Introduction

The oldest manuscripts that preserve the Icelandic family sagas are from the thirteenth century, but various theories have been put forward as to how old individual sagas or parts of them are. The family sagas generally focus on the period around and between two major events that shaped and changed Icelandic society, the settlement of Iceland (starting c. 870) and the conversion to Christianity (c. 1000).

Njál's saga (also known as Njála or Brennu-Njál's saga) is one of the Icelandic family sagas. It takes place between c. 960–1020 and the conversion gets a fair amount of coverage and is a turning point in the narrative. Therefore Christianity, its symbolism and interplay with pre-Christian culture, and how it affects Icelanders are overarching themes in the saga. Among other prominent themes and driving forces of the narrative are honor and masculinity and how men maintain their social status, often by killing those who have wronged them in any way or getting compensation from them, thus contributing to the feudal system. There is a vast gallery of characters in the saga, but the main focus is on the friends Gunnar and Njáll and their families, particularly their wives Hallgerðr and Bergþóra as well as Njáll's sons. Although they are not chieftains, both Gunnar and Njáll are prominent men, the former known for his athletic abilities and the latter for his wisdom and cunningness. Despite their abilities, they both get sucked into a vicious cycle of vengeance and are killed as a result.

The chapter presented here combines the concepts of feud, honor, and masculinity, as well as the newly emerged Christian religion. These concepts converge in a minor character, who enters the stage, takes the spotlight for one scene, then leaves and is never mentioned again. His name is Ámundi blindi (the blind) and “he had been born blind, but for all that he was tall and strong.” Ámundi is an illegitimate son of Hóskuldr, who himself is an illegitimate son of Njáll, but often accompanies his three legitimate brothers. As a part of blood feud, Hóskuldr's brothers kill Práinn Sigfússon but Njáll pays compensation on their behalf to Práinn's brothers to end the feud and ensure peace. However, Práinn’s brother in law Lýtingr af Sámsstqðum, who is described as being “tall of growth and a strong man, wealthy in goods and ill to deal with,” feels that he has been left out of the deal and gets his two brothers to help him avenge Práinn's death by killing Hóskuldr. The three surviving sons of Njáll attack Lýtingr and his brothers and kill the brothers, but Lýtingr escapes and later agrees to pay a monetary compensation to Njáll and his sons to avoid being killed by them.

Ámundi, however, does not receive any of that money, presumably because he doesn’t have a legal status in the matter. He therefore goes to Lýtingr at a parliamentary assembly and asks him for compensation. Lýtingr refuses since he has already paid his dues according to the rules of the society. Because of his blindness and social status, Ámundi's only option is to pray to God, who in return grants him sight just long enough for him to kill Lýtingr.

Ámundi's description is very brief, and nothing is said about his role in society, what he does for a living or where he lives, but
he needs the help of others to find his way around the parliament site, and he poses no threat to Lýtingr, until he gets divine help. The nickname “blind” sounds almost neutral, but nicknames in the Icelandic sagas often describe distinctive physical features of the characters. Eyes and good eyesight are however often symbols of power and masculinity and the act of blinding someone is often used as symbolic castration. When the theme of constant feud and revenge within Njáls saga is kept in mind, Ámundi’s blindness makes him less of a man within the society; he is perceived as harmless and incapable of doing his duty as a son and avenging his father’s death.

Between the encounter of Lýtingr and the sons of Njáll and Ámundi’s meeting with Lýtingr, there’s a long account of the conversion of Iceland. The story of Ámundi is the first narrative of Njáls saga within a Christian society and therefore the miracle highlights the new religion. Ámundi laments his blindness and asks God to judge between them, and all of the sudden, he can see, and praises the Lord. Not only does God aid him, but the invocation of Ámundi suggests that it is God’s will that he shall kill Lýtingr. With the help of this miracle and surprise, Ámundi, who sees for the first time in his life and has therefore presumably never handled a weapon, charges forward and kills Lýtingr with an axe. The miracle is only temporary and having carried out his revenge, Ámundi loses his sight again.

This divine intervention highlights that a new faith has emerged and that the new God sympathizes with the helplessness of a blind man, who without his eyesight and divine intervention can’t fulfill his social duty. The placement of this narrative shows that a new power, which is benevolent towards the marginalized, has entered the scene of the saga. Ámundi is not healed permanently, but by asking God to judge between him and Lýtingr, he surrenders to the judgment of a higher being, who rules in his favor. And as Lars Lönnroth interprets the scene, the miracle is a theological reference to the Natural Law, that Ámundi has a right although society has settled the score. It also shows the Christian God as a source of justice and a protector of Icelandic law, even the pre-Christian revenge system. Blindness is sometimes used as a symbol of those who reject Christianity and remain non-Christians, but the opposite seems to apply to Ámundi, since his faith in God enables him to avenge his father.

Bibliography

That event happened three winters after
at the Thingskala-Thing that Amund the
blind was at the Thing; he was the son of
Hauskuld Njal's son. He made men lead him
about among the booths, and so he came to
the booth inside which was Lyting of Samste-
ede. He made them lead him into the booth
till he came before Lyting.

“Is Lyting of Samstede here?” he asked.

“What dost thou want?” says Lyting.

“I want to know,” says Amund, “what
atonement thou wilt pay me for my father,
I am base-born, and I have touched no fine.”

“I have atoned for the slaying of thy fa-	her,” says Lyting, “with a full price, and thy
father's father and thy father's brothers took
the money; but my brothers fell without a
price as outlaws; and so it was that I had both
done an ill-deed, and paid dear for it.”

