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CONCENTRATION OF POWER IN 13TH CENTURY
ICELAND AND ITS REFLECTION IN SOME ÍS-
LENDINGASÖGUR

I

It is a well established historical fact that during the last phase of the Old-Icelandic commonwealth political power was concentrated in the hands of a few chieftains who after fiercely quarreling and fighting about it finally lost it into the hands of the Norwegian king. It is also considered a fact, that a good deal of the Íslendingasögur were written during this period or by people grown up then. This class of chieftains then ruling the country must have had some kind of ideology derived from this structure of society and justifying the role of the chieftain, and analysis of the sagas from this period should reveal this ideology or, possibly some reaction against it. I shall therefore start by giving a resumé of the structural changes in Icelandic society during the 12th and 13th centuries, and then take a look at a few sagas with the question of ideology in mind. I am very well aware that this method may lead me to a circular argumentation, but an analysis of the sagas would in any case be made with some pre-conception of society in mind, and therefore I find it most convenient to tell you at the beginning what I shall be looking for in the sagas.

II

Reference works agree that the old commonwealth -- with tolerably good results -- strove for maximal distribution and balance of power between the 39 goðar. Thus Jón Jóhannesson says in his Íslendingasaga, I, 82:

Goðarnir voru jafnir að völdum að lögum, og var enginn þeirra yfir annan settur. Þjóðveldinu svipaði til bandalaga margra ríkja, goðorðanna, með alsherjarlöggjafarvaldi og allsherjardómsvaldi, en engu allsherjarframkvæmdavaldi.

And on p. 269-70:

Goðavaldið virðist hafa staðið í nokkurn veginn föstum skorðum allt fram á 12. öld. Goðarnir börðust stundum um auð, völd og virðingu, en engum þeirra mun hafa komið til hugar að teygja völd sín yfir heila landshluta, hvað þá heldur landið allt. Að vísu kom fyrir, að jafnvægið milli einstakra goðorða raskaðist í þessari baráttu, en aldrei svo, að stjórnskipuninni væri hætta búin af, enda munu höfðingjarnir lengi hafa haldið í þá hugsjón, sem kom fram við stofnun alþingis, að varðveita valda-jafnvægið sem best.

In this case, as in many others, our picture of the commonwealth may be idealized to some extent, but in pagan times at least one thing hindered the "collecting" of goðorð practised in the 12th and 13th centuries, i.e. the fact that a goði was both a political leader and a priest, and had as a priest some functions which could not be exercised in too large an area. Another argument for the theory of a fairly high degree of equality among the goðar in pagan times is the economic structure of the society. A goði was likely to be richer than his þingmenn because he had the biggest farm, and even more than one farm run by his workers and slaves, but he was not in a position, it seems, to exploit the other farmers, and the goðorð as such seems to have given very small economic profit.¹⁾ (This is of course not equal to saying that there were no class differences in this society --there were free people and slaves, farmers and workers, rich farmers and poor farmers --, but economic equality must have been much greater than on the continent.)

There seems to be fairly good agreement on this

1. v. Jón Jóhannesson, op.cit., p. 72-82; see also Ó. Lárusson, Byggð og saga, pp. 32-33: "Landsleiga þekktist að vísu á þessu tímabili, en hennar virðist hafa gætt mjög lítið ... Fjárhagsstoðin sýnist fyrst og fremst vera stórbú höfðingjanna sjálfra. Þau bera fjárhag þeirra uppi."

picture of the old society, but recent research disagrees with the older about the question of its stability. We all know the myth of the friðaröld, which is supposed to be the period when the commonwealth had been consolidated and was functioning admirably for a century at least, i.e. most of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries. This myth is founded on the absence of accounts or sagas telling about feuds taking place in this period, and also on some hagiographically coloured statements in Sagas of Bishops about the peace in the country during the reign of the first bishops, esp. Gizurr Ísleifsson (1082-1106).²⁾

