filid* or poet/seer might chew in order to receive supernatural inspiration and vision.

compelled to eat the roasted dog meat he is offered; this is the first in the concatenated circumstances that bring Cú Chulainn down. In another Ulster cycle tale, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (*The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig*) the hound Ailbe guards the entire province of Ulster and is sought by the rival hosts of Ulster and Connacht.<sup>12</sup> The hound is killed in the battle that followed the confrontation of opponents in the banquet hall over the champion's portion, after electing to side with the Ulstermen.

It is not, however, the tales of the Ulster cycle, centered on Cú Chulainn, Conchobar, Fergus, and their opponents Ailill and Medb, but those of the Fenian cycle centered on Finn mac Cumhail that are of greatest relevance in our consideration of Gunnarr's dog.<sup>13</sup> These, too, are the dogs of another era, dogs of story, as illustrated in the scene when Patrick first spies the huge survivors of an earlier age and then goes on to have them recount the deeds of Finn:

Is annsin do boí Pátraic oc cantain na canóine coimdetá 7 oc etarmolad in Dúileman 7 oc bennachad na rátha i raibe Finn mac Cumail .i. Ráith Droma Deirc. Ocus atchonncatar na cléirig dá n-innsaigid iat-som, 7 ro gab gráin 7 ecla iat roim na feraib móra cona conaib móra leó, uair nír lucht coimré ná comaimsire dóib iat.<sup>14</sup>

Just then Patrick was chanting the Lord's order of the canon (i.e., Mass), and lauded the Creator, and pronounced a benediction on the rath where Finn mac Cumail had been, the rath of Drum Derg. The clerics saw Cailte and his band draw near them; and fear fell upon them before the tall men with their huge wolf-dogs that accompanied them, for they were not people of one epoch or of one time with the clergy.<sup>15</sup>

Finn, the leader of a hunting and war band that is on the margin of Irish society while also its defender on the geographical frontier against supernatural and foreign forces, among which are the *Lochlan-naig* 'Scandinavians,' has two fine dogs, Bran and Sceolang.<sup>16</sup> Their names mean 'raven' and 'messenger'.<sup>17</sup> But the hounds are Finn's

<sup>12</sup> *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* 1935, par. 1.

<sup>13</sup> General orientation with regard to the Finn cycle in Murphy 1955, Nagy 1985, Ó hÓgáin 1988.

<sup>14</sup> *Acallam na Senórach* 1970, ll. 58–63.

<sup>15</sup> *Acallam na Senórach* 1892: II.103.

<sup>16</sup> General treatment in Reinhard and Hull 1936, Ó hÓgáin 1988: 124, 131 f., 209, 300.

<sup>17</sup> On the name *Bran* 'raven' in association with dogs, see Hughes 1993. ON-Icel.

cousins. Their mother had been enchanted while pregnant and turned into a bitch by a rival; after giving birth she is restored to human form, but the offspring remain canine.<sup>18</sup> Human and canine qualities are blurred, as the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic are elsewhere merged in the Finn cycle (cf. his son Oisín 'fawn'). At one point Finn lists the physical qualities of a good hound: an eye like the sloe, ear like a leaf, chest like a horse's, hock like a sickle, the "pith joint" at a good distance from the head.<sup>19</sup> Bran is further described as having a head as high as Finn's shoulder, two white sides, a purple haunch, crimson tail, bluish feet, and a fierce eye (Ó hÓgáin, p. 132). The dogs are a constant in the Finn stories, and considered so valuable that at one point they are stolen by Artúir and carried off to Britain. In the story of Diarmait and Gráinne Bran warns the lovers of Finn's pursuit. In another incident Finn strikes Bran with his leash and the metal ring is buried in the dog's head. The dog stares at him in wonder, weeps, then runs off and disappears in a loch.<sup>20</sup> Finn at once regrets his action and long mourns the lost hound. Dogs are ubiquitous in Irish tradition — helpful, malevolent, shape-shifting, and otherwise enchanted. Worth noting is that dogs, along with horses, bridles, swords, ornamented horns and slave women, were considered appropriate tribute to royal overlords, "honorific symbols of royal office", in the Irish *Book of Rights*.<sup>21</sup> This brief review gives a sample of the kind of stories and conceptions that might have been part of the Norsemen's knowledge of large Irish hounds and of their function and worth.<sup>22</sup>

With regard to *Sámr*'s exceptional abilities, Ireland, Scotland and the Western Isles are associated in the sagas of the Icelanders with the uncanny in ways that provide local color but also have an ideological charge. The Celtic realms are the source of malevolent sorcerers such as Kotkell and his family in *Laxdæla saga* or Frakokk in *Orkneyinga saga*, and of more ambivalent female figures such as Eðna (OÍr. *Eithne*) in the same work or Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga*. The gift to

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*sámr* is interpreted as meaning 'black' but this correspondence can scarcely be meaningful. 'Messenger' is here meant in the sense of one who reports back from the battlefield (Ford 1994). In the Irish predilection for lists and musters, names of other dogs in the Fenian pack are also known; *Acallam na Senórach* 1892: II. 231.

<sup>18</sup> *Duanaire Finn* 1933, 1954: 103 f.

<sup>19</sup> Nicolson 1951: 347, No. 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Duanaire Finn* 1933: II. 198–202.

<sup>21</sup> Patterson 1994: 151, citing *Lebar na Cert* 1962. This is supported by the legal texts that state that hunting hounds are proper attributes of a lord (Kelly 1988: 36, n. 138, citing *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* 1978: 1268, I. 16).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, "Helpful animals" in Cross 1952.

