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Medieval Page-turners: Interpreting Revenge in *Njáls saga* in Reykjabók (AM 468 4to) and Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.)

Abstract: The aim of this article is to investigate the initial programs in two manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, namely Reykjabók and Möðruvallabók, in order to evaluate whether the interpretation of the text may be conditioned by the *mise en page* of the manuscripts. The article focuses on the series of revenges prior to and following the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and discusses whether the initial program helps explain these episodes by means of Christian ideology, or by means of the norms in an honor-based society, or by means of basic human psychology. The study shows how different meaning construction processes may be triggered to various degrees by the graphic structuring of medieval manuscripts. Stories of revenge and honor may thus be seen as medieval page-turners inviting and challenging the writing and reading selves to be creative in their writing and interpreting strategies.

Keywords: multimodal communication, interpreting / constructing meaning, material philology, *mise en page*, initials, revenge, writing and reading selves

With the advance of material philology, more and more scholars are studying not only the specific codicological peculiarities of medieval manuscripts, but also what these material peculiarities can tell us about narrative and cognitive structures inherent in the texts. Further, studying textual transmission from a new philological perspective can tell us how these narrative and cognitive structures changed over time and conditioned the possible meanings of a text in various socio-cultural contexts. This article will investigate whether the *mise en page* of various manuscripts of the most complex of the Sagas of Icelanders, *Njáls saga*, may be interpreted to show different inherent narrative and cognitive patterns, and thus meanings of the saga. This will be done by focusing on one specific episode, namely, the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, including the series of events preceding and following it. This series of events is, at its core, a feud between two kin groups, triggered by continuous assaults and acts of revenge, which are traditionally regarded as common and characteristic for

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an honor-based culture like Old Norse culture. Revenge is, however, also an extremely common human reaction, combining cold rationality and intense emotions. It exists in all kinds of societies and is described in numerous literary classics, such as the *Iliad*, *Hamlet*, *Medea*, *The Great Gatsby*, just to mention a few. By studying how the series of acts of revenge in *Njáls saga* are actually written down on the manuscript page, how they are structured in suitable episodes, marked visually by initials and rubrics, it will be discussed whether the scribes of the different manuscripts may have had different explanations of the acts of revenge and the saga as a whole – did they see them as culturally conditioned, as something deeply emotional, individual, and existential, or did they intend for the reader to figure this out by themselves?

The selves that this article will engage with most immediately are thus the selves of the scribes and readers of medieval manuscripts.¹ We will investigate the possible writing strategies that scribes had to project, or inject, a specific meaning onto a text they were copying and, on the other end of the communication process, the possibilities that medieval readers had to interpret a text in various ways. Was a certain intended meaning of a text engraved in and clearly communicated by the scribe, through the way a text was written, or did the scribe leave his reader with options for his or her own interpretations? Further, could this potential freedom of interpretation vary depending on the way different versions of the same story were written? And last but not least, did this freedom of interpretation vary depending on what text and genre one read? When addressing these questions, we are of course not negating all the pragmatic functions of the graphic aspects of a manuscript page, such as helping a reader find a specific section and navigating the book. Such pragmatic functions, I would argue, rather emphasize the significance of the various elements of the *mise en page* as conditioning factors for the understanding and interpretation of the text.²

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¹ Even though this article focuses on investigating the material evidence of saga manuscripts, it has to be remembered that the sagas must have been communicated orally as well, either based on the reading of an actual book or based on memory. Obviously, we can know nothing about oral transmission as such, except that it must have existed and that it was certainly a main mode of transmission of the sagas and other narratives (Lethbridge 2016). If, on the other hand, a manuscript was read out loud to a listening audience, it may be argued that some of the graphical aspects of a manuscript page, such as the division into chapters by initials and rubrics, could have been vocalized by the public reader, by explicitly reading the wording of the rubric, by changing the tone of voice, or by even taking a break in the reading session (Eriksen 2014). A distinction must, nonetheless, be made between a reader having visual access to the manuscript and one who is solely listening to the narrative being read aloud or retold.

² For a similar discussion, see Eriksen (2019).

In the following, we will, first of all, discuss why it is methodologically legitimate to look for meaning in the way a text about a series of acts of revenge is structured on the manuscript page. Thereafter, we will turn to *Njáls saga*, the history of its manuscript transmission, and scholarship done on the meaning of the acts of revenge. The questions above will then be investigated by studying two versions of *Njáls saga*, namely, Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), c. 1300–1315 and Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.), c. 1330–1370. We will focus on the layout and graphic structure of the chosen textual sections. In conclusion, we will discuss whether the differences in graphic structure may suggest a variety of available interpretation strategies for medieval reading selves.

Multimodal Communication

First of all: Why is it legitimate to look for a link between the content and the narrative structure of a text, the way it is structured visually, and the freedom of interpretation that emerges from this textuality and materiality? There are two arguments for this, and they come from two different perspectives: the first one is inspired by cognitive sciences and principles of multimodal communication and interpretation, while the second is based on recent studies of textuality and materiality of Old Norse manuscripts.

From the perspective of cognitive sciences, humans interpret culture and construct meaning by unconsciously blending various linguistic and narrative patterns, by compressing large narratives to concise metaphors, and by projecting and expanding these same metaphors to produce different meaning in various contexts. For example, a metaphor like “When the cat’s away, the mice will play” may be understood in many different ways depending on the target context in which it is used: in the classroom, the cat would be the teacher; at work it would be the boss, etc. (Turner 1996, 6). Meaning is thus not stable and rigidly defined, but it is the result of a constant construction process which entails complex operations of projecting, linking, contrasting, and blending multiple spaces (Turner 1996, 57).

These complex operations happen in all types of communications, including multimodal communication, which characterizes most communication. Multimodal communication predates language and is a context for it. It extends in a huge variety of artistic and cultural expressions, including cave paintings, dance and music, theatre and tv (Steen and Turner 2013). When we listen to someone talking, we observe their body language, we listen to their voice intonation, and maybe feel their interaction with the physical and social

space. We blend all these impressions to construct a meaning of what is being communicated. The process of constructing meaning when reading is similar. Imagine a children's book, where small images are sometimes used instead of written-out words to help children learn to read. The child manages to understand this because the meaning of the words written on the page and the images on the page are automatically and subconsciously combined in the interpreting process. Understanding the front page of a newspaper is another example when the meanings of the various elements are automatically combined, as meaning is given not just to the written words, but also to the size of the script, the type of the script, the pictures, and the headlines, and not least their positioning in relation to each other. A couple of metaphors may be given as a final example of the connection between the content of a text, its structure, and the layout. A "page-turner," for example, refers to a text or a book that is so exciting that you want to continue turning the pages and reading, while a "cliff-hanger" is a plot device where the main character is described in a dilemma that requires an important choice to be made, at the end of chapter (or episode for series). This once again requires the continuation of the reading, from one chapter to the next, and the turning of the pages.

The same basic mental operations occur in the interpretation of a manuscript page as well: not only is the materiality and viscosity of the manuscript page conceived of as a unit when a reader constructs meaning out of the text, but the material, visual, and textual elements are blended to produce a new meaning of the manuscript as a whole, which is not possible to reach based solely on text or on viscosity. It is therefore essential to regard a medieval manuscript as a multimodal cultural expression – it was meant to be looked at, to be read, maybe even vocalized in a certain context – and its potential meanings lay in its multimodality. This difference between texts and books produced in press culture, as opposed to texts written in manuscript culture, is that in the latter context every scribe had the opportunity to change the relationship between content, structure, and layout, thus toning down or highlighting any "page-turner" or "cliff-hanger" qualities of a chapter or text. This article will thus investigate not only the multimodality inherent in *Njáls saga* manuscripts, but also whether and how the change in this multimodality may have changed the potential for interpretation.