Recently Icelandic historians have started calling the historical accuracy of this myth in question. They maintain that the concentration of power and the goðorð-collecting of certain families started very soon after the introduction of Christianity in the year 1000, and moreover that there is actually no reason to think that there was any real difference in the peacefulness of the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries.³⁾

Whatever we may think of the stability of the old society with its power evenly divided among the 39 goðar, it is quite certain that during the period of the writing of the classical Íslendingasögur the political structure of the society and its economic base are radically changed, although the goðorð was still the formal key to legislative and judicial power. About the year 1200 a few families had gathered into their hands most of the goðorð, and most of the political power in the country: the Svínfellingar ruled in Austfirðingafjórðungr, the Oddaverjar in Rangárping, the Haukdælir in Árnessping, the Ásbirningar in Skagafjörðr and parts of Húnaþing, and Guðmundr dýri (a descendant of Guðmundr inn ríki) in Eyjafjörðr and great parts

2 "Gizurr biskup friðaði svá vel landit, at þá urðu engar stórdeilur með höfðingjum ..." Biskupa sögur, (Kaupmannahöfn 1858), I, p.29.

3 v. Saga III (Reykjavík 1960-63), 48-75, and Saga X (1972), 5-57.

of Þingeyjarþing. The western parts of the country were still divided among more goðar than the areas already mentioned, but just at this time a new family was arising in the west eager to fill this gap, and not, in fact, limiting its ambition to this area. I am, of course, referring to the sons of Hvamm-Sturla, Þórðr, Sighvatr, and Snorri, and later on their sons. When Sighvatr in 1215 moved to Eyjafjörðr and was, however reluctantly, accepted as their chieftain by the farmers of that area, a new phase began in the relationship between chieftain and farmers. A chieftain now seemed to be able to take over an area and its goðorð, even if he came from quite a different part of the country. But in such cases he had to get the acceptance of the farmers of the area. In certain parts of the country such changes of chieftains became frequent during the last two decades of the commonwealth, especially in Skagafjörðr, Eyjafjörðr, and Borgarfjörðr.

At this point of time there had developed a distinct class of chieftains who had the political power in the country, power based on foundations entirely different from those I have described before. The most important source of wealth for most of these chieftains was probably their share as churchⁿ-owners in the tithe and other income from the churches. There were of course also farmers who were church-owners, but the richest and most profitable churches were in the hands of chieftains, and may indeed have been the basis of their power. It is known about the Oddaverjar in particular that they had very great income from the church.⁴⁾ Ownership of land and livestock, either hired out or managed by their own people, had also become a real source of wealth for the chieftains. Here the example of Snorri Sturluson is perhaps best known. He succeeded in gathering great wealth amazingly quickly during the first quarter of the 13th century. Finally, direct taxing of farmers

4 v. Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn, II, 86-88.

seems to have been common during the last decades of the commonwealth. By accepting a chieftain farmers, in certain areas at least, seem to have taken upon themselves the responsibility of furnishing him with livestock and other necessities which would enable him to keep a small "army", that is people whose main occupation was not farming, but doing more or less peaceful jobs for the chieftain inside and outside his domain.⁵⁾ Some chieftains even directed their men to commit robbery in order to maintain them, and the line between robbery and taxation seems to have been difficult to draw.⁶⁾

It would, of course, be inaccurate to talk about a feudal society in Iceland at this time, but a class society ruled by an exploiting class of chieftains had been formed. We may regret this fact from the point of view of our own political convictions, but we should not forget that the accumulation of capital in the 12th and 13th centuries was a necessary condition for the literary culture of the period.