Gunnarr then has affinities with the preternatural in its 'Celtic expression' and is further prestigious in its fundamental value, in its exotic and, one must judge, aristocratic origins, and in having been offered by the grandson of an Irish king and a prominent Icelandic chieftain, Óláfr pái. But this same Óláfr's relations with the supernatural are not always characterized by astuteness, and gifts of foreign provenance often contribute to the worsening of community relations or fail to meet the demands of Icelandic circumstances.

Medieval Western European story-telling traditions display many common features in the treatment of paramount heroes fated to die, and if Gunnarr's death bears comparison with, say, that of the legendary Irish king Conaire *mór* as recounted in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*) in the failure to heed advice in the Icelandic case and the involuntary infraction of tabu in the Irish, or that of Cú Chulainn in the combination of magic and treason needed to overcome the hero (*Aided Con Chulaind — The Violent Death of Cú Chulainn*), we need not identify this as either Celtic influence or, for the original public of the saga, a Celtic touch. But this said, there are recurrent "Celtic strands" throughout *Njáls saga*: in the name of Njáll himself (OIr. *Niall*), in the child Hallgerðr's homicidal Hebridean foster-father Þjóstólfr or in her long hair, mentioned in the first chapters, worn tucked in her belt in the company of her later lover Hrappr, and then replicated in the appearance of the viking Bróðir, the killer of King Brjánn (*Brian*), who is a royal magnification of Njáll in some respects, at the Battle of Clontarf outside Dublin toward the close of the saga.<sup>23</sup>

Another touch that is less explicitly Celtic in origin but might well have had such associations for the contemporary public is Gunnarr's remark, in the next saga episode (Ch. 72) after the gift of Sámr and in the context of an impending ambush by Þorgeirr Starkaðarson and Þorgeirr Otkelsson, that the unusual sight of a weapon spontaneously running with blood is called *benrögn* 'rain of mortal wounds' in other countries. Gunnarr's companion Ólvir interprets it as a portent of battle.<sup>24</sup> In a perhaps conscious recall, the otherwise rare *benrögn*

<sup>23</sup> Discussion of Irish matter in the Clontarf chapters in Sayers 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Plausible candidates for the 'other countries' would be Scandinavia (Ólvir was Norwegian), England, Scotland and Ireland. *Ben-* figures in ON-Icel. compounds referring to wounds, especially from the legal perspective of their gravity. Neither Old English nor Old Irish offers a direct parallel despite the cognate *benn* 'wound' in the former and, in the latter, *béin* 'act of striking, cutting' and *béim* 'cutting, striking; blow'. OIr. *guin* and *cned* are frequent terms for 'wound' in the legal corpus, although *fuil* 'blood' is

figures in the self-laudatory verse that Gunnarr proclaims from his burial mound (Ch. 78). A rain of scalding blood occurs before the Battle of Clontarf and *Darraðarljóð*, which closes the Irish matter in the saga (Ch. 157), has similar imagery, e.g., *rignir blóði* 'blood rains' (st. 1). While such weapons and rains are well at home in heroic Irish literature, the metaphor and motif are certainly cross-cultural storytelling commonplaces.<sup>25</sup> Still, this mention of a preternatural weapon, in the economical saga genre, cannot be casual. At a minimum it signifies Gunnarr's entry into a larger force-field in the saga, not simply that which surrounds him as the most outstanding man on the island but one that is also determined by chance, the supernatural and fate, one in which Njáll's prescience, Sámr's ability to read men's intentions and even Gunnarr's own considerable talents are tried to their limits.<sup>26</sup>

As concerns Gunnarr directly, a Celtic narrative arch begins in the person of the slave Melkólfr (OIr. *Máelcolm*) in the Otkell affair that follows the feud between Hallgerðr and Bergþora; this Celtic span will end with Sámr's second appearance in the saga. Similarities in the Melkólfr and Sámr incidents suggest their conscious use as bracketing episodes. Gunnarr had sought to procure hay and food from Otkell Skarfsson but various transfer procedures (purchase, gift, expropriation) are rejected by one or the other party. In a coercive appeal to Gunnarr's honor, the socially inferior Otkell then invites him to purchase an Irish slave of doubtful character to which Gunnarr reluctantly agrees, lest he seem as recalcitrant to negotiation as Otkell. Melkólfr is a negative gift, as Sámr is a positive one. Hallgerðr, who is the half-sister of Óláfr *pái*, ostensibly to take vengeance for the slight

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also used. *Cith* 'shower' is used figuratively of the fall of missiles and of supernatural apparitions of blood. Note the surely fortuitously similar phrasing *gae ... co mbráen fola dara faebor* 'spear ... with a rain of blood across its edge' (*Táin Bó Cúailgne* 1954–83, l. 11,876). Calling the spontaneously appearing blood on the weapon a "rain of wounds" involves a double synecdoche, the liquid on the halberd is equated to the injuries caused by the weapon which results in this same liquid.

<sup>25</sup> The rain of blood is among the "fifteen signs of doomsday" that figure in collections of apocalyptic portents that were popular in western Europe from the tenth century onwards. Heist 1952 sees the decisive influence of the tract *Airdena inna Cóic Lá nDéc ria mBrath: The Tokens of the Fifteen Days Before Doom* and argues for an Irish origin to the list. A natural analogy to the apocalyptic sign is found in the phenomenon of fine red dust from the Sahara which is picked up in hot ascending drifts and carried north with the jet stream when the North European high pressure zone weakens. The dust mixes with precipitation to create the impression of 'blood rain'.