“I ask not,” says Amund, “as to thy hav-
ing paid an atonement to them. I know that
ye two are now friends, but I ask this, what
atonement thou wilt pay to me?”

“None at all,” says Lyting.

“I cannot see,” says Amund, “how thou
canst have right before God, when thou hast
stricken me so near the heart; but all I can say
is, that if I were blessed with the sight of both
my eyes, I would have either a money fine for
my father, or revenge man for man; and so
may God judge between us.”

After that he went out; but when he came
to the door of the booth, he turned short
towards the inside. Then his eyes were
opened, and he said—

“Praised be the Lord! now I see what His
will is.”

With that he ran straight into the booth
until he comes before Lyting, and smites him
with an axe on the head, so that it sunk in up
to the hammer, and gives the axe a pull to-
wards him. Lyting fell forwards and was dead
at once. Amund goes out to the door of the
booth, and when he got to the very same spot
on which he had stood when his eyes were

Sá atburðr varð þrim vetrum síðar á Things-
skálahöfingu at Ámundi inn blindi var á þingi,
Höskuldsson, Njállsonar. Hann lét leiða sík
búða í meðal. Hann kom í búð þá, er Lýtingr
var inn af Sámsstöðum; hann lét leiða sík
inn í búðina og þar fyrir, sem Lýtingr sat.

Hann mælti: “Er hér Lýtingr af Sáms-
stöðum?”

“Hvað villtú þú mér?” segir Lýtingr.

“Ek vil vita,” segir Ámundi, “hverju þú vil
bœta mér fǫður minn. Ek em laungetinn, ok
hefi ek við engum bóturn tekki.”

“Bœtt hefi ek við fður þíns fullum bó-
tum,” segir Lýtingr, “ok tók við fðurfæðir
þínn ok fðurbrœðr, en brœðr minir váru
ógildir. Ok varð bæði, at ek haða ílla til gört,
enda kom ek hért niðr.”

“Ekki spyr ek at því,” segir Ámundi, “at þá
hefur þú bœtt þeim; veit ek, at þér eruð sáttir. Ok
spyr ek at því, hverju þú vill mér bœta.”

“Alls engu,” segir Lýtingr.

“Eigi skil ek,” segir Ámundi, “at þat muni
rétt fyrir guði, svá nær hjarta sem þú hefur
mér hǫggvit; enda kann ek at segja þér, ef ek
væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skyldla
ek annathvárt fyrir fður minn fæðrare
mannahefnindir, enda skipti guð með okkr!”

Eptir þat gekk hann út, en er hann kom í
búðardyrrin, snýsk hann innar eptir búðinni;
þá lukusk upp augu hans.

Dá mælti hann: “Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn
minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill.”

Eptir þat hlevur hann innar eptir búðinni,
þar til er hann kemur fyrir Lýtingr, ok høggr
øxi í høfuðu honum, svá at hon stóð á hamri,
ok kippir at sér öxinni; Lýtingr fell áfram ok
var þegar dauðr. Ámundi gengur út í búðardyr-
rin, ok er hann kom í þau spor in þoomu, sem
upp høfuðu lokizk augu hans, þá lukusk aprt,
ok var hann alla ævi blindr síðan.

Eptir þat lét hann fylgja sér til Njáls ok
sona hans; segir hann þeim vig Lýtings.

“Ekki má saka þikum slíkt,” segir Njáll, “því
at slíkt er mjök á kvéðit, en viðvoðrunarvert,
opened, lo! they were shut again, and he was blind all his life after.

Then he made them lead him to Njal and his sons, and he told them of Lyting's slaying.

"Thou mayest not be blamed for this," says Njal, "for such things are settled by a higher power; but it is worth while to take warning from such events, lest we cut any short who have such near claims as Amund had."

After that Njal offered an atonement to Lyting’s kinsmen. Hauskuld the Priest of Whiteness had a share in bringing Lyting’s kinsmen to take the fine, and then the matter was put to an award, and half the fines fell away for the sake of the claim which he seemed to have on Lyting.

After that men came forward with pledges of peace and good faith, and Lyting’s kinsmen granted pledges to Amund. Men rode home from the Thing; and now all is quiet for a long while.
Endnotes

1 The Icelandic text is from the edition of *Brennu-Njáls saga* in Íslenzk fornrit XII, 272–74, published by Hið íslenzka fornritafélag in 1954, and is used with permission from the publisher. The English translation is by George Webbe Dasent, published in 1861 as *The Story of Burnt Njal: From the Icelandic of Njáls Saga*. It is in the public domain and was released on the website of Project Gutenberg in 2006. Notes and glosses have been provided by Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir.

2 *Þing* were held regularly in Iceland, both locally and on a national scale on Þingvellir. Chieftains and farmers met at such assemblies and settled their differences and court cases were held there. *Þingskálar* is the name of the place where that particular *Þing* was held.

3 Icelandic names are often translated in this manner, the endings are dropped and special characters are changed.

4 Although this looks like a pun in the English translation, the original text uses the verb *skilja*, which means understand, but does not indicate sight.

5 In the original text the verb *sjá* is used, which, like the English verb “to see,” can have the double meaning of eyesight and understanding.

6 The Icelandic word *goði* is used for men who in pre-Christian times were at the same time chieftains and priests. After the conversion the word *goði* was used for chieftains and *prestr* for priests, although at times one and the same man could be both. *Hvitanes* is a place name, the whiteness.