The development which I have been describing was not entirely without countercurrents which are very interesting, even from our point of view. Although ownership of land was being gathered into fewer hands than before, many farmers were still owners of their farms, and some of them, usually called *stórbændr*, were even able to gather considerable wealth, not least, of course, those who owned a church with a good income. When the traditional ties of *goði* and *þingmenn* were being broken because of the social and in most cases geographical distance between the chieftain and a common farmer, the *stórbændr* seem to have taken over part of

5 A good example of the chief's position is given in *Þórðar saga kakala*, *Sturlunga saga* (Reykjavík 1946), II, 69: "Eftir þat var fundr áttir at Hestapingshamri. Kom þar fjölmennt um heraðit ok svá vestan um heiði. Var þá Brandr þar kosinn yfir allar sveitir þær, er áðr vǫru til nefndar. ("öll heruð fyrir vestan Öxnaldsheiði ... allt til Hrutafjarðarár"). Hafði hann þá tekjur allar af sveitunum, þær er Kolbeinn hafði áðr haft, ok sauðatoll.

6 v. *Sturlunga s.*, I, 373, 386; II, 32.

the goði's informal political power and have become leaders of the farmers in a kind of opposition to, or at least a counterbalance against, the chieftains. Without any formal power, these stórbændr were able to decide whether the smaller farmers in their vicinity gave their support to the chieftain. Of course, this often gave them great influence, and among them grew the revolutionary idea that it would be best to have no chieftains at all.⁷⁾

This opposition of farmers to the chieftains has been interpreted by older historians as the last remnant of the farmers' independence with respect to the goðar, but a recent and more plausible interpretation is that this opposition was the result of a new stratification of the class of farmers according to wealth and influence, when the chieftains no longer could nor wanted to maintain a personal relationship to their þingmenn.⁸⁾ It is only natural that this new "middle class" should be the first to realize the conflict of interests be-

7 On the 20th and 21st of July 1255 the chieftains Þorvarðr Þórarinsson of the family of the Svínfelðingar and Þorgils skarði of the family of the Sturlungar were asking the farmers of resp. Eyjafjörðr and Skagafjörðr to take them as chieftains. Þorgils saga skarða has this account of the negotiations: "... var fundr stefndr við Djúpadalsá. Kómu þar til margir heraðsmenn ... Beiddi Þorvarðr sér viðtöku af bóndum. Flutti þat með honum Þorgils ok Sturla. Varð at því lítill rómr. Orti Þorvarðr á um órskurði við bændrna, Þorvarðr ór Saurbæ ok Hall af Möðruvöllum, Örnólf ór Miklagarði ok enn fleiri aðra.

Þorvarðr ór Saurbæ svarar fyrst, -- lézt eigi ráð eiga meir en eins manns, -- "má ek vel sama við þann, sem er, en bezt, at engi sé." Þeir Hallr sögðu, at þeir myndi ekki taka ráð þessi fyrir hendr bóndum. Gengu bændr þá á eintal. En er þeir höfðu talat um hríð, gengu þeir aftr á fundinn, -- sögðu Þorvarði, at þat var samþykki bændra, at þeir vildi ekki taka við honum í herað." (Next day in Skagafjörðr:) "Beiddist Þorgils þá af bóndum, at þeir tæki við honum til höfðingja yfir heraðit ... Broddi svarar þar fyrstr manna: Ef hann skyldi þar nokkrum höfðingja þjóna, vildi hann helst Þorgilsi, en betr at þjóna engum ..." Sturlunga s., II, 192-3.

8 Gunnar Karlsson, "Goðar og bændur," Saga X (1972), 5-57.

tween farmers and chieftains and draw the simple conclusion: we need no chieftains.

Outside the church, the people who would be most likely to sponsor the writing of sagas, or even to take the pen themselves, are of course the chieftains, members of their families, or people dependent upon them. It is therefore to be expected that an ideology indirectly justifying their social status should be visible in a good many of the sagas. Our first task, therefore, will be to look for sagas in which chieftains are glorified and presented as an important and necessary factor in society. When we look for this tendency, it is of course necessary to bear in mind that criticism of the character and behaviour of individual chieftains does not automatically imply any criticism of the social structure, indeed the effect may be quite contrary.

Our second task will be to look for examples of the opposite idea, i.e. that chieftains are a nuisance who only make life more difficult for decent people, that is, farmers. This would indicate some literary activity among the new "middle class".