<sup>26</sup> Gunnarr's earlier sudden drowsiness and ominous dream in Ch. 62 of the impending ambush represent a similar opening to the preternatural.

to her husband's honor entailed in the failed dealing for hay and food, puts Melkólfr up to a theft from Otkell's farm, covered by setting a fire, a task which he is able to complete successfully because the guard-dog knew him. Returning from the farm, the slave's shoe thong breaks (a motif replicated later in Gunnarr's severed bowstring). While repairing it, he leaves tell-tale tokens in the form of his knife and belt which later help to identify him as the thief and arsonist.<sup>27</sup> When Gunnarr questions the sudden appearance on the table of butter and cheese, he is told that kitchen affairs are not a man's business. This is a rather more serious slur on Gunnarr's manhood than we may think it, insinuating an unseemly interest in women's work,<sup>28</sup> and it will be echoed in Gunnarr's own self-questioning (see below). Gunnarr slaps his wife in the presence of others, saying that it would be an evil day when he became a thief's accomplice. Earlier in the saga the feud between Hallgerðr and Njáll's wife Bergþora had ended in killings, but these were duly compensated for by Gunnarr and Njáll. The covert nature of theft, however, moves the narrative action into the sphere of criminality. Before Gunnarr and Hallgerðr leave the room in an open display of discord in their marriage, Hallgerðr promises to repay the blow. Later Otkell refuses Gunnarr's offer of compensation for the theft but Gunnarr wins self-judgement in the case and the slave Melkólfr is returned. The incident points fatefully ahead to the "evil day" when Hallgerðr refuses Gunnarr a few strands from her hair for a make-shift bowstring, enabling his attackers to kill him in the well known scene of his last defence.<sup>29</sup> But, for this to happen, Gunnarr's enemies must dispose of Sámr.

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<sup>27</sup> The shoe, belt and knife of the Melkólfr incident, in which one item will be the "give-away", has a typological parallel in Óláfr pái's gifts, the bracelet, cloak and dog, where one will also "let its owner down". The latter trio is suggestive of Irish royal insignia, while the other (even though shoes and weapons are known to have figured in such inaugural paraphernalia) might be thought the bare possessions of a slave. We should resist the temptation to read too much into such story-tellers' devices which pull taut the thread of narrative with a recall that yields a slight esthetic satisfaction when the two sets are put together but carries little ideological baggage.

<sup>28</sup> One of the devices of female characters trying to shame men into tardy vengeance was to offer them the keys to the household in exchange for pants, a weapon and horse, e.g., Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir in *Pórdar saga kakala* 1948, Ch. 2. In *Þorsteins þátr stangarhöggs* (1950: 70) the initial criticism by the father of his son seems innocuous, a simple remark that he is up early, but the inference is that only one occupied with women's work would have arisen at that hour, and the father's scorn becomes more apparent in subsequent remarks as he faults his son for the failure to avenge an accidental blow.

<sup>29</sup> See Sayers 1994c.



A party of forty conspirators, organized by Mǫrðr Valgarðsson and including the chieftains Gizurr *hvíti* and Geirr, sets out to attack Gunnarr when he is alone at home. The saga had made earlier reference to Gunnarr's annual practice of sending his farm laborers to Eyjar (the Land-Isles) for haying. This leaves Gunnarr at risk. While the narrative detail makes the situation plausible it also reveals Gunnarr's (unconscious) heroic preference to stand alone or with only a few companions. The narrative is fast-paced as Óláfr's initial description of the hound has provided the necessary programme for action.<sup>30</sup> Treason is the means to overcome Sámr's abilities. Because the dog can tell friend from foe, one of Gunnarr's neighbours, Þorkell, is coerced into approaching the animal on guard on the roof of the house and luring it into a sunken lane (cf. Melkólfr's access to Otkell's farm buildings because the dog recognized him). Then the dog sees the other conspirators and recognizes their murderous intent. Sámr rushes at Þorkell and bites him in the groin (as if this effort at emasculation were the fitting punishment of an "unmanly" traitor). Then:

Onundr ór Tröllaskógi hjó með øxi í höfuð hundinum, svá at allt kom í heilann; hundrinn kvað við hátt, svá at þat þótti með ódæmum, ok fell hann dauðr niðr.

Gunnarr vaknaði í skálanum ok mælti: "Sárt ertú leikinn, Sámr fóstri, ok búð svá sé til ætlat, at skammt skylti okkar í meðal". (Chs 76–77)

Onund of Trollwood drove his axe deep into the dog's head, right down to the brain. The animal uttered a loud howl, the like of which none had ever heard before, and fell down dead.

Inside the house, Gunnar woke up. "You have been harshly treated, Sam, my fosterling", he said. "It may well be fated that my turn is coming soon."

The Sámr incident in *Njáls saga* may owe something to the account in various versions of the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason of the king acquiring a dog in Ireland shortly after winning the Irish-born Gyða in marriage.

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<sup>30</sup> There is no other scene in the saga in which Sámr figures, throwing into high relief Óláfr's admonition to the dog to serve Gunnarr and the dog's single test. This said, dogs are relatively rare in the family and other sagas (but see the following note). For an examination of some of the attendant symbolism in Eddic poetry, see the discussion in McMahon 1991. One may also see some opposition between the roles of the wolf Garmr at *ragnarök*, as destroyer, and Sámr, as protector of an individual destiny.