The relationship between the textuality and materiality of medieval manuscripts has also been a main concern for the so-called material philologists since the 1990s. They do not refer to the cognitive principles behind meaning construction, but emphasize that all aspects of a medieval manuscript need to be taken in consideration when the texts within them are read and analyzed – these include the materiality of the manuscript, the nature of the socio-cultural

context where the manuscript was produced, and, of course, the language, style, and content of the text (Nichols 1990).

This has been influential within Old Norse literary studies and philology, too, and gradually more and more scholars demonstrate how the meaning of a text is inherent in its verbal and linguistic characteristics, as well as in the materiality and visuality of the manuscripts. In her PhD thesis, Katharina Heinz discusses how the visual structuring of the Old Norse *King's Mirror* in its main manuscript AM 243 b α fol., c. 1275, strengthens and emphasizes the intended function of the rhetorical figures used in the text, namely, to teach and instruct (Heinz 2019). One example may be seen in the rhetorical figure of the winds, which is used twice in the texts: at the beginning and the end of a long section about the wonders of nature and the world. Such usage of the winds is also common in visual representations of the world, namely, on medieval maps such as the map of Ebstorf, where the winds are depicted in a frame surrounding the representation of the world and its history. In the manuscript of *The King's Mirror*, the winds are not visually represented, but they are emphasized visually through initials which mark the textual sections where the winds are mentioned. The visual emphasis of a textual element (the winds) that is traditionally used to frame visual narratives about the natural world could have triggered the medieval reader to think of world maps, which would have colored his reading of *The King's Mirror*. Of course, we do not know if this happened, but the potential for such blending is certainly inherent in the way the scribe wrote and structured his text.

A second example, of many possible ones,³ may be given from an analysis of the textual and material structure of the Old Norse *Barlaams saga* (Eriksen 2019). The text is a collection of parables and exempla, some based on the Bible, while others have no biblical parallels. However, all of these parables may be seen as an intended lesson or exercise in the *quadriga* model of interpreting, which entails that an event (originally a biblical event, but the interpretation model was certainly usable for other texts and genres too) could be read on four levels: a historical, an allegorical, a moral, and an eschatological level. A recent study of the main Norwegian manuscript of the saga, Holm Perg 6 fol., c. 1250, shows that this *quadriga* model of interpretation is inherent in the way the parables are written down

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³ For a study of old Norse law manuscripts, see Rohrbach (2014). For studies of the relationship between images and text in medieval Nordic manuscripts, see Drechsler (2016); Liepe (2009). For a study of the correspondence of materiality and textuality in various versions of the story about Elye / Eliss and its implications for the mode in which the story may have been communicated, see Eriksen (2014).

in the manuscripts, as visual emphasis is more or less systematically given to the separate levels of interpretation. It may thus be argued that the scribe of the text may have intended to emphasize the *quadriga* model of interpretation through both the content and the graphic structuring of his text. The close correspondence between textuality and materiality would have made the intended message relatively clear for a reader and does not allow for enormous freedom of interpretation.

Major postulates and tendencies in these two very different research fields thus point in the same direction: it is indeed legitimate to look for meaning in the way a text is written down in a medieval manuscript, as will be done in this article based on two versions of *Njáls saga*. A main aim of the article will be to discuss the degree to which the theoretical potential of meaning in multimodal communication is used actively by the scribes of these two manuscripts.

Njáls saga

Njáls saga is, as mentioned, the most complex of the Sagas of Icelanders. Like the other Sagas of Icelanders, it is anonymous and is conventionally dated to c. 1280. It is preserved in about 60 manuscripts, 21 of these from the period 1300–1600, and only six medieval manuscripts contain the bulk of the saga (Arthur and Zeevaert 2018; Den Arnamagnæanske Kommission 1989, 340):

- Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), c. 1300–1315
- Gráskinna (GKS 2870 4to), c. 1300 and with additions from c. 1500–1550
- Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.), c. 1330–1370
- Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 fol.), c. 1350
- Skafinskinna (GKS 2868 4to), c. 1350–1400
- Oddabók (AM 466 4to), c. 1460

The narrative in the saga starts a few years before the year 1000, and it revolves around the close friendship between Njáll from Bergþórshváll and Gunnarr from Hlíðarendi, and the relationship between members of their families, which is less friendly. The saga is about friendship, love, pride, jealousy and hatred, identity and belonging to the farmstead and the country, ideological and political changes – all of this shown and enacted through a series of feuds, offences, and acts of revenge between the two main family constellations of Njáll and Gunnarr.

The plot of the saga is extremely complicated, and I refer the interested reader to a very useful – and concise – summary by William Ian Miller (2014, 8–13). The series of events that we will focus on here, namely, the episodes that lead to and follow the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði by Njáll's sons, may be seen as the

culmination of the narrative. To recapitulate: in chapter 92 of *Njáls saga*,⁴ Njáll's son Skarphéðinn kills Þráinn Sigfússon, uncle of Gunnarr (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954). A settlement is achieved (ch. 93) and Njáll fosters Þráinn's son Hǫskuldr (ch. 94). A few years later, Njáll makes Hǫskuldr a chieftain of Hvítanes, after reorganizing the whole juridical organization of the country for this to be possible, and marries him off prestigiously to a wife who had refused to marry a man who was not a chieftain (ch. 97). Thereafter, Þráinn's brother-in-law, Lýtingr, kills Njáll's illegitimate son, also called Hǫskuldr (ch. 98). Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and Njáll, who are foster-son and foster-father, and belong to the families in conflict, agree on a settlement (ch. 99). The next five chapters in the edition are dedicated to the Christianization of Iceland (ch. 100–5). The settlement does not lead to a cessation of the feud between the two kin groups, and Njáll's sons revenge the killing of their half-brother Hǫskuldr by killing their foster-brother Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði (ch. 111):

Veðr var gott og sól upp komin.

111. Í þenna tíma vaknaði Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði. Hann fór í klæði sín og tók yfir sig skikkjuna Flosanaut. Hann tók kornkippu og sverð í aðra hönd og fer til gerðisins og sáir niður korninu.

Þeir Skarphéðinn höfðu það mælt með sér að þeir skyldu allir á honum vinna. Skarphéðinn spratt upp undan garðinum. En er Hǫskuldr sá hann vildi hann undan snúa.

Þá hljóp Skarphéðinn að honum og mælti: “Hirð eigi þú að hopa á hæl, Hvítanesgoði” og höggur til hans og kom í höfuðið og féll hann á knéin.

Hǫskuldr mælti þetta: “Guð hjálpi mér en fyrirgefi yður.”

Hljópu þeir þá að honum allir og unnu á honum. (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 280–281)

The weather was good, and the sun was risen.

111. About that time Hǫskuldr the Godi of Hvítanes awoke; he put on his clothes and covered himself with his cloak, Flosi's gift. He took his seed-basket in one hand and his sword in the other and went to his field and started sowing.

Skarphedin and the others had agreed that they would all give him a wound. Skarphedin sprang up from behind the wall. When Hǫskuldr saw him, he wanted to turn away, but Skarphedin ran up to him and spoke: “Don't bother taking to your heels, Hvítanes-Godi” – and he struck with his sword and hit him in the head, and Hǫskuldr fell on his knees.

