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### The Forests of Gilgamesh

We tend to think of the world as always being what we remember today. Most human beings have too much to do getting fed, clothed and sheltered to spend much time on history or philosophy. The questions of “why” and “what” have almost always been left to an interested minority within the idle rich.

**Njal’s Saga**, an Icelandic edda from the dawn of Christianity in the Northlands that was passed down orally for three hundred years, tells of events that occurred sometime between 960 and 1020 A.D. written down first in the 13th century and translated into English in the 1860’s—never out of print since.

People in Njal’s time were just as litigious as people are now. Based on the edda, manipulating the rules of law and suing each other for and over property seem to be a good third of what these folks spent their time on.

The main difference between then and now is that Njal’s folks were more likely to go for blood, to actually kill someone, and to sue each other over that as well.

In Chapter 91, a fighter, Skarphedinn, stops to tie his shoe just as a skirmish is beginning, then sprints across the ice into the fray, strikes a blow to the enemy cleaving one guy’s head then he slides on the ice right past the other warriors and has to run back across the ice to get into the fight again. Injuries and death blows are described in detail; the patterns of those wounds are wholly consistent with archeological studies of other warriors who died during the time period.

Skarphedinn’s gear is described in detail as is the gear of Hjort, the much younger brother of Gunnar, Njal’s best friend. The details of Hjort’s death, in a different skirmish, and his burial are also part of the edda. In the mid-nineteenth century a skeleton with a bracelet decorated with two hearts was found in the area described in the poem. Hjort’s bracelet. Hjort’s grave. The battles were real; the people were real. **Njal’s Saga** is our memory of it.

Epic poems like the **Iliad**, the **Odyssey**, **Njal’s Saga** and the **Epic of Gilgamesh** were committed to memory and transmitted orally for generations. In 2700 B.C. or thereabouts Gilgamesh was the ruler of a kingdom where southern Iran is now. In the **Epic of Gilgamesh**, written down by the Sumerians in 2000 B.C., vast almost-impenetrable forests are described in the place we now know as Lebanon. The saga tells us how Gilgamesh cuts down and uses or destroys whole tracts of that forest to expand his city, Uruk.

**Njal's Saga** (839.6 NJA, CD BOOK 809.02 SHU, online at [http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals\\_saga.en](http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.en)) and the **Epic of Gilgamesh** (892 DAM, PLAYAWAY 892.1 GIL, online at <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/index.html>) are our only “memories” of those times and those places. They exist because some of the people before us preserved them without regard for their immediate usefulness. And each tells us something about human behavior, historical context, even species loss and climate change.

Most of us are doing well to remember what we had for lunch yesterday. When we need information we seek out experts, we ask a coworker, a staff person, tech support. We go to Google, Yahoo, Wikipedia. All of these later resources come from random jurisdictions, bought and paid for by somebody else, on servers in towns we don't know the names of and available to us at the pleasure of people we don't know.

There is a place where anyone in Montgomery County can go for reliable information that our own taxes pay for, an information destination that belongs to us all. That place, where we can access information even from home, is Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL).

For the people who are able to use it the public library is our memory—books, music, videos— a constant stream of information, knowledge and wisdom that we can dip into as we wish. Nonfiction informs us of the past and present, practical and historical. Fiction, light or deep, informs us of what it is like to be human.

S.I. Hayakawa, father of modern semantics, once said that it isn't true that we only have one life to live. In books we can live as many lives as we wish.

In February of 2009, MCPL had 767,794 visits to its branches and 920,637 items were checked out. People came to Libraries to check their email, to participate in jobs workshops, to study, to practice English or Spanish or French or Chinese, to get help with their taxes, to register to vote, to get health information or to get financial advice, to do a myriad of things. From home, people called Ask-a-Librarian or Night Owl —the telephone reference services— tapped into the MCPL catalog or explored many of the databases the County provides.

We all know times are bad; they will be much worse; they may never be as good as the “good old days.” But try, if it is possible, to hold onto our collective memory and keep library service at current levels.

Thank you.