When a farmer asks Óláfr to have back the cattle that have been rounded up, the Irishman is permitted to use his large *hjarðhund*. The dog separates his master's animals from the herd of hundreds of cattle. Óláfr is so impressed with how clever (*vittr*) the dog is that he asks for it as a gift, which he recompenses with a gold ring to the Irish farmer. The dog is then renamed Vígi and was long with the king. In some accounts of the king's death (other than the *Heimskringla* version) a retainer, in one recension Einarr þambarskelfir, says: *Heyr nú, Vígi, nú erum við drottinlausir* ("Hark now, Vígi, now we are lordless"). The dog howls loudly, and later climbs on the king's burial mound to die there of starvation.<sup>31</sup> To the use of the relational word *dróttin* and the appeal to the dog we may compare Gunnarr's apostrophe of his *fóstri*, as well as the linking in both cases of the fates of man and dog.

Before examining the immediately following events, we may stand back a bit from the scene and, having noted the bracketing effect of (and parallels between) the Melkólfr and Sámr episodes, consider Gunnarr's overall trajectory in the saga. Emphasis here will be less on exterior incident than on inner development, in particular that which marks his relationship to the principle of *hóf* that was the Icelandic social ideal in both the ethical and emotional dimension. Gunnarr's course will be seen to be not only toward external jeopardy, as a result of envy and of old and new grudges, but also toward internal vulnerability, manifest in admissions of self-awareness and emotional realignments, among which is his affection for Sámr.

After the conventional capsule portrait (Ch. 19), which presents him as a paragon of Icelandic virtues, in particular physical and martial, Gunnarr enters the saga in order to recover the dowry of Unnr, a kinswoman and the divorced wife of Hrútr, uncle of Gunnarr's future wife Hallgerðr. Gunnarr enacts an elaborate scene and scheme devised by Njáll, which involves disguise, ruse, and a pastiche on the familiar knowledge-testing scene between the "traveller" and "wise giant", here Hrútr. In this quest for knowledge, with his low-pulled hat and humble peddler's garb that nonetheless lets a bit of hidden finery show through at the appropriate moment, Gunnarr's first appearance could be put under an Odinic sign. Similarly "archaic" or backward-

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<sup>31</sup> Details reproduced in notes to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, Ch. 31 (Snorri Sturluson 1979, I. 269 and n. 1). The editors of *Bjarnar saga Hittælakappa* (1938: 136 n. 2) speculate that the much envied dog that Björn received from his father was also called *Vígi* (Chs 10 and 13).

looking, from the perspective of the saga public, is his appearance in the same incident as a huge bear in a revelatory dream to Hrútr's half-brother Høskuldr that alerts them to the possibility that they have been tricked and that the trickster is Gunnarr Hámundarson.

The account of succeeding events concentrates on the friendship of Gunnarr and Njáll and their efforts to conclude the tit-for-tat acts of vengeance mounted by their wives. Although Gunnarr initially does not disavow his wife's actions and thus preserves domestic stability and the couple's honor, he does act in these incidents with social responsibility, for example, in the injunction not to circulate satirical verses about Njáll's supposed deficient manliness. But after the Melkólfr incident and the slap Gunnarr's isolation begins, firstly in the estrangement of Hallgerðr's affection. As a public man, Gunnarr has reached the apogee of his career, successful in arms and before the law, and standing highest in community opinion. All attempts to get at Gunnarr on the part of his enemies fail, to their greater frustration. But after one of these tactical and legal successes, Njáll warns Gunnarr that his future safety is dependent on his not killing twice in the same family, and should this happen, on his keeping the resulting settlement (Ch. 55). Earlier he had made a similar, if less dark, forecast ("they will remember their old enmity and assault you with new hatred — and you will have no choice but to retaliate"; Ch. 58). Thus good advice given in good will casts a shadow forward in the saga, in whose techniques of prolepsis omens, dreams, curses, and prophecies are invariably realized, since they would otherwise be superfluous in the spare narrative economy of the genre.

In just such a necessary reaction, rather than on his own initiative, and in a way engineered by Mørðr, Gunnarr commits the second killing, of Otkell's son Þorgeirr. With this he crosses a threshold of inevitability, since past experience shows he has every reason to put faith in Njáll's foresight (which is otherwise vouchsafed by the authorial voice in the portrait of Njáll). It is in the build-up to these circumstances, after Gunnarr and his brother Kolskeggr have successfully dispatched a party of attackers and killed Otkell and a number of others, that Gunnarr gives voice to a sentiment rare in the family sagas — rare in its content, rare in its public admission: *Hvat ek veit hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en þórum mönnum at vega menn* ("But I wish I knew whether I am any the less manly than other men, for being so much more reluctant to kill than other men are"; Ch. 54). Gunnarr's scruples might seem as arbitrary in the saga as the malice of Mørðr

Valgarðsson.<sup>32</sup> But like Celtic accounts of the sacrifice of a physical faculty for enhanced enjoyment of its spiritual counterpart (the blind seer and poet, or closer to hand, Óðinn, or Njáll's lack of masculine marker, a beard, but greater understanding of men's hearts), Gunnarr appears to sacrifice something of the old externalized notion of honor in favor of greater self-awareness. Yet Gunnarr's aversion to killing is not shown as founded in religious belief; it rather seems a personal conception of ethical propriety. Gunnarr displays an evolution that brings him very close to the notion of "noble heathen",<sup>33</sup> that is, the most admirable character that the early Norse and Icelandic ethos could generate without the benefit of the yet to be introduced Christian faith. With the conversion of Iceland not too far distant in time or in the saga narrative, this revelation of Gunnarr's character, as well as his last heroic defence and his happy afterlife, a pagan one it should be noted, in his burial howe as witnessed by the Njálssons, seems part of the phasing-out of best of the old heroic ethos, a theme given fuller treatment in Njáll's martyr-like death after his conversion to the new religion.