He spoke this: “May God help me and forgive you.”

They all ran at him and wounded him to death.

(Cook 1997)

Flosi, Hǫskuldr's kinsman, is afterwards urged by the latter's widow to exact revenge. Flosi and Njáll are about to reach a settlement at the *Alþing*, but the

⁴ When referring to chapter numbers, I refer to the Íslensk Fornrit edition by Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1954).

opportunity is wasted through sarcastic and hateful comments between Flosi and the Njáll's sons, and a settlement is not achieved (ch. 123–4). As expected by tradition in an honor-based society, Flosi has to avenge the killing of his relative Hǫskuldr, which leads to the dramatic burning of Njáll and his family in their house by Flosi and his men (ch. 128–30). The rest of the saga retells how Kári, Njáll's son-in-law, who manages to escape the burning house, avenges his family, by killing 15 men. In the end, Kári and Flosi reconcile after doing their respective pilgrimages, and Flosi gives Hǫskuldr's widow as a wife to Kári (ch. 159).

History of Research

This dramatic and very violent series of events has caught the attention of many scholars, who have discussed why the conflict escalates to such a degree and what social norms may explain such extreme behavior as, for example, the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði by his own foster-brothers, Njáll's sons. Three major possible explanations of this very killing have been proposed in scholarship. The first explanation of this episode, and the saga as a whole, is proposed by scholars like Lars Lönnroth and Andrew Joseph Hamer (Lönnroth 1976; Hamer 2014). Even though they argue in different ways, their main thesis is that the content and structure of *Njáls saga* was deeply influenced by the clerical mind and the Christian mentality of the author of the saga. With regard to the killing of Hǫskuldr, for example, Lönnroth points out that the way his foster-father, Njáll, mourns over him “þótti mér slökkt it sætasta ljós augna minna” (it seemed to me that the sweetest light of my eyes had been turned out) alludes to the Vulgate, references to God himself, and to models from medieval hagiography on how a parent mourns the loss of a saintly child (Lönnroth 1976, 114). Hǫskuldr's killing may thus be seen as an allusion to a loss of a saint or a martyr. The whole episode happens right after the acceptance of the Christian faith and may be seen as a moral challenge presented by the Christian author, to test the faith of the newly converted Christians.

The second paradigm for making sense of the saga, including the killing of Hǫskuldr, has been proposed by scholars such as William Ian Miller and Daniel Sävborg (Sävborg 2011; Miller 2014), who emphasize the significance of the strong social demands and expectations for revenge in the pre-Christian Norse society, which were still socially valid for many years after the actual Christianization. Miller argues that the only reason why Hǫskuldr is killed is that he is made chieftain and as a chieftain he is at the top of the hierarchy which affords him both privileges and responsibilities. He is responsible for the safety and security of his

kinsmen, but he is also responsible for the wrongdoings of his kinsmen. Even though Hǫskuldr and Njáll reach an agreement between themselves, Njáll's sons are not satisfied with that agreement, which has been made without their knowledge or approval. They thus take responsibility into their own hands and kill the head of the kin-group responsible for the offence, namely Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, even though he is their own foster-brother.

The last explanation of this killing has a different starting point. Yes, the killing happens in a specific cultural context, and both Christian and pre-Christian norms may have played a role when such a dramatic offence was committed. However, the killing of a foster-brother is also quite inseparable from the personal relationship between the offender and the victim. Revenge within the closest family is not unique to the Sagas of Icelanders. Much world literature circles around this motif, which suggests that the psychology of revenge and forgiveness is a primal vehicle for human existence and relationship navigation, regardless of cultural, social, and religious context (McCullough 2013; Beatties 2005; Schumann and Ross 2010). It is therefore relevant to ask whether the relationship between the people involved in the incident may have been a main motivation rather than exclusively the social expectations and norms. Elsewhere, I have argued that the dynamics of the relationship between Skarpheðinn, Hǫskuldr, and Njáll is indeed described in such a way that it may have provoked Skarpheðinn to kill his foster-brother (Eriksen 2018). They all get along wonderfully in the beginning, when Hǫskuldr is fostered. Njáll is, however, so fond of his foster-son and prioritizes him to such a degree, time after time, instead of his own first-born, Skarpheðinn, that the latter is gradually filled with much pain and jealousy. His lack of success when attempting to win the approval, love, and respect of his father is so aggravating, that he uses the first available opportunity to take the life of his much-beloved foster-brother.⁵

These three possible explanations – that Hǫskuldr is killed to serve as Christian martyr-model; because he was a pre-Christian chieftain with responsibilities; or because he was the preferred son – may seem exclusive, but they are not. In fact, a combination of all these explanations may appear as an explanation on its own. A characteristic common to all the approaches of the scholars mentioned above is that none of them consider the significance of the manuscripts' layouts when interpreting the text, as will be done here.

On the other hand, scholars who have studied the graphic structure and layout of the manuscripts of *Njáls saga* have not necessarily discussed the meaning of

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⁵ A similar argument, but not based on cognitive and psychological models, is proposed by Tirosh (2014).

the acts of revenge, but rather the general meaning of the saga.⁶ As early as 1975, Lars Lönnroth commented on the structural division in the *Njála* manuscripts. He argues that variations in the placement of the initials are mostly due to errors (when a scribe has started making space for the initial too early or too late and the new chapter needs to start a sentence earlier or later compared to the exemplar being copied), with the exception of a few cases when the scribes made completely new, intended divisions (Lönnroth 1975, 51). However, he uses these observations to reconstruct the *original⁷ version of the saga. Lönnroth further comments on the variation in the rubrics and the reason for their variations, but once again he is concerned with the *original version and the *author's text. With regard to some of the initials, he concludes in the traditional, for his time, positivistic style: "all these divisions should clearly be omitted from any new, critical edition of the saga" (Lönnroth 1975, 55). The aim of his study was to determine and distinguish the authentic and genuine as opposed to the spurious, erratic, and misunderstood. Once this was done, he discussed the functions of the initials, suggesting that some are "retarding" divisions (when one event is compounded by two sub-events); some indicate scene shifts, augmented by the use of narrative formulas; and others emphasize a general structural scheme of action-counteraction-settlement.

In another analysis of *Njáls saga*, Lönnroth discusses the meaning of the illuminations in the only illuminated manuscript of *Njáls saga*, namely, AM 133, Kálfalækjarbók, from around 1300 (Lönnroth 1976). The manuscript contains three illuminated initials: on 14r a G (for Gunnarr) is illuminated with a dragon combating a lion; on 14v, an N (for Njáll) is illuminated with a man with a sword fighting a dragon; and lastly an H, marking the chapter recounting the conversion, is illuminated with a knightly figure with a shield and a sword riding on a horse. Lönnroth (1976) has interpreted these initials as indicating a textual division into a Gunnarr's saga and Njáll's saga. Lena Liepe (2008) has discussed these images from an art-historical point of view and connects them to the introduction of knightly culture to the North. Recently, Katahrina Heinz (2018) has combined the philological and art-historical concerns and has argued that the initials may be seen as rhetorical *figurae* that refer to the roles of the

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⁶ See Lethbridge and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (2018) which includes articles on topics ranging from old and new stemmas of *Njáls saga*, to post medieval manuscripts, to studies of paratexts and linguistic features.