## **From Tablet V. of the Epic of Gilgamesh**

(Gilgamesh and Enkidu have traveled over mountain after forested mountain to arrive at last at the sacred grove)

... They stood at the forest's edge,  
gazing at the top of the Cedar Tree,  
gazing at the entrance to the forest.  
Where Humbaba would walk there was a trail,  
the roads led straight on, the path was excellent.  
Then they saw the Cedar Mountain, the Dwelling of the Gods, the  
throne dais of Imini.  
Across the face of the mountain the Cedar brought forth luxurious  
foliage,  
its shade was good, extremely pleasant.  
The thorn bushes were matted together, the woods(?) were a thicket  
... among the Cedars,... the boxwood,  
the forest was surrounded by a ravine two leagues long



## **Njal's saga, Chapter 91— Thrain Sigfus' son's slaying**

Now they turn down along the Fleet, and see a tongue of ice bridging the stream lower down and mean to cross there.

Thrain and his men take their stand upon the ice away from the tongue, and Thrain said -

"What can these men want? They are five, and we are eight."

"I guess," said Lambi Sigurd's son, "that they would still run the risk though more men stood against them."

Thrain throws off his cloak, and takes off his helm.

Now it happened to Skarphedinn, as they ran down along the Fleet, that his shoestring snapped asunder, and he stayed behind.

"Why so slow, Skarphedinn?" quoth Grim.

"I am tying my shoe," he says.

"Let us get on ahead," says Kari; "methinks he will not be slower than we."

So they turn off to the tongue, and run as fast as they can. Skarphedinn sprang up as soon as he was ready, and had lifted his axe, "the ogress of war," aloft, and runs right down to the Fleet. But the Fleet was so deep that there was no fording it for a long way up or down.

A great sheet of ice had been thrown up by the flood on the other side of the Fleet as smooth and slippery as glass, and there Thrain and his men stood in the midst of the sheet.

Skarphedinn takes a spring into the air, and leaps over the stream between the ice banks, and does not check his course, but rushes still onwards with a slide. The sheet of ice was very slippery, and so he went as fast as a bird flies. Thrain was just about to put his helm on his head; and now Skarphedinn bore down on them, and hews at Thrain with his axe, "the ogress of war," and smote him on the head, and clove him down to the teeth, so that his jaw-teeth fell out on the ice. This feat was done with such a quick sleight that no one could get a blow at him; he glided away from them at once at full speed. Tjorvi, indeed, threw his shield before him on the ice, but he leapt over it, and still kept his feet, and slid quite to the end of the sheet of ice.

There Kari and his brothers came to meet him.

"This was done like a man," says Kari.



**Njal's Saga commentary from:** <http://zhurnaly.com/cgi-bin/wiki/BurntNjal>

**Njal's Saga** (also known as **The Story of Burnt Njal**) recounts a multigenerational feud that occurred in Iceland, ca. 950-1015 A.D. It reads in many places like a script for a movie or a video game, with choreographed sword- and axe-play, gory hackings-off of limbs, and dramatic confrontations among stiff-necked warriors --- interspersed with interminable lawyerly quibbling and chicanery that wouldn't be out of place in a TV courtroom today.

Magnus Magnusson (co-translator with Hermann Palsson of a 1960 edition of the saga) writes:

It is impossible to summarize briefly the 'plot' of **Njal's Saga**. At its core is the tragedy of the influential farmer and sage, Njal Thorgeirsson of Bergthorsknoll, who with his family is burned alive in his home by a confederacy of enemies.

... It starts on a quiet note with a group of people, neither particularly good nor particularly bad, who, because they are the way they are, clash with each other; not violently, but sufficiently hard to cause ill-feeling. This casual ill-feeling is transmitted to kinsmen and descendants, to friends and to allies. More and more people become involved, with fatal results --- first Njal's great friend, the heroic Gunnar of Hlidarend, and then Njal himself and his four sons. The early actors of the drama fade out, but the troubles they have started now seem to have a life of their own, until the action is galloping headlong, with brief tantalizing pauses where control seems to have been momentarily asserted, from minor mishap to major tragedy, until finally its inevitable impulse is exhausted in the last elegiac chapter.