Just prior to receiving Sámr, Gunnarr displayed a fatalistic stance toward his situation: *Koma mun til mín feigðin hvar sem ek em staddr, ef mér verðr þess auðit* ("Death will catch up with me wherever I am, when it is so fated"; Ch. 68). But as Njáll's warnings illustrate, no man is burdened with a single destiny; there are forks in the road of the future. If Gunnarr were to abide by the terms of his exile from Iceland, he would gain honor and live long; if he were to fail to keep the terms of the settlement, he would be at mortal risk. But both personal decision and random event can steer the course of future action. Allied to the fatalism that marks so many saga protagonists is a conception of the contingent in life, the trivial as a fulcrum for the momentous: an old servant seized with notions of honor tells Hrafnkell his enemy's brother has returned to Iceland and is riding by (*Hrafnkells saga*); a shepherd spots a raiding party and on the basis of descriptions, Njáll can identify them all and defuse an attack; idle gossip as to the best horse and best man leads to a challenge of Gunnarr and his stallion (another animal the victim of malice); Otkell, known to be near-sighted, inadvertently rides down Gunnarr in his field and gives him a facial wound with his spur. But as this last example illustrates,

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<sup>32</sup> Mjǫrðr is simply presented as envious of Gunnarr despite their tie of kinship. The enmity of this most despicable of family saga characters is unmotivated by any dictate of honor and Mjǫrðr plots for payment.

<sup>33</sup> Lönnroth 1989.

the contingent arrives in a weighted context of prior contention and is aggravated on the spot by the slanderous comments of Otkell's companions. The chance element is all that is needed to upset a precarious balance or moment of stasis in the ongoing jeopardy of saga-era Icelandic life. This deployment of the fortuitous event motif has tangible consequences for the narrative, these random occurrences always having a catalytic effect, but a similar view of the contingent may be thought to have been part of both saga character's and saga public's understanding of causality in human affairs.<sup>34</sup> Thus destiny has an imponderable component, largely divorced from personality and social circumstances.

As well as the admission of fatality and initial reluctance to kill, there is also a "sentimental" development in Gunnarr, an attachment to Iceland that interacts with chance events and his fatalism. This cannot be described as any "Celticization" of character but nonetheless is contextually tied to the gift of Sámr, the acceptance of the foreign gift while maintaining the tie to Iceland.<sup>35</sup> The settlement following the killing Þorgeirr, the son of Otkell, requires that Gunnarr leave Iceland for three years. Gunnarr is prepared to go abroad, as he once had earlier during his formative years in the typical saga excursus of the talented Icelander winning fame and fortune in other countries. But in the celebrated scene of his departure, his horse stumbles (another animal "failure") and he involuntarily leaps from the saddle, as he earlier had so consciously and confidently done on returning from the killing of Otkell, when he went on to speak of his aversion to homicide. Despite Gunnarr's statement of attachment to Iceland and his farm, it is made under the shadow of his sentence and the ominous tripping of his horse: *Fögr er hliðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnzki, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aptr ok fara hvergi* ("How lovely the slopes are, 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"; Ch. 75). Thus the contingent and accidental seem to open Gunnarr's eyes to life's joys; one aspect of his fatalism seems a pagan "epiphany", a recognition of the possibility of esthetic and sentimental experience (plus something of a *carpe diem*

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. the frequent saga use of the telling/untelling detail, e.g., the pile of dried chickweed outside Njáll's house that a crone knows will be the source of future ills, and is later used as tinder for the burning.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the interaction of what I judge we are expected to see as Celtic temperamentality allied with Norse ethos and art in the person of the skald Kormákr.

attitude). In refusing to leave, Gunnarr of his own will breaks the settlement and is subsequently condemned to full outlawry, leaving himself open to attack without legal consequences. This, ironically, reduces him to a status comparable to Melkólfr's socially marginal position as slave. It would also seem that with the multiple killings and crossing the boundary set by Njáll, Gunnarr has lost or surrendered some of his original *hóf* or moderation, living outside his personal ethic as well as the law, and is now vulnerable to swings of temperament as evidenced by his attachment to his home fields, his disregard of the sentence of outlawry, even certain of his tactics in his last defence.

Gunnarr's observation on the beauty of his fields is the last instance of interiority, as the saga prepares for his death by returning to the epic perspective. But first there are additional incidents that should not be read as lack of will so much as an acceptance of coming events. Gunnarr is invited to join Óláfr *pái* in the west, accepts, but then does not go. When Njáll reports from the Althing that Gunnarr has now been proclaimed a full outlaw, Gunnarr limits his remarks to thanking him for the warning. He refuses Njáll's offer that his sons Skarphedinn and Hǫskuldr come to live with him as protection. Gunnarr replies that he does not wish Njáll's sons to be killed on his account; he asks simply that his own son Hǫgni be taken care of. It is under these emotional conditions and during a period when Gunnarr interacts with his community as if he had never been outlawed that Gunnarr's enemies determine to take full advantage of his outlaw status and kill him with impunity. But among all the possible circumstances it is against Gunnarr alone at home and through the watchdog Sámr — both the real and symbolic chink in his defence — that the attack comes.