⁷ The * is commonly used in philological studies to indicate that this version does not exist anymore: it is a version that is reconstructed by an editor.

two figures Gunnarr and Njáll.⁸ Gunnarr is characterized by the chivalric ideals that may be symbolized in the lion-dragon combat; Njáll is characterized by the depiction of a “lawman” fighting for justice, while the conversion is symbolically represented as a Christian soldier fighting for the true faith. Heinz argues that the work of the illuminator and the scribe are embedded in the chivalric culture and courtly conventions of the time, based on the use of similar literary images of the lion, dragon, and the knight in other contemporary texts, such as *Þiðreks saga* and *Laxdæla saga*.

In recent years, many scholars have approached the saga and its manuscripts from a more material, or new philological, perspective. The main focus of the recently completed research project “The Variance of *Njáls saga*,” led by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir at the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, Reykjavík, Iceland, was on the various types of textual variations of the saga, including linguistic, stylistic, and narrative. Emily Lethbridge shows in detail how distinctive textual variation manifested itself even in the earliest phase of the saga’s written tradition (Lethbridge 2014). She points out that *Njáls saga* is unusual and distinguishes itself from the rest of the saga material, as it was copied out and circulated independently as the sole text in whole books. This suggests that *Njáls saga* was probably read in a different way compared to other sagas. The reasons for this may have been logistics, length, or the saga’s “particular intrinsic worth and a different symbolic significance,” as well as the saga’s great geographical sweep, making it a national story (Lethbridge 2014, 77). Lethbridge concludes that the textual variation testifies to differing interpretations of infinite aspects of the narrative.

While this research project studies the textual variance of the saga, Susanne Arthur has studied the material aspects of *Njáls saga* manuscripts, including codicological and paratextual features (Arthur 2015). She has analyzed the codicology, readership, and reception of the approximately 60 manuscripts of the saga. By tracing size, layout, and text density, she discovers trends in the manuscript production and intended purposes, ranging from scholarly and prestigious, to private and less formal.

As relevant as such new philological research is for increasing our insight into the significance of the various manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, their production, and readership, this research does not discuss how the meaning of the saga is reflected through the graphic program in the various versions of the saga, as will be discussed in this article. Pursuing this question – to look for meaning based

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⁸ See website for The 17th International Saga Conference, for program and abstracts: <https://sagaconference2018.hi.is/> (accessed April 17, 2020).

on the graphical and textual aspects of versions of *Njáls saga* – is legitimate, as was argued above, based on principles in multimodal communication and new philological arguments. As said, only one *Njáls saga* manuscript has illuminations, but all of them have initials. This approach therefore allows the study of not only textual meaning based on initials and structure, but also variation in possible meanings of various versions of the text. Of the six medieval manuscripts that contain the bulk of the saga, our attention is focused on Reykjabók (AM 468 4to), c. 1300–1315 and Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.), c. 1330–1370.

Reykjabók (AM 468 4to) and Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.)

The two chosen manuscripts of *Njáls saga* have different content and format. Reykjabók is a small 4to (22.5 x 15.7 cm), where *Njáls saga* (fol. 1–93r) is the one main text. However, at the end of the saga, there are *vísur* concerning *Njáls saga* (fol. 93v) and *Hymn to the Virgin* (94r-v). The latter text is younger and makes explicit the significance of the Christian religion in the context of the reading of the manuscript, after its addition, but the same may not be claimed with regard to the context of the writing of *Njáls saga* itself. The text is structured in one column, red initials and red rubrics. A special aspect of the manuscript is that it includes 48 stanzas of skaldic verses, 27 of these being unique to this manuscript, written in the margins and at the end of the saga not by the one main scribe, but by a different but contemporary hand. This second scribe was responsible for adding 17 stanzas of skaldic poetry in the margins and at the end of the codex, and he occasionally added a forgotten word and highlighted others; he potentially drew the initials.⁹ The earliest known home of the manuscript is Reykir in Miðfjörður, which gives the name of the manuscript. It was owned by Ingjaldur Illugason (1560–1643), who was the *lögréttumaður* in the district.¹⁰

Möðruvallabók (1330–1370) is a very different manuscript. It is a grand collection of 11 Sagas of Icelanders: *Njáls saga*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Finnboga*

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the paleography of the material features of the manuscript, aiming to shed new light on the collaborative nature of the production of the manuscript, especially keeping in mind the presence of the unique skaldic verses, see Stegmann (2018).

¹⁰ For more information on the manuscript, its history, digital images of its folios, and references to secondary literature, see handrit.is (<https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/en/AM04-0468> [accessed May 10, 2019]).

saga ramma, *Bandamanna saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Ölkofra saga*, *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Fóstbræðra saga*.¹¹ The manuscript consists of 200 folios, measures 33.5 x 24 cm, and is bound in wooden covers. Chesnutt (2010, 166) has argued that the manuscript was “a pile of loose, unbound groups of quires formerly kept in a workshop with a view to being sold in combinations determined by potential buyers.” Despite its complex and varied content, the manuscript is uniform, written by a main scribe and a second hand (Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 1994, 115–116; Chesnutt 2010).¹² The text is finely written and is structured in two columns, which seems to have been a fourteenth-century innovation (Chesnutt 2010). It is structured by red and green initials, some of them finely ornate, and red rubrics. Both scribes seem professional, and a plausible provenance for the manuscript is the Augustinian house at Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur (Sigurjón Páll Ísaksson 1994, 118; Chesnutt 2010, 154). Chesnutt has argued that a manuscript like this reflects the ambitions of the fourteenth-century bourgeoisie to appropriate traditional history and make luxury items out of it.

When analyzing the chapter structure of the saga, I will focus on the section retold above, namely the part of the saga starting with the episode of the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and ending with the burning of Njáll's family at Bergþórshváll, which span the chapters 110 to 130 in the ÍF edition. Table 1 shows the distribution of the initials in, respectively, the ÍF edition, Reykjabók, and Möðruvallabók. A quick survey of the wording of the passages where new chapters / initials appear reveals that these refer either to specific moments in time (e.g., chs. 110, 121); the introduction or activity of a specific character (almost all of them); or coincide with a movement of the narrative focus from one character / context to another (e.g., chs. 127, 128). The aspects of the initial programs that emerge as most striking and significant and that I will comment on in greater detail below are: (i) general similarities and differences between the two manuscripts, seen in juxtaposition to the Íslensk fornrit edition (ÍF); (ii) the structuring of the killing of Hǫskuldr episode in both manuscripts; and (iii) the initial program in Möðruvallabók.

A last comment before we turn to these aspects of the initial programs concerns the size of the initials in the two manuscripts and the implications this has for the interpretation of the narrative structure of the saga. In Reykjabók,

¹¹ For a short description of the codex, see Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson (2015). See also de Leeuw van Weenen (2018).

¹² The same hands seem to have contributed to other manuscripts, containing religious and law texts. For more information, see <https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM02-0132> (accessed January 02, 2019).

Table 1: Distribution of new chapters / initials in ÍF-edition, Reykjabók and Möðruvallabók.

