

## **Gísli Sigurðsson**

The question of orality is one of the overriding themes of saga scholarship from the time of its founding fathers. In my book *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition* I argued that it is of utmost importance to take the oral traditional background into account when reading individual sagas. Some of my readers have failed to realise that this idea has fundamental consequences for the aesthetic appreciation of what they have grown accustomed to read as literary texts with written literary relations (*rittengsl*) to other texts. For many the idea of an oral background can still be swiped away as a reasonable general theory – but of no importance for a modern reading. In order to demonstrate that this is not so I shall look at *Njáls saga* and discuss how the idea of an oral traditional background affects the reading of this most literary of sagas. It has long been appreciated that *Njáls saga* is an exceptionally well composed saga, so well that many have agreed with Bååth that the author had such good command over his material that he wrote “den första linjen [...] med blicken fäst på den sista.” Many have also agreed with Lars Lönnroth that *Njáls saga* differs from other sagas in not providing a thematic prelude about the ancestors – in a similar fashion as for example *Egils saga*. In my paper I shall demonstrate that we do not have to read beyond the first two sentences in *Njáls saga* (“Mörður hét maður er kallaður var gígja. Hann var sonur Sighvats hins rauða.”) in order to realise that previous emphasis on *rittengsl* and failure to take the oral traditional background of *Njáls saga* into account has lead scholars to overlook one of the most thematic openings of any prose narrative. The opening includes a pointed reference to the oral traditional background which provides the knowledgeable listener with the key themes of the saga: Conflict with *húskarlar* that leads to a killing, a lamenting woman craving for revenge by fire, and reconciliation (involving *Mörður gígja*) by marriage of members of the feuding parties (the parents of *Gunnar á Hlíðarenda*). This only becomes clear if we apply the method of reading the saga as the orally derived text which it most likely is.