And there's sex, and magic, to go with the violence. One tragic seed of the conflict sprouts when a betrothed warrior travels far to claim an inheritance, is seduced, and then bewitched when he chooses to return home --- so that he and his intended can never consummate their marriage. And then there are ghosts and "fetches", visions and prophecies, mysterious mists and portents. To give a taste of the saga, some storyboard scenes follow (taken from the 1861 translation by Sir George Webbe Dasent).

A dramatic battle takes place on a frozen river (~995 A.D.), when one of Njal's sons pauses to tie his shoe, then races to catch up and slips on the ice:

Skarphedinn takes a spring into the air, and leaps over the stream between the ice banks, and does not check his course, but rushes still onwards with a slide. The sheet of ice was very slippery, and so he went as fast as a bird flies. Thrain was just about to put his helm on his head; and now Skarphedinn bore down on them, and hews at Thrain with his axe, "the ogress of war," and smote him on the head, and clove him down to the teeth, so that his jaw-teeth fell out on the ice. This feat was done with such a quick sleight that no one could get a blow at him; he glided away from them at once at full speed. Tjorvi, indeed, threw his shield before him on the ice, but he leapt over it, and still kept his feet, and slid quite to the end of the sheet of ice.

When a gang has trapped Njal and his family in their house, and is about to burn them (~1011 A.D.), an artifact from that earlier battle returns in brutal vengeance:

Then Skarphedinn said, "Here now is a keepsake for thee;" and with that he took out of his purse the jaw-tooth which he had hewn out of Thrain, and threw it at Gunnar, and struck him in the eye, so that it started out and lay on his cheek.

And, decades later, another gruesome killing:

Wolf the Quarrelsome cut open his belly, and led him round and round the trunk of a tree, and so wound all his entrails out of him, and he did not die before they were all drawn out of him.

Then there are the poems and the figures of speech, kennings and metaphors like "sea stag" and "water skate" (ship), "boiling kettle" (hot spring), "helmet hewer" (sword), "rill of wolf" (stream of blood), and more. And the characters, still vibrant after 1000 years. And their speeches! As Magnusson describes them, "... these whiplash retorts, these silences, these slow deliberate formalities that are a prelude to violence."

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From Bede's **Ecclesiastical History of England**, Book 2, Chapter XIII, on the expedition in 627 AD to Northumbria by Saint Paulinus of York. At a meeting with the King of Northumbria one of the participants says:

"The present life of man, O King, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. ..."



### **Where We Are (after Bede)**

A man tears a chunk of bread off the brown loaf,  
then wipes the gravy from his plate. Around him  
at the long table, friends fill their mouths  
with duck and roast pork, fill their cups from  
pitchers of wine. Hearing a high twittering, the man

looks to see a bird—black with a white patch  
beneath its beak—flying the length of the hall,  
having flown in by a window over the door. As straight  
as a taut string, the bird flies beneath the roofbeams,  
as firelight flings its shadow against the ceiling.

The man pauses—one hand holds the bread, the other  
rests upon the table—and watches the bird, perhaps  
a swift, fly toward the window at the far end of the room.  
He begins to point it out to his friends, but one is  
telling hunting stories, as another describes the best way

to butcher a pig. The man shoves the bread in his mouth,  
then slaps his hand down hard on the thigh of the woman  
seated beside him, squeezes his fingers to feel the firm  
muscles and tendons beneath the fabric of her dress.  
A huge dog snores on the stone hearth by the fire.

From the window comes the clicking of pine needles  
blown against it by an October wind. A half moon  
hurries along behind scattered clouds, while the forest  
of black spruce and bare maple and birch surrounds  
the long hall the way a single rock can be surrounded

by a river. This is where we are in history—to think  
the table will remain full; to think the forest will  
remain where we have pushed it; to think our bubble of  
good fortune will save us from the night—a bird flies in  
from the dark, flits across a lighted hall and disappears.

—Stephen Dobyns, from **Velocities** © Viking Penguin, 1994.

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