ÍF	Reykjabók	Möðruvallabók
ch. 110, p. 279. Þat var einn dag	56r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	39rb, 3 lines, green initial, red ornaments, red rubric
–	–	39rb, Þeir fóru þar til, er þeir kómu, 3 lines, red initial, red rubric (p. 280 in ÍF)
ch. 111, p. 280. Í þenna tíma vaknaði Høskuldr	56r, 'I' in the margin, red initial, red rubric	–
ch. 112, p. 282. Hildigunnr vaknaði	56v, 2 lines, no initial, red rubric	39va, 3 lines, red initial, dark ornamentation, red rubric
ch. 113, p. 283. Maðr er nefndr Guðmundr inn ríki	57r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	39vb, 3 lines, dark red initial, dark ornamentation, red rubric
ch. 114, p. 286. Snorri hét maðr, er kallaðr var goði	57r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	40ra, 3 lines, green initial, red ornamentation, red rubric
ch. 115, p. 287. Flosi spyrr víg Høskulds	57r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	40ra, 3 lines, green initial, red ornamentation, red rubric
ch. 116, p. 289. Hildigunnr var úti ok mælti	57v, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	40rb, 3 lines, red initial, red rubric
–	–	40vb, Ingjaldr bjó at Keldum; 'I' in the margin, green initial, red ornamentation, red rubric (p. 292 in ÍF)
ch. 117, p. 293. Sigfússynir spurðu at Flosi var við H	58v, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	40vb, 3 lines, red initial, dark ornaments, red rubric
ch. 118, p. 295. Njáll mælti til Skarpheðins	58v, 2 lines, no initial, red rubric	41ra, 3 lines, red initial, red ornamentation, red rubrics
ch. 119, p. 297. Flosi var þá kominn á þing	59r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	41rb, 3 lines, dark red initial, red ornamentations, red rubrics
ch. 120, p. 303. Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson	60v, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	42rb, 3 lines, red initial, dark ornaments, red rubric
–	–	42vr, Guðmundr inn ríki hafði spurn af, 3 lines, red initial, green ornamentations, red rubric (p. 306 in ÍF)
ch. 121, p. 306. Annan dag eptir	61r, 2 lines, no initial, red rubric	42vr, 3 lines, red initial, green ornamentation, red rubric

Table 1 (continued)

ÍF	Reykjabók	Möðruvallabók
ch. 122, p. 309. Njáll stóð upp ok mælti	61v, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	42vr, 3 lines, green initial, red ornamentation, red rubric
ch. 123, p. 311. Snorri goði mælti svá	62r, 2 lines, missing initial, red rubric	43ra, 3 lines, dark red initial, red rubric
ch. 124, p. 315. Flosi stefndi öllum sínum mönnum	63r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	43va, 3 lines, red initial, green ornaments, red rubric
ch. 125, p. 321. At Reykjum á Skeiðum bjó Runólfr	(Missing leaf)	—
ch. 126, p. 322. Flosi bjó sik austan	64r, 2 lines, missing initial, red rubric	44r, 3 lines, green initial, red ornaments, red rubric
ch. 127, p. 323. Nú er þar til máls at taka at Bergþórshváli	—	—
ch. 128, p. 325. Nú er þar til at taka, er Flosi er	65r, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	44v, 3 lines, dark red initial with red ornaments, red rubric
ch. 129, p. 328. Síðan tóku þeir eld ok gerðu bál mikit	65v, 2 lines, red initial, red rubric	45r, 3 lines, red initial, red rubric
ch. 130, p. 333. Nú er at segja frá Skarpheðni	—	—

most initials span over two lines, some span over three, one over four, and one spans over eight lines:

- 1r, ch. 1 in ÍF: 8 lines: Mörðr gígja is introduced (finely ornate initial)
- 2r, ch. 3 in ÍF: 3 lines: about Haraldr Gráfeldr's reign in Norway
- 3r, ch. 5 in ÍF: 3 lines: about Atli, son of Earl Arnviðr of Gotland
- 6v, ch. 9 in ÍF: 3 lines: Hallgerðr's story
- 11v, ch. 19 in ÍF: 4 lines: Gunnarr is introduced (finely ornate initial)
- 12r, ch. 20 in ÍF: 3 lines: Njáll is introduced
- 38v, ch. 77 in ÍF: 3 lines: Gunnarr gets killed
- 43r, ch. 87 in ÍF: 3 lines: Kolbeinn Arnljótason, who helps Hrappr in the first part of the chapter, is introduced.

The larger initials may be said to define a narrative structure, with a clear focus on the political and judicial system (chs. 1, 3, 5) and Gunnarr's side of the story (chs. 9, 19, 77), even though the introduction of Njáll gets a visual emphasis as well (ch. 20). The emphasis on the introduction of Kolbeinn is maybe the only one that does not really fit the pattern. This pattern is, however, probably more visible for someone who knows the narrative, while *Njáls saga* novices may have seen the bigger initials as a hint to the importance of the specific characters or place in the narrative.

Most initials in Möðruvallabók are three-line initials, but we have a few four- and five-line initials also, exclusively in the first part of the saga and none in the section of special interest here (chs. 110–130)¹³:

- 11v, ch. 29 in ÍF: 4 lines: Gunnarr goes abroad and starts his adventures
- 17r, ch. 46 in ÍF, 5 lines: Gizurr the White is introduced
- 27v, ch. 77 in ÍF: 4 lines: Gunnarr gets killed
- 35r, ch. 95 in ÍF: 4 lines: Flosi is introduced
- 35r, ch. 96 in ÍF: 4 lines: Hallr Þorsteinsson (Síðu-Hallr) is introduced
- 36v, ch. 100 in ÍF: 5 lines: Christianity is introduced to Iceland
- 37v, ch. 103 in ÍF: 4 lines: Gestr Oddleifsson is introduced

The focus here is clearly on the first part of the story before the Christianization, on Gunnarr and his side of the clan, but also on important figures in the political and judicial system. The use of bigger initials in the first part of the saga in both manuscripts may suggest that it was given more cognitive focus by the scribes and potentially by the reader(s). Gunnarr's side of the conflict is highlighted to a greater degree in both manuscripts, with the exception of Njáll's introduction in Reykjabók. Whether this colored the potential for interpretation of the acts of revenge differently, we will return to below.

Initials in ÍF, Reykjabók, and Möðruvallabók

The first main and most obvious observation from the analysis of the initials of the two manuscripts is that the chapters given in the main ÍF edition do not always correspond to the “chapters” in the two manuscripts. The introduction of the edition states that it is based on the Möðruvallabók version (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 161), but the editor has not always been faithful to his manuscript's chapter structure. The chapter structure of the edited text is thus a

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¹³ The whole saga is 159 chapters long.

construction that does not represent any actual manuscript version of *Njáls saga*.¹⁴ Most relevant for us here is that there are also differences between the two manuscripts – sometimes a new chapter is introduced at a certain place in the saga in one of the manuscripts where there is no new chapter in the other manuscript. Despite these variances, it has to be emphasized that the chapter structure of the saga in the two manuscripts is the same to a large degree.

One difference between the chapters in ÍF and the two manuscripts concerns the length of the chapters. On a few occasions, at places where there is a new chapter in the edition, there is no initial in either of the manuscripts. The first example is in ch. 126, when Flosi and his men are getting ready to travel to Bergþórshváll: the troops get together gradually on the way, and the only one missing is Ingjaldr of Keldur. The edition then changes the focus by starting a new chapter, ch. 127: “Nú er þar til máls at taka at Bergþórshváli” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 323) (To turn now to Bergthorshvol) (Cook 1997, 152). None of our manuscripts have a new chapter at this narrative spot, which suggests that the two clusters of events – Flosi and his men on their way to Bergþórsváll and Njáll and his family in their house – were to be read as interconnected events, functioning as one narrative unit. In the edition and in both manuscripts, the next chapter comes when the focus returns to Flosi: “Nú er þar til at taka, er Flosi er” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 325) (To turn now to Flosi) (Cook 1997, 153).