In one sense Gunnarr can go calmly to his fate because while the specifics are lacking, the general scenario is known to him in advance, as it must be to the saga public. He will be attacked at a moment of perceived weakness; he will perform heroically but succumb. Thus his reputation and his afterlife in men's minds are already secure (although, perhaps unknown to him, his domestic situation, his relationship with his wife, is at its lowest ebb). Njáll, too, later makes a last decision which is as much honor-related as expressive of his new Christian faith, in choosing not to leave the burning farmhouse and survive as an aged man unable to avenge his sons. As Gunnarr is already the most prominent man of the island, but has no likelihood of

becoming a chieftain, one might observe that there are no achievements left for Gunnarr, save his last struggle. The hero has almost become superfluous. Still, some light criticism of the old heroic code seems implicit in the fatal outcome of Gunnarr's decision to shoot one of his enemies' arrows back at them to shame them. The returned arrow alerts the astute Gizurr *hvíti* to the possibility that his store of missiles might be running low, and shortly thereafter his bowstring is cut. In a parody of the medieval debate genre, Gunnarr asks a favor, a few lengths of her luxuriant hair, and Hallgerðr questions whether anything is riding on it. His life, he replies. Hallgerðr refuses, recalling the earlier slap to her face. *Hefir hvern til síns ágætis nokkut* ("To each his own way of earning fame"), replies Gunnarr in last words that are archetypically Icelandic in being both stoic understatement and proverb. Gunnarr is eventually brought down in a kind of discrete and reverential distancing by the saga author in which the last blows are not detailed and Gunnarr's heroic stature is kept intact. The point in the saga is marked by the relatively rare (for this saga) inclusion of a stanza of skaldic verse praising Gunnarr's last defence, and even his opponents voice their admiration. Gizurr says: *Mikinn öldung hófu vér nú at velli lagit, ok hefir oss erfitt veitt, ok mun hans vörn uppi, meðan landit er byggt* ("We have felled a great champion and we have not found it easy. His last defence will be remembered for as long as this land is lived in").

Gunnarr's overall evolution in the saga may be seen as an ideological statement on a true course to which Icelandic society in the troubled thirteenth century still saw itself trying to hew, after its legendary origins in the settlement period and its "golden age", the literary recreation of the post-settlement period of the family sagas, at once historical and idealized. This is not to deny that Gunnarr's evolution has psychological plausibility (although it seems to lack a motor force other than goodness) and, indeed, portraiture suggestive of this depth of personality is rare in the genre, which is otherwise content to stay with monolithic inner states such as envy, the desire for vengeance, and other honor-driven emotions. Recalling Gizurr's juxtaposition of Gunnarr's fame and Iceland's future, and anticipating Iceland's conversion some ten years after Gunnarr's death,<sup>36</sup> the termini of his trajectory, to return to the teleological image, might be summarized

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<sup>36</sup> Here I rely on the chronology proposed by Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson in their translation, *Njal's Saga*, for simple illustrative purposes.

thus: from savage and predatory (ursine) to domesticated and defensive (canine), from Odinic disguise to a religious neutrality in which no recourse is had to a higher power, from adventurous traveller to almost untroubled stay-at-home, from life by an externally dictated honor and shame code to one with new interior dimensions of self-doubt (if not yet Christian guilt), an appreciation of natural beauty, of home and its fields, and then a paradoxical freedom.<sup>37</sup> Although identified by his contemporaries and enemies as a man of luck (Ch. 58),<sup>38</sup> Gunnarr is not without flaws — or vanity. The counsel and criticism of his mother Rannveig offer a corrective to his actions that one might call the authorial or community perspective: his success in arms may be an accomplishment but nothing good will come of it (Ch. 72); better to go abroad and let his enemies find other targets (74); don't shoot the arrow back and stir them up when they are retreating (Ch. 77).<sup>39</sup> Inattentive to such advice, Gunnarr is constantly being coerced into action and reaction by the dictates of honor which, however heroic, can be seen as a considerable infringement on his

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<sup>37</sup> One may also compare Skarphedinn as another character who passes a threshold of no return, with the effects particularly visible in his sneers at the refusal to lend him, his father and brothers support at the Althing.

<sup>38</sup> See Hallberg 1973 for a fundamental exploration of the concepts of inherent good fortune.

<sup>39</sup> Rannveig is a more skilful creation than might be first noticed. In line with the above comments on possibly representing an authorial voice, she appears to speak in common sense, for the moral code and from a knowledge of human nature, e.g., recognizing that Hallgerðr has questioned a man's courage and pushed him over the brink into action (Ch. 39). This combination allows her to foresee likely outcomes to events, although her foresight is less uncanny than Njáll's second sight. Rannveig's statements, some in indirect speech but the most telling in direct, typically come toward the end of chapters, as clinching, concise, often proverbial (under)statements from the community perspective. It is thus she who delivers the saga's judgment on Hallgerðr (Ch. 77). But against this almost thoroughgoing positive portrayal of Rannveig we must note that, while her first speech in the saga is to discourage Hallgerðr from sending a man on a killing errand (Ch. 36), her last appearance in the saga is to urge her grandson to take up his father's halberd and avenge him (Ch. 79). Thus mother like son is a representative, although an admirable one, of the old order and Rannveig, no less than Gunnarr, is eventually coerced into putting family honor before family life. In this last guise as inciter she anticipates the more celebrated scene between Hildigunnr and Flosi. It is perhaps only in the incitation scenes, with their openly staged emotionality and stridency, that we distinguish a distinct women's discourse in the family sagas. Perhaps also a statement on women's role in the medieval North, Rannveig's sound advice is never heeded or comes too late. In another society and another time, its value might have been differently recognized. But here we are squarely in a story-telling convention where warnings are disregarded and omens always realized as the narrative creates a subjunct causalty of its own (with concomitant esthetic effect), exploiting prolepsis to bring the narrative advance to its predestined outcome and thus, through compositional means as well as through character, seal men's fates.



autonomy. The heroic code leaves its adherents in constant jeopardy, not only before the acts of others but also the words, even those of the socially inferior. While not anti-social in the sense of failing to work for and with the community, Gunnarr's reliance on his own might, and to a very substantial degree on Njáll's foresight and counsel, eventually leaves him the recognized best man of his kind but it spurs envy and challengers. With time it forces him to abandon the path of law and litigation for that of retaliatory killing. It ends in isolation: his reluctance to see Njáll's sons involved in his dealings with opponents, the sentence of outlawry, his eventual death alone with his aged mother in his home as his disaffected wife sides with his attackers.