I refrain from discussing changes in social structure caused by the fall of the commonwealth, and I shall also avoid the discussion of young sagas.

II

Searching for the views of chieftains in Íslendingasögur it is only natural to begin with sagas that show the most obvious signs of being influenced by courtly romance and the glory of kings and knights in general, like for instance Laxdæla saga. Here the author is trying hard to convince us of the almost royal grandeur of Ólafr pái and his son Kjartan, and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is a lady who would arouse interest at any court. Chieftainship is in this saga a part of the natural order, and the love-affairs of chieftains are the most interesting things to tell about. Another example of this tendency is Gunnlaugs saga. Both these sagas may

include some moral criticism of the main heroes, Kjartan and Gunnlaugr,⁹ criticism which could apply to chieftains of the 13th century, but this does not alter the fact that they are written from an upper class point of view. Along with these two sagas could be grouped some others from the 13th century, e.g. Vatnsdæla saga. In these sagas there is often a striking contrast between the romanticism shown by the author when he is describing his heroes and the much more realistic descriptions of their surroundings or even their nearest relatives. An example of this is Laxdæla's relation of Þorsteinn Kuggason's and Þorkell Eyjólfsson's attempt to compel Halldór Ólafsson, Kjartan's brother, to sell his farm, because of his need of money. They do not succeed, but it is impossible to think of his father or his brother in such a situation. A similar case is the very sudden decline of the family of Vatnsdælir, in their saga. Both these examples serve to show that the authors were describing their own romantic ideal when they wrote about their heroes, but that they neglected to present less important people in the same light. Their ideal, however, is unmistakable.

Hrafnkels saga is in my opinion also written from chieftains' point of view, and the author is mainly interested in the qualities of a successful chieftain; whether it is more or less influenced by Christian ethics does not matter in this connection.

I have chosen to look at Eyrbyggja saga a little more closely than the sagas I have already mentioned, because I think its author is primarily interested in the role and function of chieftains in the society of his own time. His attitude to the chieftain is entirely unromantic; he is not interested in the qualities that make him a hero, but rather in his qualities as a politician.

9 see e.g. Njörður P. Njarðvík, introduction to Laxdæla saga (Reykjavík 1970), 12, and R.G. Cook, "The Character of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue," Scandinavian Studies, Vol. 43 (1971), 1-21.

The chieftain ideology nowhere finds a clearer expression than in Eyrbyggja saga, and this is remarkable for the reason that this saga is not as directly influenced by chivalry as e.g. Laxdæla. Eyrbyggja may therefore be regarded as the true product of a domestic upper class, which sees the chieftain system as a political necessity, without seeing the necessity of a continued development into monarchy and feudalism. The saga is so permeated with these views that this cannot be an unconscious reflection, but on the other hand they are so well concealed that a fairly close reading of the saga is needed in order to prove their existence.

Superficially the contents of Eyrbyggja are very mixed, and on first reading the saga has often been felt to be an ill-assorted mixture of badly connected bits or short stories. A closer reading, however, quickly reveals the underlying structure of the saga which in most cases gives individual parts a significance greater than they have in isolation.

In my view Eyrbyggja is naturally divided into three parts. The first is an introduction, giving an account of the settlers of Snæfellsnes with the greatest emphasis on Snorri goði's family, but the families of his allies and opponents are also given a great deal of space. The second part is the main story, where we are shown how Snorri goði draws all power in the district into his hands (ch. 12-48). In part three we see the role of Snorri, the chieftain in society, and the problems he has to struggle with.