The same happens again with the most dramatic scene of the saga, i.e., the burning of Njáll’s family in their house. The two manuscripts give the whole event in one chapter, from the moment when the fire is made up in front of the door (ch. 129 in the edition) to Flosi exclaiming “Nú höfum vér fingit mikinn mannskaða” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 338) (We have just suffered a great loss) (Cook 1997, 160), followed by him and the others riding up to the mountain Þríhyrningr. This passage is written on fols. 65v–68r in Reykjabók and fols. 45r–46v in Möðruvallabók. In both manuscripts, these are easily the longest chapters in the whole saga. In the edition, a new chapter begins in the middle of the scene, when the “camera” zooms in on Skarpheðinn, who tries to run up the beam after Kári but fails and thus understands that death awaits him. These two examples indicate that the two manuscripts that we are investigating seem to cluster longer series of events into the same narrative unit, compared to the ÍF edition. There may be different reasons for this, but it may seem that the

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¹⁴ The chapter division in ÍF in general seems to be based on the division created by Konráð Gíslason and Eiríkur Jónsson in their edition (1875–89). For a more detailed discussion on the editorial history of the saga and the work of various editors over time, see Lönnroth 1975, 52–53.

literary device of the “cliff-hanger” at the end of chapters is more actively used in the modern edition than in the medieval manuscripts.

The fact that the ÍF edition introduces new chapters at places which are not marked by initials in our medieval manuscripts may of course be based on the usage of a different manuscript. Since this is, however, unclear, it may also suggest that the modern editor is using the introduction of a new chapter as a narrative technique to increase the suspense more actively. It may of course be debated whether the medieval scribes were not aware of the technique to the same degree, or just chose not to use it at these specific moments. From the perspective of a reading self, it is more natural to have a break in the reading session at the end of a chapter, than in the middle of a chapter. This suggests that the medieval readers of our manuscripts were most probably intended to read these important scenes in one go. These observations do not prioritize any of the three possible readings of the revenge sequence which are all realistic options.

The Killing of Hǫskuldr Episode

The first difference between the manuscripts in our section of the text is the structuring of the episode of the killing of Hǫskuldr. In *Reykjabók*, a red two-line initial appears on fol. 56r (see Fig. 1): “Þat var einn dag, at Mǫrðr kom til Bergþórshváls” (One day Mǫrðr came to Bergþórshváls). The rest of the chapter, which in *Reykjabók* spans over eight lines, tells us how Mǫrðr continuously talks behind Hǫskuldr’s back to Skarpheðinn and his brothers, he provokes them and urges them to kill him, adding that Hǫskuldr would probably kill them first, if they do not kill him. In this chapter, Skarpheðinn declares that he will kill Hǫskuldr; Njáll makes it clear that he does not know what his sons are planning; and finally, Njáll’s sons, Kári, and Mǫrðr take their weapons, ride to Ossabœr, where Hǫskuldr lives, and wait until dawn. The chapter ends: “veðr var gott ok sól upp komin” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 280) (The weather was good and the sun had risen) (Cook 1997, 132). This last sentence is flanked around a red rubric (which is unreadable), which marks the beginning of the next chapter, in addition to a red initial “I” in the margin: “Í þenna tíma vaknaði Hǫkuldr . . .” (see quote above, see Fig. 1). This chapter includes the killing of Hǫskuldr, followed by a discussion of the best possible strategy of how to make the news known. Njáll’s sons and Kári go back home and tell Njáll. The latter is heartbroken and speaks the famous words “mér þœtti betra at hafa látit tvá sonu mína ok væri Hǫskuldr á lífi.” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 281) (I would rather have lost two of my sons, as long as Hǫskuldr were still alive) (Cook 1997, 133), and he professes his own and his

Figs. 1 and 2: Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Collection, AM 468 4to, fol. 56r and fol. 56v. Photograph: Suzanne Reitz. Published with permission from the Arnamagnæan Institute.

family's death. The chapter ends: "Sjá einn hlutr var svá, at Njáli fell svá nær, at hann mátti aldri óklökkvandi um tala" (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 281) (This was the only thing that ever touched Njal so deeply that he could never speak of it without crying) (Cook 1997, 133) (see Fig. 2).

The same episode is structured slightly differently in *Möðruvallabók*. Here we have an initial at the beginning of the same sentence: "Þat var einn dag, at Mǫrðr kom til Bergþórshváls" (see fol. 39r, Fig. 3). The initial is green with red ornamentations and also flanked by a red rubric. The next initial, however, appears at a different spot, initiating the sentence: "Þeir fóru þar til, er þeir kómu til Ossabœ . . ." The sentence telling us about Hǫskuldr waking up is not initiated by an initial. However, the chapter continues in the same manner and ends with the same sentence about Njáll's sorrow and tears (see 39v, Fig. 4).

If meaning is to be constructed based on the visuality and the narrative structure of the two versions, it may be said that *Reykjabók* focuses on the arrival of Mǫrðr at Bergþórshváll, which ultimately leads to the following tragedy, and on Hǫskuldr waking up and preparing for his sowing. *Möðruvallabók*, on the other hand, also focuses on the arrival of Mǫrðr, but then stays focused on the gang of men who are on the way to Ossabœ. Hǫskuldr of course gets just as much attention, but focus stays with Njáll's sons. It is impossible to draw too great a conclusion about the meaning of the revenge episode based on this example only, but the impression from these passages is that *Reykjabók* focuses in on Hǫskuldr, at a place while *Möðruvallabók* stays with Skarpheðinn and his brothers. Further analysis may confirm whether the two versions of the saga are inclined towards one or the other side of the conflict and how that would condition the interpretation by the reading self.

Initial Program in *Möðruvallabók*

Another major difference between the two manuscripts in the section in focus is that *Möðruvallabók* has initials in a few places where *Reykjabók* does not.¹⁵ Examples in *Reykjabók* include the important scene when Hildigunnr, Hǫskuldr's widow, receives a visit from Flosi, where she eggs him on indirectly (with the towel and the high seat) and more directly (with the bloodied cloak) to avenge the death of her husband; when he speaks the famous words "eru kǫld kvenna ráð"

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¹⁵ This is also a conclusion drawn by Lönnroth (1975, 21), based on the study of all the initials in the two manuscripts. He formulates this differently, by stating that R tends to omit divisions of the author's text, while M tends to include superfluous ones.

Figs. 3 and 4: The Arni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies, AM 132 fol., Möðruvallabók, fol. 39r and fol. 39v. Published with permission from The Arni Magnusson Institute for Icelandic Studies.

(Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 292) (Cold are the councils of women) (Cook 1997, 137); and when Flosi starts negotiations with Ingjaldr to get support at the *Alþing* – all of these major events are crammed into one chapter. In *Möðruvallabók*, the same section is divided into two more logical episodes – one chapter includes the scene when Flosi visits Hildigunnr, introduced by a red initial and a red rubric (fol. 40rb), and another chapter, introduced by a green initial and a red rubric (40vb), tells us of Ingjaldr: “Ingjaldr bjó at Keldum” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 292) (Ingjaldr lived at Keldur) (Cook 1997, 137), and how Flosi seeks his help in the future. So again, if we think of the initials as a way to emphasize narrative focus, *Möðruvallabók* has more numerous changes of foci and indicates visually when there is a change in scene.