Iceland after the conversion will progress still further than did Gunnarr, not only spiritually but also in its integration into Christian western Europe, in part through the remedy it sought to domestic political ills in acceptance of Norwegian rule in the 1260s. The new world it enters is more complex, one in which personal and family feud, and recourse to law are not sufficient to contain society's dysfunctions as factional contention assumes the scale of civil war. The succeeding generation is heir to the vices of its predecessor but can only long nostalgically for its virtues and mourn their irrevocable passing. The larger course of *Njáls saga* charts the last flowering but eventual discrediting of, and succession to, the heroic ethos of the past. Its finest expression may have been Gunnarr Hámundarson but it was inextricably committed to personal honor and violence, and its social expression, in the absence of a centralized executive power in control of the apparatus of justice, was often bilateral alliances and feud. Njáll's famous (but, in immediate context, ironic) comment on the need for Icelandic society to be founded in law (Ch. 70) comes at the very moment that Gunnarr's individualistic security begins to be seriously threatened. Gunnarr's last message, delivered in his verse from the burial howe, is to die rather than yield. But, however appealing to Skarphedinn and Hogni, this is not the path that the Icelandic state would take in the thirteenth century.

There remains to factor the incident of *Sámr* and its Irish connotations into this summary picture. Large Irish wolf-hounds are attested as prestigious gifts between prominent men and it is unlikely that there was anything implausible to an original public in Óláfr's gift to Gunnarr. The public may also have known something of the roles ascribed to faithful dogs in the Irish story-telling tradition as preserved in the Finn cycle. We are doubtless on safer ground to speculate on a

general Irish resonance in the *Sámr* episode, rather than on echoes of any specific Irish or Fenian oral tradition.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Falaky Nagy has written of Finn's interaction with the supernatural and wilderness world as an initiatory experience under the title *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*.<sup>41</sup> This notion may be provisionally borrowed to characterize the rather different inner development of Gunnarr that includes his questioning of the need for violence in human affairs, his acceptance of destiny, the curious freedom that accompanies his passage across the threshold identified by Njáll, and finally the moment of epiphany when he decides against leaving Iceland and his farm. From this perspective of personal evolution it is perhaps appropriate that Gunnarr have, in lieu of a conventional Norse family fetch to monitor his fate, this externally assigned, preternatural Irish animal helper. Thus the final flowering of the archaic heroic ethos just before the arrival of Christianity in Iceland is both glorious but tinged with elements of doubt, a heightened consciousness of self, circumstance and community, and even a touch of the exotic. The epic has taken a step in the direction of romance. The tribute to the past, coming at mid-point in the saga, is nostalgic, but the narrative, like Iceland's own history, must move on.

As exemplified by Norway and the Celtic realms (Ireland, the Hebrides and Orkney, mainland Scotland) there is a continuing and

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<sup>40</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1957 cut an earlier generation's exaggerated claims for Irish literary influence on Norse down from the imitation of whole genres to plausible borrowing on the level of story-telling matter. See the more recent effort at a comprehensive listing of studies devoted to the issue in Gísli Sigurðsson 1988. Although there is not the same kind of evidence for oral traditional matter moving in the other direction along this axis, from Scandinavia to Ireland and Scotland, "Norway" figures importantly in the Fenian cycle and the town of Bergen is a recurrent reference point. But in this the Vikings seem inserted in an ideological and narrative slot earlier filled by monstrous opponents to the Irish polity (Mac Cana 1987). In parallel to the *Sámr* incident, the Finn stories include the account of three marvellous Norwegian warriors and their hound who come to serve Finn. The dog is of exceptional color and size and every second day provides enough game to feed the Fianna. But each night, one of the Norwegian warriors dies and is revived while the dog shrinks to the size of a lap-dog, all the while spewing up a delicious liquor. Other abilities are the creation of a magical wind by wagging its tail and fiery breath; *Acallam na Senórach* 1892, II.233-37.

<sup>41</sup> Nagy 1985. Celtic tradition also gave European literature the "wild man of the woods" motif in which an initial panic in battle or aversion to human affairs, often the result of a saint's curse, is succeeded by special insight or prescience in the natural surroundings. Norse speakers knew of the Irish tradition, even taking over the word *geilt* 'madman', discussed in Sayers 1994a. This notion of supernaturally inspired irrational fear might also be brought to bear on the story of Grettir and his meeting with the *draugr* Glámr.