The introduction of Eyrbyggja is not particularly long compared to such sagas as Njála, Laxdæla, and Egla. Its role is obviously to prepare the ground for the main story, the account of Snorri's dealings with the other chieftains of Snæfellsnes, by describing the settlement and the relations between the intervening generations. It starts with a detailed description of the settlement of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, Snorri's ancestor, and his religion. In this account there is a remarkable sentence

which shows how the author connects the power of chieftains in former times with that in his own time, thus justifying the latter by calling attention to its ancient origin: "Til hofsins skyldu allir menn tolla gjalda ok vera skyldir hofgoðanum til allra ferða, sem nú eru þingmenn hofðingjum ..." ¹⁰⁾

It is a special feature of the Eyrbyggja introduction that it describes in detail the settlement of many men besides Snorri's ancestors. Still it is obvious that the author's aim in writing about these settlements is not just to give information about a certain area or to write the history of the district, for he says: "Á þessum tíma byggðisk allr Breiðafjörðr, ok þarf hér ekki at segja frá þeira manna landnámmum, er eigi koma við þessa sögu." ¹¹⁾ The introduction also shows that the situation in this district was extremely unstable; there were many chieftain families laying their claim to power and glory, which inevitably resulted in clashes.

In the middle part of the story we see how Snorri first gains power and leadership in his family from his uncle Börkr, and then gradually gains the position of greatest power and influence in the whole district. In the beginning Arnkell goði at Bólstaðr is his main opponent, as he is too close a neighbour for such an ambitious chieftain as Snorri to tolerate. Arnkell holds his own against Snorri in the beginning -- and for a fairly long period, as a matter of fact -- but must finally give in to him. Before this happens, Snorri succeeds in consolidating his power by establishing family ties with another powerful opponent, Styrr Þorgrímsson. After this only the Eyrbyggjar have the courage to stand up against Snorri's will -- along with the adventurer Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, but they too are bound to lose. Here we are shown how the power of some minor chieftains is gathered in the hands of one

10 Íslensk fornrit, IV, 9.

11 op.cit., 11.

man, the one who not only is of noble birth but also endowed with more intelligence, will-power, and ambition than all the others. Now it has been well known from oral tradition that Snorri goði later moved from Helgafell to Sælingsdalstunga in Dalir, where he lived for 20 years. The story of what happened there is not told in Eyrbyggja, but in the last chapter we are given a resumé of what happened there, which shows that again Snorri goði succeeded in gaining power in the area with similar methods as before:

Snorri goði bjó í Tungu tuttugu vetr, ok hafði hann fyrst heldr ofundsamt setr, meðan þeir lifðu stórbokkarnir Þorsteinn Kuggason ok Þorgils Hölluson ok enn fleiri inir stærri menn, þeir er óvinir hans váru.

En er Snorri tók at eldask, þá tóku at vaxa vinsældir hans, ok bar þat til þess, at þá fækkuðusk ofundarmenn hans. Þat bætti um vinsældir, at hann batt tengðir við in mestu stórmenni í Breiðafirði ok víða annars staðar. (p.180)

The reason why his ill-wishers diminished in number can be seen in Laxdæla, where his part in the death of Þorgils Hölluson is described. But it is only in the third part of the saga that we can see clear indications of the fact that the author of Eyrbyggja wants to emphasize the blessings of the chieftain system by implying that Snorri increases his power not only in his own interest, but in the interest of society as a whole.

In the section about the haunting of Fróðá there is a gigantic symbolic clash between old paganism and the new civilization. The new civilization conquers: a combination of church and chieftain power. This needs to be explained in greater detail.

Þórgunna, the woman from the Hebrides who comes to Fróðá to stay with the sister of Snorri goði, owns several precious objects filled with some sort of evil power. These powers can only be controlled if the owner of the objects dutifully practises Christianity, as is seen in Þórgunna's going to church each morning before she starts working. In other words, evil, heathen

powers are held in check by the power of Christianity. When Þórgunna dies, her instructions regarding these objects are disregarded and, as was to be expected, the evil powers are let loose when the objects come into the possession of the passionate and headstrong mistress of Fróðá. Punishment seems to be directed against her, and she has fallen ill when the danger is finally averted by a combined effort of church and secular powers. It is Snorri goði who gives advice on the measures to be taken: ghosts are called to court and sentenced according to law, and then masses are sung and houses sprinkled with consecrated water, "ok eptir þat tókusk af allar aptrgöngur at Fróðá ok reimleikar, en þuríði bátnaði sóttarinnar, svá at hon varð heil."(p.152) Order is restored.