A similar thing happens when the narrative is at the *Alþing* and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson and Njáll’s sons are going from booth to booth to ask for help after they have killed Hǫskuldr. This is the scene when Skarpheðinn grins and manages on each occasion to provoke and scare all the people whom they visit. In both manuscripts a new chapter is introduced when Ásgrímr and his companions go to the booth of Þorkell “Bully.” Skarpheðinn grins as he usually does, and a conflict arises between them. The two provoke each other and Skarpheðinn jumps at Þorkell with his axe, ready to kill him unless Þorkell sits down. Þorkell does sit down, and the narrator adds “ok hafði hvárki orðit á fyrir jonum áðr né síðan” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 305) (such a thing never happened to him before or after) (Cook 1997, 144). In *Reykjabók*, the chapter continues to relate that when Guðmundr the Powerful hears about what has happened, he changes his mind and promises to support Njáll’s sons at the court. In *Möðruvallabók*, however, this last scene is given in a separate chapter on fol. 42vr, starting with: “Guðmundr inn ríki hafði spurn af . . .” (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, 306) (Guðmund the Powerful had learned what had happened . . .) (Cook 1997, 144). Once again, the introduction of a new chapter is logical, as the focus of the scene actually changes.

Not only are there more initials in *Möðruvallabók* compared to *Reykjabók*, but the initial program in the former manuscript may be characterized as generally more complex than the one in the latter. In *Reykjabók*, there are only red initials. Note, however, that there are some missing initials, which may be due to fading away or to an intention for them to be drawn in a different color. Even if that was the case, the frequency of potential variation in color of the initials is much lower in *Reykjabók* than in *Möðruvallabók*. The only other initial that distinguishes itself in *Reykjabók* is the *littera florissa* on fol. 1r [Fig. 5], marking the beginning of the saga with a finely ornate 8-line initial.

In *Möðruvallabók*, on the other hand, the complexity in the initial program is realized through a variation in color, in ornamentation, and in size. There are light-red, dark-red, and green initials, some of them with fine ornamentations

Fig. 5: Copenhagen, Arnamagnæan Collection, AM 468 4to, fol. 1r. Photograph: Suzanne Reitz. Published with permission from the Arnamagnæan Institute.

(see Table 1 for specifications). All in all, the red initials are greater in number than the green, and a working hypothesis may be that the green initials would have marked the more narratively significant places in the story. The reasoning is that the graphical elements, i.e., initials in green, used more rarely in the graphic program would stand out when the saga was visually perceived. Ideally, this hypothesis can be tested by studying the use of green initials in the whole manuscript, but because of the scope of the article, here the hypothesis will be tested through a closer analysis of the content of the chapters starting with green initials in the chosen section of the saga and juxtapose these to the content of the sections in between. The green initials mark the beginning of the following chapters and alternate with sections containing a number of red initials:

- Fol. 39rb, ch. 110 in ÍF: Mörðr arrives at Bergþórshváll and provokes Njáll's sons to kill Hǫskuldr.
  - 3 chapters starting with red initials, including the killing of Hǫskuldr. Njáll's sons start looking for supporters straight away. Hildigunnr discovers that Hǫskuldr is dead, wipes off all the blood from his dead body and wraps the clotted blood in his cloak. Guðmunðr the powerful is introduced.
- Fol. 40ra, ch. 114 in ÍF: Snorri goði from Helgafell is introduced, whom Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson asks for support on behalf of Njáll's sons. Snorri will play an important role in the upcoming case at the *Alþing*.
- Fol. 40ra, ch. 115 in ÍF: Flosi hears about the killing of Hǫskuldr and starts gathering people to support him at the *Alþing*.
  - 1 chapter with red initial: Flosi goes to Hildigunnr; the episode with the towel and the high seat and her demands for vengeance.
- Fol. 40vb, second part of ch. 116 in ÍF: Ingjaldr of Keldur is introduced. He promises help to Flosi, but then fails to turn up when he is actually needed. This was one of the extra initials, see above.
  - 6 chapters with red initials: the text goes back and forward from one group building alliances, to the other doing the same, including the moment when Skarpheðinn almost kills Þorkell "Bully."
- Fol. 42vr, ch. 122 in ÍF: Njáll speaks about his love for Hǫskuldr at the *Alþing* and asks to make a settlement for the slaying of Hǫskuldr.
  - 2 chapters with red initials, including the scene where Njáll adds the silver cloak and a pair of boots on top of the pile of money. The settlement is broken and Flosi is chosen as the leader with one main goal only – revenge! The dream vision of the rider with a torch setting a huge fire, also called a witch-ride.
- Fol. 44r, ch. 126 in ÍF: Flosi gathers his troops on the way to Bergþórshváll,

- 2 chapters with red initials: people at Bergþórshváll get ready; Flosi's group arrives; women and children are let out. Everyone dies except for Kári. Flosi and his men stay at the fire the whole night and go after the one who betrayed them and kills him too.

The green initials do indeed mark important narrative moments in the saga, giving a narrative skeleton of the plot. It may certainly be debated whether seeing this narrative skeleton depends on being acquainted with the saga, or whether the initials would be useful for a reader who does not know the saga to understand the narrative better. The main tendency is that the green initials emphasize the two sides of the story alternatively: they jump from focusing on Skarpheðinn, his brothers, and their supporters (ch. 110–114); to Flosi and his troops, and their supporters (ch. 115–116); to Njáll's attempt for a settlement (ch. 122); to finally focus in on Flosi's gang on their way to committing the burning (ch. 126).

On the other hand, the sections with the red initials contain many of the most important scenes: the killing of Hǫskuldr; Hildigunnr urging vengeance; the breaking down of the settlement; the burning of Njáll and his family. Therefore, if we judge the importance of the narrative elements based on the positions and number of the green vs the red initials, it could be argued that the green initials emphasize the two sides of the conflict, the two groups and their supporters, and the judicial system that deals with such conflicts, all of which emerges as the most important narrative scheme. The sections with the red initials, on the other hand, emphasize a different rhythm in the narrative, clustering the most important core scenes of the narrative together.

Relating this back to the three possible meanings of the revenge series, it may seem that the way the green initials are used highlights the sides of both parties and the demand for action in an honor-based society. The sections with the red initials, on the other hand, based on the initials' density and the content of the chapters, seem to present the core narrative. The hypothesis, presented above, should therefore be adjusted: the green initials do not mark the significant narrative moments, rather they mark the change in focus, the turning points between the significant narrative moments which are given in the sections marked by dense use of red initials. Once again, this hypothesis may be tested by studying the role of red and green initials in the rest of the saga and the manuscript as a whole, but this has to be done in a different context. All in all, the fact that *Möðruvallabók* has a more intense initial program (number and variation of initials) compared to *Reykjabók* may suggest that the former scribe perhaps used the initials as a narrative tool more actively than the latter.

The Narrative Function of the Initials and Making Sense of the Acts of Revenge

Two main conclusions may be drawn from the comparison of the initials in the two manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, one about the very nature of the initial programs in the manuscripts and another about the reading selves' potential for creation of meaning based on such initial programs.

The division into chapters is predominantly the same in the two manuscripts. Nonetheless, some differences exist, for example, in the structuring of the episode of the killing of Hǫskuldr. In Reykjabók, the “camera” zooms in on Hǫskuldr, while in Möðruvallabók, the focus stays with Njáll and his gang. In general, Möðruvallabók has more initials, meaning more chapters, than Reykjabók, and the initials vary in color (red and green) which increases and intensifies the visual beat of the narrative. The green initials in Möðruvallabók, fewer in number than the red ones, seem to be used to emphasize the change of focus in the narrative from one important saga section to another. In both manuscripts, most of the initials are of the same size, but important narrative moments are emphasized by bigger initials. In Reykjabók, these bigger initials appear in the first part of the saga; they mark the beginning of the text, and chapters telling about Gunnarr and his part of the story, even though the introduction of Njáll is also visually emphasized. In Möðruvallabók, the focus is also on the first part of the story, on Gunnarr and Flosi, but also on individuals important to the Christianization process, such as Gizurr the White.

