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The Power and Wealth of the Icelandic Church:
Some Talking Points

A number of years ago Björn Sigfússon wrote an insightful article that is not well known outside of Iceland. In this essay he questions the view that amalgamation of power into fewer hands and the political disruptions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were largely a response to the growing wealth and power of the church.¹ In stating his premise--that church influence, whether direct or indirect, has been considerably exaggerated by modern scholarship--Sigfússon observes that neither the power of Guðmundr ríki (around the year 1000), nor that of the later chieftain Hefliði Másson in 1120, derived from any connection with the church. He points out that church power did not initiate a pattern of political evolution, which was already in evidence in the pre-Christian tenth century. In presenting his argument Sigfússon specifically takes issue with scholars such as Árni Pálsson and Jón Jóhannesson,

who had placed great emphasis on the church's influence in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.²

The Icelandic church is, of course, fascinating. Its priests married freely more than a century after the Gregorian Reform and its bishops operated in ways which would have seemed irregular to most contemporary European churchmen. Although the structure and general organization of the Icelandic church during the Free State period resembled continental models, it functioned quite differently from the church in Norway, Iceland's nearest neighbor, or for that matter from the church in the rest of Europe. There is strong evidence that the Icelandic church is unique, having early adapted itself to the decentralized nature of Iceland's traditional governmental system. In this paper I look at some criteria which are important to consider if we are to evaluate the place of the church in medieval Iceland.

One criteria may be the absence of violence in the elections of bishops. It is noteworthy that, in the otherwise well-chronicled intrigues of the stórhöfðingjar, the powerful chieftains of the later period, it is never reported that they battled over the appointment of an Icelandic bishop.³ The consistent absence of violence in the filling of high Icelandic church positions is all the more remarkable because, until 1237, the country's bishops were elected by the chieftains at the Althing. When one bishop died, the normal procedure was for the surviving bishop to suggest a politically acceptable candidate to the chieftains,

a practice which after the Second Lateran Council in 1139 would have been unacceptable on the European mainland. Clearly the office of bishop was prestigious, and the episcopal seats at Hólar in the north and Skálholt in the south were usually filled by members of the most powerful families, especially the Haukdalir and the Oddaverjar.⁴ That the elections engendered so little conflict is, however, difficult to ignore.⁵ Not only does the ease with which these offices were filled stand in strong contrast to the fierce struggles for power among chieftains, but it is also at variance with the situation on the continent. There the elaborate political machinations that often accompanied the selection of high churchmen underscored the political, economic, and governmental importance of the church in Europe. Had the office been one of significant power in Iceland, the choice of a new bishop would have been of vital concern and would undoubtedly have led to fierce contention among leading families, ever on the lookout for more authority.

There are other reasons for doubting the scope of church strength and influence. Beyond governing the internal life of the church, the Icelandic bishops had relatively little authority. In clear defiance of the policies of the Roman church (especially in the wake of the Gregorian Reform), Icelandic secular leaders not only controlled selection of the bishops but, throughout the Free State period, regulated almost all points of contention between the

church and lay society. Virtually nowhere in medieval Europe, especially in the thirteenth century, did laymen exercise as much control over the church as they did in Iceland. This situation was formalized in the period 1122-1133 when the laws governing the relations between church and temporal society were written down. These laws, contained in Kristinna laga báltr remained in force in Skálholt until 1275 and in Hólar until 1354.

Even when laws from the Christian law section of Grágás were broken, the bishop had no right of prosecution, for judicial matters stemming from breaches of Christian laws were handled by secular courts.⁶ Presumably a bishop exercised judicial power only when a priest was disobedient to his superior. At times the church's inability to execute one of its judgments made it advisable to turn the matter over to the secular courts. So matters remained until at least the end of the Free State (1262-1264), though in 1253 a curious event occurred. In that year, according to the New Christian Law Code (kristinréttir nýi) instituted by the Skálholt bishop Árni Þorláksson (1269-1298), the Althing drafted a resolution declaring that church law should take precedence over the law of the land when they were in conflict.⁷ Scholarly views on the veracity of this statement have varied from complete acceptance to total disbelief, but Jón Jóhannesson, a historian who often stresses the importance of the church, has provided the most logical explanation. He points out that in 1253, a time of serious

feuding among stórhöfðingjar, many chieftains stayed away from the Althing. We know from other sources that Gizurr Þorvaldsson, strongest of the leaders who did attend the Althing, was at the time particularly interested in ingratiating himself with the bishops because of his desire to marry a woman with whom he had had two sons. It is possible, therefore, that Gizurr managed to have the resolution passed by the lögretta. In Jón Jóhannesson's opinion, "The resolution of the Court of Legislature in 1253 was never anything but a dead letter, although later Bishop Árni Þorláksson tried to resuscitate it. The chieftains who were absent from the Althing in 1253 were no doubt unwilling to agree to its adoption, and it may in fact never have been formally passed as law, and probably never went beyond the stage of a proposed amendment (nýrali)."⁸