Another main section of the third part takes place after Snorri has moved to Sælingsdalstunga. It is in a way an independent account, like the section about the haunting of Fróðá, but it undoubtedly has a deeper symbolic significance. It tells of the villain Óspakr who breaks the law, robs farmers and thus poses a threat to the social order. His attacks are hardest felt by the small farmer and weakling Álfr litli, but stronger farmers in the neighbourhood like Þórir Gull-Harðarson who was "gildir bóndi ok ... fyrir mönnum um Bitruna," i.e. a stórbóndi, cannot resist him either, and Þórir is killed by Óspakr. Then the chieftain Snorri goði, who has earlier dragged Óspakr to court and had him and his men sentenced, attacks him with a number of people, and Óspakr and many of his men are killed. Then Snorri settles everything in a just way. Again the chieftain has restored order and peace.

Finally I want to mention one point in Eyrbyggja saga which relates it to the chieftains of the Sturlungaöld, not least the Sturlungar themselves. This is the characterization of Snorri goði. He is contrasted with different types of heroes in his conflicts: Arnkell goði, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi and Steinþórr á Eyri. He is not a traditional hero himself, but he comes out

of the struggle with power over his antagonists. His cool intelligence, his ruthlessness when he finds it necessary to strike, are the qualities which a chieftain needed in the Sturlung Age much more than bravery in battle or old-fashioned drengskapr.

Apart from its seemingly chaotic structure Eyrbyggja usually strikes people most at first sight for its folkloristic and traditional matter. There is no doubt that its author was very interested in old religious customs, in legal practice and in genealogy, and last but not least in aptrgöngur and other supernatural phenomena whose real existence he hardly doubted. But his ideology was that of a chieftain, and its cornerstone was the belief in the vital role of the chieftain of the Sturlungaöld type for his society.¹²⁾

It is easy for anyone who reads through the Íslendingasögur to find examples of the role of the chieftain regarded as a natural presence, as e.g. in Laxdæla, although many of these sagas show evidence of having been written inside families less wealthy and powerful than the Sturlungs. Examples are sagas like Vopnfirðinga saga, probably written by some of the Hofverjar in Vopnafjörður, a family that lost its power to the Svínfellingar and was combined with that family in the 13th century. It is also probable that the writing of Droplaugarsona saga is in some way connected with that branch of the Svínfellingar family that lived at Valþjófsstaðr.

On the other hand I doubt whether any saga can be found which comes closer than Eyrbyggja to preaching a chieftain ideology.

IV

That we should find what we were looking for in Íslendingasögur, the ideology of the class of chieftains who dominated Icelandic society at the time the sagas were

12 The analysis of Eyrbyggja saga presented in this paper is mainly built on parts of my own article, "Nokkrar athugasemdir um Eyrbyggja sögu," Skírnir, 1971.

written, was almost inevitable. It is a priori much more unlikely that we should find traces of a different view of society, namely that held by the stórbændr that it is best to have no chieftains at all. Nevertheless, some examples can be found, and I shall now turn to them, but I frankly admit that the possibilities of misinterpretation are greater when we come to this part of the material.

My first example is Hænsa-Póris saga. The main actors of this short but admirably constructed saga are on the one side an alliance between two goðar (+ the one goði's son) and a miser and scoundrel who has gathered great wealth in a rather disreputable way. On the other side is a stórbóndi, Blund-Ketill, of a kind certainly more likely to exist in the 13th century than in the 10th ("Hann átti þrjá tigu leigulanda"), a very rich man and a noble character and most generous towards his tenant farmers. After the miser has behaved very wickedly, this alliance burns Blund-Ketill, and one of the goðar then tries to rob his son and heir of his land by a legal trick. The son makes an alliance with good people and succeeds in getting his property back and takes an honourable revenge. This saga is unusually outspoken about the merits of people and there can be absolutely no doubt who has a good cause and who has a bad one. When the social status of the actors is taken into consideration, this seems a very good example of a saga reflecting the attitudes and interests of the "middle class" of stórbændr.