These conclusions have further implications for the reading selves' potential for creation of meaning based on such initial programs. Above, three possible explanations for the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði were presented. The episode could be interpreted from a Christian perspective, based on the fact that Hǫskuldr's death is described as the death of a martyr; from a social perspective in an honor-based society, suggesting that he is killed because he was the responsible chieftain; and from cognitive-emotional perspective, suggesting that he dies because of Skarpheðinn's feelings of jealousy, which trigger a desire for revenge.

This analysis of the initials in connection with the interpretation of the acts of revenge leads to the following conclusions: the most coherent result is that the initial program in Möðruvallabók is more active than the one in Reykjabók – based on the number of initials and their variation in size and colors. The scribe seems to have used the tool more actively, possibly because of his competence, the resources available at the scribal center, the type of manuscript that he was writing. No matter what the reason was, the meaning-making process for a reading self would

have been activated to a greater degree when reading Möðruvallabók, compared to Reykjabók.

Further, the Christianization was visually emphasized in both manuscripts, based on the placement of the larger initials. Reykjabók shifts the “camera focus” from one side of the conflict to the other in the episode of Hǫskuldr’s killing and highlights visually through larger initials the introduction of both Gunnarr and Njáll. On the other hand, Möðruvallabók stays focused on Skarpheðinn when Hǫskuldr is killed, and highlights Gunnarr and his people through larger initials. This may suggest that the Reykjabók version of the saga inspires an interpretation that balances the responsibilities of two kin-groups for a revenge series in an honor-based society, while Möðruvallabók gives more cognitive focus to Skarpheðinn and thus possibly promotes his guilt and the martyr-like death of Hǫskuldr.

All of these are naturally just hypotheses for how the initial programs may have triggered the cognitive meaning-creation process for a reading self. Apart from the few elements pointing towards an emphasis on the Christian framing of the saga in Möðruvallabók, and towards an emphasis on the feud between the two kin-groups in Reykjabók, the chapter structure defined by the initials in the two manuscripts may be said to be so open that it allows for all three explanations of the series of acts of revenge that were presented above.

Lars Lönnroth analyzed the structure of the saga based on initials, conducting a close analysis of the beginning of the saga and Hallgerðr’s first marriage. He concluded that “the spurious chapter division in the *Njála* editions have tended to obscure the real structure of the narrative” (1975, 77). In other words, the structure and meaning of the saga is clearer when the manuscripts are used. Further, he discussed the *author’s text, without allowing for the scribes to have changed the structures themselves. He concluded that the author’s techniques were sophisticated, and that they increased the artistic effect of his saga, while other Icelandic scribes used initials just as a practical index for readers leafing through the manuscript (1975, 79). This analysis, albeit focusing on a different section of the saga, naturally enough (because of the new philological starting point), demonstrates that scribes of the various manuscripts explored the potential of the graphic tools they had at their disposal to a varying degree. No one knows what the *author’s text looked like, and it is clear that the manuscript material we have preserved reveals the scribes’, and not the author’s, varying sophistication, artistic awareness, and intentions. This is in line with the results of other studies of the materiality of manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, for example, by Lethbridge (2014).

Freedom of Interpretation

At first glance, this may seem as a negative result of the analysis, pointing to a lack of link between the materiality of the text and a clear message in the text. However, this is a very interesting result if juxtaposed with other studies of graphic structuring of medieval texts. As presented above, the graphic organizations of some thirteenth-century manuscripts, such as the main manuscripts of *The King's Mirror* and *Barlaams saga*, seem to have a clear correlation with the main messages of the texts. Of course, it has to be added that, even though *The King's Mirror* and *Barlaams saga* are complex texts with many various meanings, the main functions of the texts themselves are not very controversial, as they were both most probably meant to have an edifying, pedagogical function in the socio-cultural context of the thirteenth-century Norwegian court, where they were produced and read. This suggests that the graphical appearance of the manuscripts, the way the texts were organized and written down on the manuscript page, served to enhance this inherent and intended function. We also saw that one of the *Njáls saga* manuscript, AM 133 fol., seems to reflect the same courtly culture through the illuminated initials in it as well.

The analysis of the two *Njáls saga* manuscripts in this article has shown something different. *Njáls saga*, being of a different genre, is open to interpretation to a very different degree compared to texts like *The King's Mirror* and *Barlaams saga*. Based on both content and illuminated initials, scholars have discussed whether the narrative is motivated by the Christian mentality of the writer and scribe, or by the norms of the pre-Christian honor-based society which is portrayed in the saga, or by a combination of these two, spiced up with human emotional triggers, universal for all cultures. The analysis of the *mise en page* of Reykjabók and Möðruvallabók shows that this potential for various interpretation is also reflected or supported by the graphic organization of the text. By not giving us clear guiding principles for what main message to take home from the saga, with the exception of a few hints, the scribes of the two manuscripts leave the process of interpretation and reflection to the reading self.

All manuscripts mentioned in this study – the two studied in detailed, but also the main manuscripts of *The King's Mirror* and *Barlaams saga* – were produced in the same cultural context of Norway and Iceland, at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. Without describing the network of socio-political and literary agents at this time in detail, it may be mentioned that there were plenty of individuals, Norwegians and Icelanders, who had close connections to the royal house and the court and who were literary producers or patrons. The most obvious examples from the thirteenth century are Snorri Sturluson (1178/79–1241) and Sturla Þórðarson (1214–1284), as

well as Haukr Erlendsson (d. 1334). Their individual writership / patronship provides plenty of evidence that the two literary sub-systems – the edifying literature meant for the royal court, on the one hand, and the Sagas of Icelanders, on the other – were written and read in the same socio-cultural circles.¹⁶

The principles for writing down texts in this cultural and literary context were thus common – texts were structured by illuminated and ornate initials, by initials of different size and color, and other graphical emphases. However, this study shows that the textual production in this context enabled different processes of interpreting and making sense of texts and manuscripts. In more formal, Latinized contexts, such as those that produced *The King's Mirror* and *Barlaams saga*, interpretation of a text was strictly guided by the texts' content and materiality – the readers were more or less explicitly instructed in what the text meant. In other contexts, however, scribes wrote down texts which had a content and graphic structure that encouraged freer interpretation. The reader, as well as potentially his listeners (if the reader cared to vocalize the graphic structure of the text when reading), could thus have various options when making sense of the multimodality of their books. The freedom of interpretation and cognitive creativity seems to have been steered by the genre of the text. Some genres had a more explicit edifying meaning, which was reflected in their content, structure, and materiality, while other genres were meant to allow a higher degree of freedom for individual interpretation of the reading self. As mentioned, according to cognitive sciences, making sense of multimodal cultural expressions entails the blending of all their elements. This study has shown how different meaning construction processes may have been triggered by medieval scribes when they wrote their texts and manuscripts. Stories of revenge and honor may thus be seen as medieval page-turners inviting and challenging the writing and reading selves to be creative in their writing and interpreting strategies.

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¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of this issue, with a special focus on Reykholt at the time of Snorri and later, see Johansson (2018).

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