unresolved ambivalence in the family sagas toward the two geographical areas that supplied the original settler population of Iceland.<sup>42</sup> Well born land-takers from the Western Sea such as Auðr and her aristocratic freeman Erpr may have formed a cultural elite in the settlement period, but they were also accompanied by sometimes mutinous Celtic slaves who, in story at least, are eradicated from the Icelandic bloodline.<sup>43</sup> Norway too supplied prominent settlers but under the troubled circumstances of the oppression of Norwegian kings. Later royal Norwegian favor may advance the career of the individual Icelander, but the costly axe given Skallagrímur by the young Eiríkr in *Egils saga Skallgrímssonar* or the headdress that the princess Ingibjörg gives Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga* either does not meet the demands of the Icelandic moral and material environment or causes dissention, just as surely as does Queen Gunnhildr's curse on her lover Hrútr in *Njáls saga*. Sámr, while the good gift of a good man, who is not always decisive (his half-Irish heritage?),<sup>44</sup> is powerless before native Icelandic malice. Despite his sacrifice, Sámr does not give evidence of all the abilities ascribed to him by Óláfr: he recognizes friend from foe but cannot read the intentions of a neighbour forced into betrayal. Once again the foreign, however aristocratic and noble, is seen as less than adequate. But in the matter of other Celtic touches, against the Hebridean foster-father Þjóstólfr who favors Hallgerðr's worst side in the early chapters we have Kári Sölmundarson later in the saga, one whose adult life, if not his origins, lay in the Hebrides. And the saintly king Brjánn, met in the Clontarf chapters, while victim of the same lust for power and conquest as brought down Gunnarr and Njáll in Iceland, transcends the battle he refused to join on Good Friday, and also marks a step beyond Gunnarr's in abandoning the old ethical code.

Of the two, the ambivalence toward Norway is the more readily understood, given its kings' territorial and missionary ambitions with regard to Iceland and the subsequent almost forced acceptance of

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<sup>42</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen 1987.

<sup>43</sup> Discussed in Sayers 1994b.

<sup>44</sup> One thinks here of his failure in *Laxdæla saga* to oppose his daughter Þuríðr's marriage to Geirmundr, which brings the fatal sword 'Leg-biter' into play in his own circle (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, Ch. 29). This weapon is counter-pointed by Óláfr's reception of a fine axe from Earl Hákon while in Norway. Despite this gift and that of timber for his new hall, the trip to Norway, and the human and material cargo that derive from it, will contribute to the death of Óláfr's son Kjartan.

Norwegian hegemony. In the case of Ireland and Scotland, the look is backward, not forward to a perceived threat. The *Hauksbók* recension of *Landnámabók* offers as one reason for writing national history the need to disabuse foreigners of the notion that Icelanders might be descended from slaves or scoundrels.<sup>45</sup> But clearly, to some degree they were descended from both, as well as from the many others shown to admirable effect in the family sagas. And, indeed, Celtic origins (in the widest sense of both mixed blood and family residence in the West) are cited in the same work for several of the most prominent in the compiler's generation. It would rather appear that some of the seeds of Iceland's future societal ills — family feud in the family sagas, standing in symbolically for the larger scale factional fighting of the Age of the Sturlungs — are being traced to, and explained away by, something like the modern racist and xenophobic notion of 'inferior blood lines' that are represented by some late arrivals, such as Þjóstólfr or the sorcerers Kotkell and family in *Laxdæla saga*. But on the positive side of the scales, we find a man like Kári who assumes, in a darker, more persistent and workman-like way, the mantle of heroism, will and vengeance from Gunnarr. And here too we must situate the heroic dog Sámr, who is given only one opportunity in the saga to serve Gunnarr, and serves him as well as he can, if only to alert him to the fact that the inevitable is now on his doorstep. Gunnarr and Sámr are both 'larger-than-life,' although not above its vicissitudes, and we may return in closing to the huge surviving heroes of an earlier age as they appeared before St. Patrick, who saw the wisdom of recording their tales, despite their paganism, and regret the passing of those ages, their heroes and hounds. In his debate with Patrick, Finn's son Oisín is more elegist than convert:

I have heard music more melodious than your music,  
Tho' greatly thou praised the clerics.

...

More melodious to me was the cry of the hounds  
Than of thy schools, O chaste cleric.

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<sup>45</sup> The oft-cited epilogue is preserved only in the relatively late *Þórðarþók*, a variant of *Mélabók*, which is in turn thought to derive from *Stymrisbók*, and ultimately from Ari. This moves the rather defensive and indirect disclaimer closer to the period of the conception of this "master story" of Icelandic ethnogenesis. The passage is given in Jakob Benediktsson's "Formáli", *Landnámabók* 1968: cii.

A delight to Finn of the heroes  
Was the cry of the hounds afar on the mountain;  
The wolves starting from their dens,  
The exaltation of his hosts, that was his delight.

A greater loss than we is he,  
And all that have ever lived within our time;  
All that ever passed away and all that are living,  
Fionn was more liberal of his gold than they.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> I must admit to a bit of rhetorical licence at this point, since the 17th century poem cited postdates the medieval Irish period and is less reflective of the accommodation of Fenian lore with Christian tradition that is the objective of the framing tale of *Acallam na Senórach*. More fully elegiac, it contrasts the heathen survivors' love of the heroic life and nature, and Patrick's Christianity; quoted from "The Dialogue of Oisín and Patrick" 1859: 4 f., 10 f. Oisín also wonders whether hounds will be admitted to heaven (pp. 36 f.). Discussion in Ó Fiannachta 1987. I have retained O'Daly's translation, characteristic of its time. As a sample of the Irish verse, the last two stanzas are given here in roman transcription:

Ba mhian re Fionn na bhflath  
siansán a chon a bhfad air shliabh;  
coin allta ag fágbháil cuain,  
mórdáil a shluaigh ba hé a mhian.

Is mó do sgéal Fionn násinn,  
's ná a dtáinig re ar linn riam;  
a ndeachaidh, 's a bhfuil beó,  
bfheárr Fionn faoi ór ná iad.

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