Relatively strong arguments support the view that Hænsa-Póris saga is written during the years 1274-80.¹³⁾ The author is therefore most likely a man who grew up during the last decades of the commonwealth, the time when there seems to have been an awakening consciousness among the middle class concerning the conflict of interests between it and the chieftain class.

13 Björn Sigfússon in Saga, III (1960-63), 345-70.

Bandamanna saga often has been interpreted as a criticism of the chieftains, so there is no need to dwell long upon it: the main antagonists are on the one hand the six bandamenn, goðar from every part of the country, men of noble families but short of ready money, and on the other hand a nouveau-riche merchant who has bought a goðorð for himself, but has got himself into trouble because of his lack of legal education. The old goðar conspire to get hold of his money, and would most certainly have succeeded, if the merchant's father, an old and cunning farmer, had not upset their plans to such a degree that they gained nothing but shame. In this saga clearly no respect is given to the old chieftains, but neither does the author respect the young merchant, Oddr, who is useless as a chieftain. Yet Oddr can earn money, and he is a generous man, while the old chieftains seem to be governed only by avarice and ill-will. This saga is certainly anti-chieftain and pro-farmer, and therefore probably originated in circles of stórbændr.

In Ljósvetninga saga there is a famous episode where the great chieftain Guðmundr inn ríki is humiliated by a farmer, a stórbóndi, in Þingeyjarþing. This saga seems to be dominated by the feelings of farmers in Þingeyjarþing against the mighty chieftains of Eyjafjörðr who through centuries reigned in large areas of Þingeyjarþing. Here antagonism between two districts is mixed up with class antagonism, but this saga is certainly one of the best examples of an anti-chieftain ideology. This attitude is, if possible, still more distinct in Ófeigs þáttr (an appendix to Ljósvetninga saga in a group of manuscripts) which pleads the cause of farmers who suffer from the burden of having to feed the chieftain's body-guard and his horses while he is travelling among them, probably collecting taxes and rent.

Let me at last mention a few doubtful examples. Gísla saga certainly contains important signs of not being written by chieftains. Its hero is a farmer, a most industrious man in contrast to his brother who comes close to being a villain, and his chief antagonists,

Börkr inn digri and Eyjólfur grái, are chieftains. Gísli is not primarily a farmer, however, but a lone wolf fighting against great odds, and in the Hergilsey-episode Börkr's behaviour is, as a matter of fact, almost as exemplary as Ingjaldr's. So this saga is a doubtful example, although a closer investigation from this point of view might yield some results.

Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs has been taken as an example of the equality of farmer and chieftain;¹⁴⁾ it would be going too far to see in the saga any kind of opposition to chieftain-power, because the chieftain, Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, is here a noble character, and his right to chieftainship is not questioned.

It is difficult to talk about Íslendingasögur in general without mentioning Njáls saga, but I have avoided it deliberately. A discussion of it in this connection would demand much more time than I have at my disposal, mainly because of the scope and complexity of this huge saga, but also because this aspect of it is hard to interpret. It would in this case be too great a simplification to draw any conclusions from the fact that neither Gunnarr nor Njáll is a goði, while the villain Mörðr, Gizurr hvíti, leader of the men who killed Gunnar, and Flosi, leader of the men who killed Njáll, are goðar and ancestors or closely related to ancestors of the three chieftain-families of the South, the Svínfellingar, the Oddaverjar, and the Haukdælir. I limit myself to merely mentioning this fact.

May I state at last that it has not been my intention to find a criterion by which to classify Íslendingasögur or divide them into two groups, but rather to call your attention to divergent tendencies which seem to coincide very well with conflicts of interest in 13th century Icelandic society.

14 Einar Olgeirsson: Ættasamfélag og ríkisvald í þjóðveldi Íslendinga (Reykjavík 1954), 165.