Economic realities differentiated the Icelandic church from corresponding bodies on the mainland. As on the continent, the church in Iceland claimed ownership of a great deal of land. The difference was that the church in Norway or in most other places in Europe actually controlled the land, benefiting from all the social and political ramifications of landownership, whereas in Iceland the claim was hollow. There most of the church's land was only nominally administered by chuchmen. Soon after Iceland's conversion (ca. 999-1000), farmers and chieftains began to build churches, and except for the church at Þingvöllr such undertakings were private enterprises. In contrast, in

Norway after its conversion in the same period most of the churches were built either by royal order or by local communities. Ownership and maintenance of Norwegian churches were public responsibilities.

In Iceland the goðar and other landowners who originally constructed the church buildings normally ceded the farmsteads on which the buildings stood to the church, though they retained a right of control for themselves and their heirs. Owing to this custom, the secular "owner" of such a farmstead (including the important staðir) enjoyed most of its benefits; the episcopal administration received a relatively minor share of the wealth and the power accruing from ownership of such property. A bóndi or a goði possessing a staðir appointed the priest (usually a relative, a bondsman, or a poorly paid freeman if the owner himself was not ordained.) By the letter of the law the land was church property; therefore the layman who controlled the land not only was exempt from tithing on the property but also benefited from tithes paid by his neighbors. This situation was consistent with the practice of pre-Christian times, when important farmers maintained sanctuaries and the goðar were both secular and spiritual leaders.⁹

Monastic holdings, so valuable to the church in Europe, played only a small role in Iceland. On the continent such holdings not only were the backbone of the church's economic independence, but they also formed a vast network of spheres of church influence and power, both cultural and political.

Icelandic monasteries were a peculiarly indigenous form of religious house; their members conducted their lives by rules based on foreign models but functioned largely in accordance with native cultural traditions. The gap between Icelandic and continental houses was further widened by the fact that (as far as can be determined) not one of the Icelandic institutions was founded as a branch of a foreign monastery, as were the Cistercian houses in Norway. The first successful Icelandic monastery at Þingeyrar was not begun until 1112 and not formally established until 1133;¹⁰ the second one was started at Munkaþverá in 1155. Like the first two, the few houses founded later were small in size. Together only about ten monasteries and one nunnery were established before the end of the Free State, and few of them could be considered rich. With only a handful of members in each, these tiny communities faced grave difficulties; some failed early, leaving almost no trace.

Until 1267 at least, neither Hólar nor Skálholt could boast a cathedral chapter of canons (the kórsbræðr, choir-brethren, of Norwegian cathedrals).¹¹ Thus during the Free State (that is after the second Lateran Council) the Icelandic episcopal centers operated differently from their European counterparts. Probably there were no chapters because the bishops lacked the economic means to support them. Although one of the Hólar bishops, Guðmundr Arason (1203-1237), did attempt to gather about him more than the normal small following, those he attracted were mostly

indigents or unattached armed men. Such a group bore little resemblance to the clerical entourage of a cathedral town on the continent. His limited resources made the bishop dependent upon nearby farmers who, especially during Guðmundr's stormy episcopate, repeatedly dispersed the bishop's following.

The Icelandic church's lack of power is further attested by the failure of the two diocesan seats, Skálholt and Hólar, to achieve importance as administrative and trade centers. Both were far from the main roads and difficult to reach from the sea and so they remained during the life of the Free State. Helgi Þorláksson, who has carefully assessed the value of landholdings in the early period, concludes that even at the end of the Free State the two episcopal seats were scarcely more wealthy than the most prosperous secular-controlled staðir such as Grenjaðarstaðr, Oddi, and Reykholt.¹²

