

## **Burnt Njal (Njáls saga / Brennu-Njáls saga)**

### **Overview / Biography**

*Njáls saga* (c. 1270–1280 CE), known in English as *Burnt Njal* or *The Saga of Burnt Njáll*, is the longest and most acclaimed of the Icelandic *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders). This anonymous prose masterpiece recounts a multi-generational blood feud spanning c. 960–1020 CE in Viking Age Iceland, blending historical events with dramatic artistry drawn from oral tradition. Set against the backdrop of Iceland's Commonwealth era—featuring the Althing assembly, conversion to Christianity (1000 CE), and escalating violence—it culminates in the infamous burning of Njáll Þorgeirsson and his family. With over 600 characters and 159 chapters, the saga explores honor, law, fate, revenge, and the limits of heroism through complex figures like the wise, beardless Njáll; noble Gunnar Hlíðarendason; vengeful Hallgerðr; and survivor Kári Sölmundarson.

Modern scholars view it as a proto-novel: psychologically nuanced, structurally sophisticated, and critically reflective on feud culture, law's fragility, and Christian-pagan tensions. Its objective style contrasts with eddic poetry insertions, influencing realism from Tolstoy to modern crime fiction. Preserved in ~60 manuscripts (21 medieval), it eclipsed other sagas in popularity and cultural prestige.

### **Bibliography / Primary Sources**

#### **Major Published Works:**

*Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Njáls saga*)

Composed c. 1270–1280 CE.

Survives in ~60 manuscripts/fragments; longest *Íslendingasaga* at ~400 pages.

Original language: Old Icelandic (Old Norse).

#### **Key Manuscripts and Editions:**

- **Möðruvallabók** (AM 132 fol., c. 1330–1370): Primary basis for modern editions.
- **Reykjabók** (AM 468 4to, c. 1300–1325): Among oldest complete texts.
- **Íslensk fornrit** ed. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1954): Standard scholarly text – <https://www.hi.is/is/studium/islensk-fornrit>
- **English Translations:**
  - George W. Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal* (1861) – [https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals\\_saga.en](https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.en)
  - Magnus Magnusson & Hermann Pálsson, *Njal's Saga* (Penguin, 1960).
  - Robert Cook, *Njáls saga* (Penguin Classics, 1997) – <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/176/njals-saga-by-anonymous-translated-by-robert-cook/> **Digital:** Icelandic Saga Database (full texts/translations) – [https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals\\_saga.en](https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.en)

#### **Composition Date**

Composed: c. 1270–1280 CE (late 13th century).

**Events Depicted:** c. 960–1020 CE.

Source: Wikipedia; Einar Ól. Sveinsson.

### Notable / Best-Known For

- **Masterpiece of Saga Literature:** Finest *Íslendingasaga*; comprehensive portrait of Icelandic society, law, and feuds.
- **Blood Feud Epic:** 50-year cycle of vengeance sparked by marriages, slights, and killings; peaks in Njáll's stoic burning.
- **Complex Characters:** Njáll (prophetic lawyer), Gunnar (reluctant killer), Hallgerðr (thrice-married instigator).
- **Themes:** Honor vs. law; Christianity's arrival; fate/dreams; gender roles (beardlessness as flaw). Sources: Britannica; Cook ed.

### Famous Quotes

“With law shall our land be built, but with lawlessness laid waste.”

– Njáll (Ch. 70); iconic on rule of law.

“Bare is the back of him who has no brother.”

– Traditional proverb echoed in saga.

“I wished to see my home once more.”

– Gunnar, refusing exile (Ch. 77).

### Major Works / Textual Contents

- **Ch. 1–44:** Early feuds; Gunnar's rise/marriage to Hallgerðr; Njáll's introduction.
- **Ch. 45–91:** Escalating violence; Gunnar's outlawry/death.
- **Ch. 92–111:** Njáll's sons kill Höskuldr; trial at Althing.
- **Ch. 112–159:** Burning at Bergþórsknoll; Kári's revenge; reconciliation. **Poetry:** ~50 stanzas (e.g., drápur foretelling doom). Source: SagaDB; Sveinsson ed.

### Influences / Intellectual Context

- **Oral Tradition:** Draws on historical events/oral tales of Njáll/Gunnar (corroborated in *Landnámabók*).
- **Other Sagas:** Echoes *Laxdæla*, *Egils saga*; critiques feud in *Sturlunga saga* era.
- **Christian Lens:** Written post-Conversion; Njáll as proto-Christian martyr.
- **Legal/Cultural:** Mirrors Althing procedures; reflects 13th-c. anxieties over Commonwealth collapse. Sources: Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*.

### Legacy and Modern Significance

Canonized as "greatest saga"; shaped Norse studies, realism, and feud theory. Influenced Wagner, Tolkien, crime novels (*Trapped*). Medieval: 21 vellum MSS indicate prestige. Modern: Manuscript projects reveal variance; debates on authorship/masculinity.

Sources: Lönnroth, *Njál's Saga: A Critical Introduction*.

### Modern Moments / Impact on 21st Century

- **2018:** *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njál's saga* (Medieval Institute Pubs.) – landmark on ~60 MSS.
- **Ongoing:** Variance of Njál's saga Project (Árni Magnússon Institute) – digital archive/stemma revision.
- **2021:** BBC Radio 3 adaptation (*The Saga of Burnt Njal*).
- **Ongoing:** Core in Viking/Norse curricula (Oxford, Harvard); Jackson Crawford recaps (YouTube).
- **2020s:** Cited in gender studies, legal history, AI narrative analysis.
- **Digital:** SagaDB (multi-lang); Handrit.is MSS facsimiles.

### Suggested Reading and Resources

#### A. Secondary Literature (Scholarship)

- Cook, Robert (trans.). *Njál's saga*. Penguin Classics, 1997.
- Lönnroth, Lars. *Njál's Saga: A Critical Introduction*. UC Press, 1976.
- Andersson, Theodore M. *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. Cornell, 2006.
- Óskarsdóttir, Svanhildur & Lethbridge, Emily (eds.). *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njál's saga*. Medieval Institute, 2018.
- Miller, William Ian. *Why is Your Axe Bloody?* Oxford, 2014.

#### B. Archival or Online Sources

- Icelandic Saga Database: Full texts/translations – [https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals\\_saga.en](https://sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.en)
- Handrit.is: MSS facsimiles – <https://handrit.is>
- Variance of Njál's saga: <https://njals saga.wordpress.com>
- Wikipedia: Njál's saga – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nj%C3%A1ls\\_saga](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nj%C3%A1ls_saga)