Only when Norwegian royal government was introduced after the demise of the Free State did the Icelandic church succeed in freeing most of its property from secular authority. Even then, change came slowly, taking many decades. For example, an issue as central as the control of staðir (staðsmá) was not settled until 1297 and then only by compromise. The position of the church was significantly strengthened when the royal government instituted new provisions under which the Icelandic bishops relinquished their seats in the lögrétta. With this done bishops could

direct their full attention to controlling church farms and other property. In this undertaking, which pitted churchmen against wealthy farmers, the clerics were supported by the archbishop in Norway and even, at times, by the king. Although secular leaders still contested church demands, the power of the Skálholt bishop was notably strengthened in 1275, the year in which Bishop Arni's New Christian Law Code was adopted by the Althing for the southern diocese. With new legal guidelines decidedly advantageous to the church, both the power and the wealth of the see began to rise dramatically; between 1289 and 1520 real property owned by Skálholt increased sixfold. ¹³

The political, economic and administrative weakness of the church during the Free State is particularly striking in view of the fact that it was the only institution in a highly decentralized society that was based on a centralized foreign model. The failure of Iceland's two reform bishops, Þorlákur Þórhellsson and Guðmundr Arason, to bring about significant change in the status of the church, especially in view of perennial divisions among the chieftains, emphasizes the church's deficiencies. As might be expected, clerical influence is given great weight in the large number of extant church writings, whose authors, often apologists for the church, were intent upon recording the accomplishments of its leaders and saintly men. When appraising the role of the church and its power relative to other social forces in Iceland, it is well to remember that at the beginning of the

twelfth century, when the Icelandic church was moving toward a higher degree of institutionalization and assuming a legally defined position, the patterns of secular decision making in Iceland had been firmly in place since the early tenth century.

Footnotes

¹ Björn Sigfússon, "Full goðorð og forn og heimildir frá 12. öld," Saga 3 (1960): 48-75.

² Ibid., pp. 56-57.

³ Magnús Stefánsson has also taken notice of this phenomenon in "Kirkjuvald eflist," Saga Icelanda, ed. Sigurður Lindal, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Sögufélagið, 1975): "Til átska milli átta um biskupskjör virðist þó ekki hafa komið," p. 69.

⁴ For a list of these, see *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵ For example Guðmundr Arason's election to the seat at Hólar was one of the most controversial during the Free

State, yet even this "appointment" proceeded with little conflict.

6 See Magnús Stefánsson, "Kirkjuvald eflist," pp. 70-71. Aspects of the right to prosecution are also discussed by Ólafur Lárússon, "Die Popularklage der Grágás," Festschrift für Otto Hjalmer Granfelt (Helsingfors: Ab, F. Tilgman 1934), pp. 87-101.

7 "I Júní 1253," Diplomatarium Islandicum: Islenzkt fornbréfasöfn (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller and Reykjavik: Hinu Islenzka bókmentafélagi, 1857-1952), Vol. 1, p. 1, and "Árna saga biskupa," ch. 29, same vol., p. 720.

8 Jón Jóhannesson, A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Islenzka Saga, trans. Haraldur Beason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), pp. 220-221.

9 Ulrich Stutz contends that among the pre-Christian Germanic peoples on the continent, temples were also administered by the man on whose land they stood, and this individual profited from the dues paid to the temple. In the absence of extensive continental sources, however, Stutz bases his view on Icelandic information. Ulrich Stutz,

Geschichte des kirchlichen Benefizialwesens von seinen Anfängen bis auf die Zeit Alexanders III (1895, reprint Aalen: Scientia, 1961), pp. 89-95.

10 Magnús Már Lárusson, "Kloster," Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon f8r nordisk medeltid, vol. 8 (Mala8: Allhems, 1963), cols. 544-546; Hermann Pálsson, "Stofnun Þingeyraklausturs" in Tólfta 8idinn: þettir um menn og málefni (Reykjavik, Prentsmi8ja Jóns Helgasonar, 1970), pp. 92-102. The official date for the opening of the Þingeyrar monastery is 1133; the earlier date being more an hypothesis than a fact.

11 In 1267 Bishop J8rundur received permission to institute a chapter, but it is not clear how quickly the chapter came into being.

12 Helgi Þorláksson, "Urbaniseringstendenser," pp. 173-174. Helgi bases his conclusion upon information about the wealth of skálholt found in chapter 138 of Arna Saga biskups. ed. Þorleifur Haukason (Reykjavik: Stofnun Arna Magnússonar, 1972): p. 171.

13 Helgi Þorláksson, "Urbaniseringstendenser," p. 174.

